Michael Rosen


Michael Rosen has written an extremely valuable, largely philosophical study of the important but much neglected idea of dignity. His book is written in a style that makes it understandable to a broad audience. One of its principal aims is to clarify the meaning of “dignity” by examining its historical roots. This is done successfully in Chapter One. In Chapter Two Rosen examines the uses of “dignity” in contemporary jurisprudence. And in Chapter Three he takes up and offers an ingenious answer to the question whether we have a duty to treat the dead with dignity. I will now briefly summarize his main claims.

Rosen distinguishes four different senses of what he call strands of “dignity”. The first is dignity as a status term. Here he introduces Cicero’s idea, an idea with continued support today, that the dignity of human beings consists in their exalted or elevated place in nature. We are, Cicero contends, vastly superior to other animals by virtue of possessing minds capable of study and reflection (p. 12). Pico della Mirandola, in his oration _De Dignitate Humanus_, equates humans’ elevated natural standing with our distinctive capacity for choice (p. 14). “Dignity” was also used to designate an exalted social or political status – hence talk about the dignity of the aristocracy or of the church and church leaders.

Secondary, dignity has been identified with intrinsic value, or with what Kant famously called an absolute, priceless, unconditional worth. As Rosen points out, this conception of dignity is extremely difficult to understand and has been interpreted in many different ways. For example, Kant identifies it with the self-legislative capacity of rational beings, while Aquinas conceives of it as the value something enjoys by virtue of occupying an appropriate place within God’s creation. Obviously this interpretation of intrinsic value belongs to many living things irrespective of their rational powers. Rosen appropriately spends a lot of time on Kant’s idea of pricelessness. His reflections on one of Kant’s formulas for treating persons as priceless and not as means only help to underscore the challenges that confront advocates of this second, still influential strand of dignity.

The third meaning of “dignity” refers to an elevated way of behaving. This source is an integral part of Kant’s theory, in which we must strive to act in ways that reflect our intrinsic worth and this implies that we must endeavor to act freely from respect for the moral law that we can legislate for ourselves. This idea of dignified behavior plays a large role in Schiller’s _On Grace and Dignity_. As Rosen points out, for Schiller grace is the quality of acting
spontaneously while dignity is the ability to act well despite the resistance of our natural inclinations. Dignity so conceived shows itself above all when we exercise self-control to overcome suffering (p. 35). It is important to recognize the intimate conceptual connection between this third meaning of dignity and moral virtue. Rosen's account is valuable in bringing out this insight.

The final conception of dignity that Rosen identifies appeals to the idea of treating persons with respect. This essentially means that they are not to be humiliated or degraded (p. 60). Rosen emphasizes that this meaning is very different from the interpretation of dignity as a status term. In his words, "...the right to have one's dignity respected is one particular right – albeit a very important one – rather than something that acts as the foundation for rights in general" (p. 82). Rosen is correct, but it is important to question whether this right actually constitutes a separate strand of dignity since it doesn't provide us with a fourth meaning of the word "dignity" but instead stipulates a norm of respect for dignity interpreted as a kind of intrinsic worth.

In Chapter Two Rosen examines some of the ways that the concept of dignity has functioned in recent legal cases. He begins the chapter with the fascinating case of M. Manuel Wackenheim, a dwarf who while wearing a protective vest was set to participate in a dwarf-throwing competition. After the Mayor of the local municipality banned the event, Wackenheim appealed but lost in every court that heard the case. Rosen's own position is that while dwarf-throwing certainly constitutes undignified behavior (the third strand of meaning), it nevertheless should have been permitted. Indeed, he contends that sometimes it is good to abandon dignity – so long as we understand this not to be a claim about dignity in the second sense of an inner, inviolable worth (p. 74). More specifically, Rosen argues that we should resist any attempts by government to compel dignified behavior beyond the realm of private tact and good taste (p. 73).

Chapter Two also contains a lengthy, thoughtful discussion of Kant's principle of humanity – that we must always treat humans (as natural beings) always as ends and never as means only. Rosen convincingly points to the practical and legal difficulties that have confronted German Courts as they have endeavored to incorporate Kant's principle in their decision-making. Of equal interest is Rosen's account of the Catholic Church's evolving stance on the meaning of human dignity: from advocating a non-egalitarian, hierarchical view of dignity to endorsing, after the Second World War, a strongly egalitarian view, one grounded in equal moral rights (pp. 90–93). Rosen is quick to emphasize that contemporary Catholic teachings do not support any interpretation of Kant's conception of dignity that exalts the exercise of personal autonomy at the expense of innocent human life (pp. 94–100).