Human Dignity and Suffering: Some Considerations

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Does suffering affect dignity? This essay examines the consequences of construing dignity not as an intrinsic, constitutive quality integral to our very being but as an extrinsic, variable property dependent on certain conditions. It investigates the centrality of suffering to a left-of-centre imagining of solidarity politics and proposes that this Judeo-Christian legacy also contributes to an asymmetrical relationship between an activist-witness and suffering humanity.

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Where does human dignity lie? Is it an extrinsic property dependent on certain conditions? Or is dignity intrinsic to existence and coextensive with it? If one were to follow the general logic of emancipatory discourse today, one would have to conclude the former. Dignity is seen to be contingent. Prejudice, discrimination, violence, the economic and sociocultural contexts in which one lives, labours or loves – any of these, it would appear, can singly or in conjunction undermine one's dignity.

Dignity derives from the Latin *dignus*, meaning worthy. Webster's dictionary defines it variously as worthiness or nobility, high repute or honour, degree of worth, high position, rank or title, dignitary (rare), loftiness of appearance or manner, calm self-possession and self-respect.

These meanings ally dignity with social standing and a certain demeanour or appearance. Even if we grant that self-possession and self-respect are not exclusive to any particular social class, the definition strikes one as elitist, as reflective more of feudal and bourgeois sensibilities than egalitarian conceptions considered democratic. The alignment of dignity with location and position is also retained in astrology where the term refers to the advantage a planet has on account of its being in a particular place in the zodiac with respect to other planets.

One meaning of the word, however, stands apart from others: dignity as a general maxim or principle. This meaning is marked as obsolete. Lone among the overwhelmingly extrinsic understandings of the term, it points us in an altogether different direction. Defunct, discarded, antiquated – such is the current status of the idea of dignity as general maxim or principle.

The word "maxim" is an abbreviation of the Latin *maxima propositio*, meaning the greatest or chief premise. "Principle", from the Latin *principium*, designates beginning. In the beginning is dignity? Or more precisely, from the beginning is dignity? In the sense of "maxim", dignity is a concisely expressed principle, precept or statement of general truth; as principle, it is a fundamental truth, a natural or original endowment, an essential element, constituent or quality, the law of nature by which a thing operates. In and from the beginning is dignity.

And yet we have come to imagine dignity as effect, not precondition. Even those who would otherwise reject the conservatism of the dictionary definition can speak, act, exhort and organise as though

dignity is something to be ensured, protected, legislated, as if it is something that can be violated. Let us begin with a stark example. We think torture assaults the dignity of the tortured. Does it? However painful, regardless of intended degradation or humiliation, can anything touch the inherent dignity of the one upon whom torture is unleashed? The physical, mental and emotional body may be bruised, shattered even, but not the dignity of the tortured. Dignity is unassailable. It is an integral aspect of our very being.

The prevailing view implies otherwise. Take for instance an idea that routinely structures liberal and left discussions – that worker's rights secure worker's dignity. Such a framing of the issue proposes that dignity is conditional; its possibilities are made and unmade by circumstance. This presumption is reflected in the economy of information that supports the activist and researcher in testifying to unjust labour practices and dangerous working conditions. Even when the dignity of exploited labourers is recognised, as evidenced in their manner, bearing or other qualities, it serves to underline the gravity of the need for transformation, not to call into question a particular construction of dignity.

As a final illustration, one may point to the regrettably common response to the dependence and cognitive frailty that is at times precipitated by ageing. Family, friends and other well-wishers of those who were once mentally alert and fiercely independent are often heard to wish for a speedy end to their travails, "for the sake of their dignity", as if dignity depends on a body and mind capable of self-regulation.

Three interrelated ideas coalesce to shape such a perspective. First, that suffering leads to a loss of dignity; second, the absence of choice leads to suffering and indignity; and third, control over self and circumstance facilitates freedom from suffering and in so doing, preserves dignity. Deducible here is an ideal of mastery over self and context or at least, the ability to set limits on how one is impinged upon by social forces and more broadly, by the conditions of life. Perhaps this is why the feudal lord and bourgeois subject continue to haunt the dictionary definition of dignity. Both figures exemplify self-fashioning.

It is in this context that the law comes to be regarded as a privileged guarantor of dignity. The law has the potential to be a great leveller. It offers a means of redress for those not advantageously positioned in the social structure. In its affirmative aspect, it bestows and protects rights. In its proscriptive role, it penalises their violation. Minimising suffering and maximising dignity come to be identified as the critical functions of the law.

This discourse normalises the idea of dignity as variable. No longer the inviolable and irreducible aspect of being human, it is conceived as vulnerable to being diminished and by the same token, as capable of being enhanced and/or restored. Its ebbs and flows are related to the varieties and quantum of suffering. When suffering is borne with calm resoluteness, it is seen as dignified, though when such a stance does not acknowledge suffering, it could be read as resignation. However, to respond to trauma with intense emotionality is to risk becoming the object of concern, pity and embarrassment. Anger, aggression, grief, depression or confusion about one's experience can make one the focal point of others' distress about one's dignity.

To construe dignity as something that can fluctuate is to set apart the one who suffers, to propose a gap between him/her/them and others. When dignity is presumed to be in inverse proportion to suffering, those who experience it are structurally positioned as unequal to those in solidarity who have not experienced that suffering. If in no other way, the tortured individual, the oppressed worker, the infirm human rights campaigner or the one who has been raped is in a state of impaired dignity relative to the activist, the lawyer, the judge or the unaffected citizen who stands in support of them.

The painstaking documentation of suffering necessitated by law and politics further compounds the problem. The marshalling of particulars is essential to making suffering socially, politically, legally and culturally legible and thus actionable. Details delineate truth and enrich understanding. Campaigns for social justice require that the story of suffering be retold many times over, to awaken the indifferent and disbelieving, to convince police, judges and other interlocutors, to raise funds, to keep the issue alive in city after city, year after year. Affected individuals and communities are centrally involved in these processes.

Testifying to truth in this way empowers the one who has suffered and makes difficult the wilful forgetting of events and realities as some might prefer. However, given the proposed relationship between suffering and dignity, the individual or community in question can come to be seen as indelibly marked by his/her/its

experience of suffering. Their lives can dissolve into its narrative. If suffering negatively has an impact on one's dignity, then indignity can easily attach to one who has experienced suffering. Relatedly, inequitable circumstances can transform into undignified ones, and shameful events into ones that bring shame to individuals and communities.

Such demeaning of those who suffer is no doubt unintended. Ironically, however, it illuminates how dignity is not merely contingent. If it were, redressing suffering would simply be a practical matter. It would not lead to embarrassment or shame. For suffering to pose questions about worth or identity, it would have to challenge some core quality; dignity would have to be foundational. It turns out that the obsolete sense of dignity as maxim or principle persists after all. But it does so unhelpfully, in a way that enables suffering to cohere as indignity.

We need to remake the relations of dignity and suffering so that their autonomy is fully recognised. Embracing the a priori status and nature of dignity is crucial to such an endeavour. It establishes dignity as an invincible aspect of who we are. This frees us to document the many facets of suffering and domination on a basis that precludes diminishing or deprecating those whose lives are affected by them. The integrity of person and community is made independent of the challenge and horror of their suffering, not modified or compromised by it. Our sense of the external can no longer be confused with our assessment of the internal.

The present asymmetry between the suffering and those in solidarity with them is thereby attenuated. Sufferers can speak without concern that their words may estrange them from those who do not share their experiences or belittle them in the minds of their listeners. And those in solidarity are spared the discomfiture of becoming inadvertent voyeurs, especially in relation to acts of violence intended to humiliate, such as rape, torture and the wanton destruction of property and personal effects. When dignity is constitutive, it is difficult to construe solidarity as an unequal, charitable relationship. The way is cleared for a practice that more appropriately honours egalitarian rhetoric and commitments. But there is a further obstacle to be negotiated. And this requires us to revisit suffering, in particular its centrality to a left-of-centre imagining of solidarity politics.

Solidarity and Suffering

Upendra Baxi and Toni Morrison enable us to delineate this conception eloquently and succinctly.

> [T]heorising repression …best …happens when the theorist shares both the nightmares and dreams of the oppressed. To give language to pain, to experience the pain of the Other inside you, remains the task, always, of human rights narrative and discourse.
>
> – Baxi 1998:149

> Human rights futures, dependent as they are upon imparting an authentic voice to human suffering, must engage in a discourse of suffering that moves the world.
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> Over a century and half ago, Karl Marx put the notion of human futures presciently when he urged that they are best born when the following twin tasks occur: when suffering humanity reflects and when thinking humanity suffers. I know of no better way to unite the future of human rights to human suffering.
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> – Baxi 1998:169

> I insist on being shocked. I am never going to be immune. I think that's a kind of failure, to see so much [human atrocities] that you die inside. I want to be surprised and shocked every time.
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> – Morrison quoted in *Toni Morrison Uncensored*, Dean 2003

Baxi and Morrison attribute a foundational place to suffering in how they envision solidarity. They express a view common on the left. Suffering is fundamental in two ways. First, the ability to sense, experience, describe and never forget suffering is the basis of fellowship with others. Knowledge of the suffering of others is the bedrock of compassion. It is the means by which one demonstrates one's commitment to challenging inequality. Second, suffering defines the subject/object of human rights, the subject/object of our individual and collective concern. It follows that if we fail to grasp the suffering of individuals or communities, we fail to understand them.

It is in this context that Morrison is determined to remain conscious, not become "immune" and "die inside". And Baxi (1998:169) describes human rights work as "imparting an authentic voice to human suffering". While he does remark that the theorist shares both the nightmares and the dreams of the oppressed, that turns out to be more of an aside. Baxi's essay, like much social justice discourse, gives precedence to nightmares.

What are the consequences of making suffering central to the identity of those who suffer? Relatedly, what are the implications of making knowledge of suffering a crucial sign of comradeship? Each of us is more than the sum of our suffering. Suffering may shape many aspects of our life; it may even be that every aspect of our life bears its imprint to a greater or lesser degree. But an account of our lives is not exhausted by a description of our suffering. I say "we", not because I am presuming commonality with others, but because I would like to pose this question in relation to *ourselves*. If we do this, we would notice the scandal of assuming that suffering is pivotal to the identity of the sufferer in the way generally proposed in political discourse.

Could we abide such a one-dimensional perspective with reference to ourselves? For example, would it not be an insuperable burden were Morrison to serve as a continual reminder of the history of slavery to those who seek to not "become immune" to its legacy? Is this not a potential consequence of her summons? One might counter that Morrison may in any case conjure this history, with its horror and suffering, for many non-African Americans. Even if we grant this, we are still left with the reality that individuals and communities, while not fully extricable from history, are not reducible to it either. The past is not simply reiterated in the present, continuities notwithstanding. Past and present interweave in complex ways that exceed the kinds of derivative understandings and reductionist interpretations implied in viewing suffering as a core, unambiguously defining experience.

Morrison's wish to encounter each injustice as if for the first time articulates a hope widely shared by many committed to social justice. The unfairness of social arrangements, the spurious grounds on which hierarchies are erected, the violence of divisiveness and hostility provoke distress, anxiety, and where privilege creates a chasm between activist and the suffering, an undercurrent of guilt. The internal dilemma is only heightened by awareness of how readily the situation can be positively transformed given political

will and a commitment to mutuality. The witness or activist inhabits the turbulent space between potentiality and actuality. The desire to remain ever vigilant is symptomatic of this existence at the threshold of possibilities. That said, can one be "surprised and shocked every time" as Morrison suggests? Would this not require a peculiar historical amnesia on our part?

Social reality is a potent amalgam. If one wishes to be truly alive and attentive, one would have to embrace all of it, not just the misery but also the joy, not merely the rage but also the contentment, not simply the drudgery but also the dynamic creativity of each life and community. The politics of solidarity often unfold as if this were not the case, as if in the end, it is suffering that is definitive. Unsurprisingly then, it also flounders on this very point. For even when subordinated groups emphasise suffering to the exclusion of other dimensions of their experience, they are discomfited by similar rhetoric from those outside their community. Such discomfort highlights the strategic nature of partial self-descriptions and their capacity to demean when deployed by others.

Sufferer, Witness and Redeemer

To what extent is the insistence on cataloguing the sufferings of others a measure of our feeling of impotence as witnesses to social inequality? Is the dedication to demonstrating mastery over the details of suffering a displacement of the recognition that we have little control over its reality? Does our knowledge of suffering function to symbolically manage unresolvable social contradictions even as it serves to distinguish us from those seemingly indifferent to discrimination? Is comprehension of suffering the best means of ensuring empathy?

The idea of empathy-via-understanding of suffering is a Judeo-Christian conception. It is the bequest of a theology which rewrites Jesus' murder by Roman officials as redemptive self-sacrifice. As Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire, the crucifixion of Jesus emerged as a privileged theological moment, the event which more than any other in his life proclaimed him as the saviour, the one who "died for our sins". As a 19th century European philosopher, Marx was heir to this legacy. When he speaks of how thinking humanity can be redeemed via empathic identification with the suffering masses and how empathic thinking is itself a form of redemptive suffering, he is invoking this inheritance. Elsewhere he is more explicit. Once again, I cite Marx via Baxi:

> Marx…wrote in 1850 [and I quote from bloodied memory] that the classical saint of Christianity mortified his body for the sake of the redemption of the masses whereas the modern educated saint mortifies the bodies of the masses for the sake of her/his own redemption.
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> – Baxi 2006: 34

The torture endured by Jesus on the cross continues to cast a long shadow on how we construe the relations of suffering, solidarity and redemption.

The consequences are mixed. For while Christ as saviour can unite within his personhood the trinity (as it were) of sufferer, witness and redeemer of suffering, the human activist or concerned observer cannot. Consequently, these functions become redistributed and a hierarchy comes into play. Thinking humanity is distinguished from suffering humanity. Striving to be saviours, the former is redeemed by empathic suffering. Meanwhile, even when it is seen to be capable of reflection, suffering humanity tends to be defined by the challenge of its material circumstances and its experience of social discrimination. The redemption of the subordinated requires their emancipation from suffering. The stage is set for suffering to be conceived as a kind of damnation, for viewing those suffering in abject terms, and for guilt and angst among those committed to social justice.

We need to rethink the basis on which we engage each other across the divides that separate us. Revisioning would require several related shifts in perception. The a priori status of dignity would have to be restored. Dignity's autonomy from suffering would have to be ensured. Suffering would need to be situated in the web of life, as one facet of the multidimensionality of human experience, along with several other aspects significant to its patterning. This would liberate empathy from a near-exclusive association with the understanding of suffering and open the door to a subtler notion of attunement. Activist-witness and designated sufferer will be enabled to meet and remake each other outside the constricting frames which structure present encounters. Such a process, if embraced, could evolve a notion of solidarity more congruent with a truly egalitarian politics.

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