

Kraynak, Robert and Glenn Tinder, eds. *In Defense of Human Dignity: Essays for Our Times*. South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003. 252 pp. \$27 paperback.

In his “Introduction” to *In Defense of Human Dignity*, Robert Kraynak asserts that “the defense of human dignity has been a perennial theme of philosophers” (1). Oftentimes, however, this defense has been held hostage by the contemporary philosophical categorizations of liberal and communitarian/republican thought. It is not that either of these categories denies the value of human dignity. Indeed, human dignity is a critical justification for both liberalism’s embrace of individual rights and republicanism’s recognition of the central importance of civic responsibility and virtue. Nevertheless, both theories have been used to legitimize the undermining of human dignity as well. For example, Timothy Jackson cites Peter Singer’s liberal rights argument that “[b]ecause fetuses and newborns have no awareness of themselves as existing over time, they are nonpersons, with at most a tenuous claim to life that can be trumped by the desires of adults” (148). One need look no further than the horrors of fascism in the last century for testimony of the potential dangers on the republican side. The failings of both theories may be traced back to their very origins with the positing of either the “right” or the “good” as the theoretical foundation. Alternatively, if we begin with the concept of “human dignity,” itself, as our foundation, we are led to conclusions that transcend the traditional liberal/communitarian or liberal/republican divide. This is the striking revelation arising from this refreshing collection of essays brought together by editors Robert Kraynak and Glenn Tinder.

Tinder’s opening essay introduces the overarching theme of the book. He expresses a concern and conviction that human dignity, “the primary intuition of Western

moral consciousness and indispensable to liberal democracy ... is not only important but is being lost" (11). Out of this concern, many of the contributors to this collection look to Christianity and its view of man made in the image of God (*imago dei*) in order to reinvigorate the idea of human dignity as the foundation to Western moral consciousness. Tinder is careful to emphasize, however, that his "arguments appeal to natural reason and natural intuition, not to faith," and that he has "cast the Christian view of humanity and history in terms that are new and might thus be persuasive for those not attracted by Christian terms" (12). Indeed, he refers to human dignity "in the terminology of Immanuel Kant, with the quality by virtue of which every person should be treated as an end and never merely as a means" (11). Susan Shell's essay develops this Kantian conception of human dignity. Shell notes "Kant's renunciation of the traditional religious view as to the source of human dignity." Instead, Kant argues, "[t]he 'only way out for the philosopher' is to seek to discover a 'purpose in nature.'" Kant finds this purpose in culture, which "enables us to regard nature as a whole as purposive, so long as culture is subordinated to 'man as moral subject' which Kant calls 'the final purpose of creation itself'" (68-69).

The search for this purpose is precisely the subject of Tinder's opening essay. In contrast with Kant's anthropocentric idea of "culture" as the source of purpose, Tinder points to the contrast between the ideas of "fate" and "destiny." Fate is purposeless; it is a "brutal factuality" (15). Destiny, however, implies meaning and purpose. "Dignity consists in the possession of a destiny and is affirmed through fidelity to individual destiny"(13). This view of dignity is dependent upon humility, however. "To speak of choosing your own destiny, as we often do, reflects a misunderstanding of human beings

and their powers.” People may create styles of life and control some of their daily activities. “But their destinies must be given them” (29). “The difference between humanistic and religious receptivity, then, concerns the source of destiny.” The contrast, of course, is with figures such as Kant and John Rawls. (Note: a short essay drawn from Rawls’s *Theory of Justice* is included in the collection).

While Tinder’s essay adeptly captures the contrast between religious and humanistic theories of human dignity, it does not go into depth on the implications of the difference. This task is taken up in Robert Kraynak’s essay explicitly focusing on the “Christian view of human dignity” deriving from man’s creation in the “image of God.” Kraynak criticizes “modern” Christian theories of human dignity, arguing that they develop the divine image in the humanistic “terms of Kantian philosophy.” According to Kraynak, the problem with such a view, ironically, is that it elevates man to too lofty of a status. “Dignity comes to mean the infinite worth of the human person who claims respect as a right.” Kraynak aims to show that the modern view is least persuasive because “it treats human dignity as an absolute right rather than a manner of degree in a hierarchy of perfection, producing a Christian faith that is overly political and that diminishes the spiritual value of subordinating the human personality to a higher order of being.” Kraynak argues that the “true Christian view of human dignity ... is more compatible with hierarchy than with democracy, though it permits an accommodation with modern democracy for prudential reasons.”

Kraynak’s diminished characterization of human dignity, and his neo-conservative critique of democracy is problematic, however. Kraynak criticizes what he calls the modern Christian view of human dignity as the infinite worth of the human

person. Yet, if man is created not only in God's image, but also by His hand and will, then it seems spurious to view the human person in terms any less than priceless. Furthermore, the divine gifts of rationality and equal human dignity demand more than Kraynak's simple prudential accommodation to modern democracy. However, I do accept the general point that Kraynak is trying to make. The profound dignity that man accrues by virtue of being created in the *imago dei* does not diminish man's need to maintain a profound sense of humility with respect to God and the rest of creation. Lowering modern Christianity's view of the man's infinite worth to make this point, however, is both unnecessary and illegitimate

Ken Grasso and David Walsh's essays take a better tack. Addressing the contemporary state of liberalism, Walsh criticizes what he sees as liberalism's efforts to remove all moral conflict from the public to the private realm. These efforts "would inevitably proceed apace until the public arena had been thoroughly evacuated of all substance. At that point the superstructure could no longer endure and the house of cards would collapse of its own weight." The result, according to Walsh, has been the "dead end of liberal disintegration" (166). As an alternative, Walsh asks us to look for deeper resources within liberalism itself, "depths within the liberal soul of which liberals themselves are scarcely aware"(166). Citing the "enduring and undeniable viability" of the liberal political tradition, Walsh argues "a political form does not demonstrate that kind of world historic persistence without evoking a substantive reality far deeper than the critics' misgivings"(167). While liberalism attempts to ignore or dismiss "any broader philosophic or spiritual orientation by which their coherence and conviction are sustained," the reality is that liberal principles emerge "as the residue of resonances that

remain of the Christian evocation of the transcendent finality of the person.” Through Christ’s “invitation to participate in the transcendent Being of God ... extended to every human being,” each of us is a “partaker of that transcendent dignity” of God. “The liberal language of rights that makes it possible for the good of a single human being to outweigh all social and historical goods is a reflection of that compelling realization” (168,170-171). Even if Walsh is correct that liberal principles emerged from such Christian foundations, such principles surely now rest upon a secularized foundation. Walsh recognizes this, of course, but argues that liberalism’s secularization does not make its Christian origins “any the less durable as an acknowledgment of our common self-understanding. Indeed the very stability of the liberal formulation arises from the residue of Christian resonances ...”(171). Walsh is wise to look to the transcendent dignity of the human person as a foundation for human rights, but I am suspicious of whether the contemporary notion of liberalism retains even much of a “residue” of these Christian origins.

Ken Grasso presents us with perhaps the best foundation for a political thought that gives individual rights and the common good a secure and enduring philosophic mooring. He looks to Catholic social thought and the writings of John Paul II in this regard. John Paul, Grasso notes, clearly has a “genuine admiration for the principles, institutions, and practices that together compose the modern ideal of the free society.” Yet, Grasso notes, “he is at pains to call attention to the shadows that today fall upon the free societies of the modern West.” John Paul’s commitment to constructing a public philosophy that transcends liberal and republican shortcomings is apparent. Grasso writes that John Paul’s “concerns extend to the public philosophy—the understanding of

the intellectual and moral foundations of the free society—that has come to inform their public life”(213). Grasso’s analysis of John Paul’s pursuit of this public philosophy is the highlight of the whole book. Grasso adeptly expresses John Paul’s argument that freedom and the common good are not the starting point but rather the product of a social and political theory grounded in Truth—in particular, the Truth of the sanctity and dignity of the human person. Quoting John Paul, Grasso writes, “Since ‘the good of the person is to be in the Truth and to *do* the Truth,’ it is only through obedience to God’s law that human freedom can achieve its goal of enabling human persons to realize themselves fully” (230-231).

Rounding out this excellent collection of essays are pieces by Timothy Jackson and John Witte Jr. that apply political theory to particular issues regarding the status of human life. They make a persuasive argument that human dignity needs to be rooted in sanctity or holiness rather than the ostensibly neutral principles of utility or Kantian rationalism. While this route fails to eliminate constructive tensions, it is “far preferable to a bogus ‘pluralism’ or ‘fairness’ that claims to prescind from controversial value judgments about life and death”(151).

Kraynak and Tinder have organized a thought provoking and insightful collection of essays that demonstrate the superiority of positing “human dignity” as the starting point for a political theory rather than the “the right” or “the good.” Such a foundation transcends the liberal/republican divide while enshrining the liberty and good of the individual and society in the sanctity of human life.

John Charles Evans, University of Wisconsin, Madison