On human dignity according to Pico della Mirandola - or a call to a new humanness

Human dignity and human rights - who is a human being?

Text:
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Is the concept of human rights rooted in reality, or is it merely a convenient fiction, much like the whole matrix of the legal system could be seen as a mere human invention?

Are human rights just an ideological construction, a beautiful lie which is, however, fundamentally beyond any possibility of a satisfactory realization, or are human rights in some sense real, because, after all, what could be more natural than the basic rights of real human beings?

The debate also concerns questions like whether it is beneficial to protect the dignity of all human beings under all circumstances in the absolute sense – which absolute conception implies that human dignity is seen as the highest value that must be upheld over any and all other values and benefits – or whether to assume the relative conception of human dignity, according to which human dignity stands as an equal member of an ensemble of other values that can be measured with each other. Thus the other values could potentially take precedence over the dignity of an individual, diminishing its protection, or even removing it altogether, should this course of action be justified by rational discourse.

Various states and governments differ in their understanding of human dignity, but the internationalization of human affairs makes this status quo impossible to sustain.

It is no wonder that the topic of human dignity rose to prominence after the Second World War, and that it is Germany which has established the absolute conception of human dignity as one of the foundation principles for its Basic Law (constitution). In modern Germany, human dignity is seen as an immutable super-law, derived from the nature of the human being and connected to the central status of the human being within any legal system.

Nowadays, this conception is becoming a minority position, having to face many a controversy and assault, as modern man has for a long time lived in a state of apparent peace. There is no such a thing as a stable legal and philosophical opinion on this issue. We however dare to point out that behind this discourse lies an important philosophical matter, namely the urgent question: “Who is the human being?”

We could also add to this in a more topical manner:
**Who is the modern human being?**

We can conceptualize the modern man as a cultivated, subtle being, a loving being, a dutiful citizen, gifted with much knowledge and a plethora of skills and abilities to influence the world around him or herself.

But is that all? Is this culture the same as human nature, or is it only a solidified crust covering and, yes, hiding the nature of the human being, having no real power to change the human nature itself?

There are some who have seen through the outer layers of culture. Many a modern human being can experience in his or her personal life the acute bondage to the same old urges and desires. The human being is still a slave to the instincts: to continue living, to possess things, to have power and influence and the sexual urge, to name but a few.

The consciousness of the modern man or woman is being broadened by the experiences with communication and social networks, and the nerves are under constant tension, stretched taut like a rubber band by all the stresses and pressures of the modern, fast-paced, - race around the clock - rhythm of life.

Is then the modern human being more of a languid and deluded weakling than a truly sentient being? Where have the depth and fulfillment disappeared to? Is he not a mere animal driven to its utmost, forcibly cultivated over the longest periods of ever repeating conditioning, and dulled by experiences?

What makes a human being... human? What makes him or her differ from the animal? And can the modern human being be humanized?

**How can a human being become a true human being?**

In their depths, these questions go even beyond the existential level, because they concern what transcends the temporary human life. Indeed, human life can sometimes be seen as transitory and with no apparent meaning, but the medieval and renaissance thinkers, like for example Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, also
known as The Prince of Concordance (Princeps Concordiae), who also apparently posited these questions, came to completely opposite conclusions!

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola was born on the 24th February 1463 in the city of Mirandole, in northern Italy, and died aged 31 on 17th November 1494. He wrote his Speech on the Dignity of Man (Oratio de Dignitate Hominis) at age 24. His speech was a preamble to his 900 conclusions (Conclusiones), which he formulated to be the sum of all philosophy and theology, and which he published in December 1486, with the plan to organize a public discourse in Rome. 13 of these theses were subsequently condemned by the pope as heresy (on the grounds of them being “magic” and “kabbalah”).

Pico introduces a new anthropology compared to his predecessors and contemporaries (i.e. Marsilio Ficino). Pico places his accent on the human free agency to the extent that man in his view self-creates himself and decides his own place in the hierarchy of creation. Thus if the human being lives according to the urges and senses, he or she lives an animalistic life unworthy to be called human. Dignity therefore does not pertain to all of mankind, since many remain in a debased, animal state. Rather, dignity is connected with an evolved state of humanhood, as a potential, a seed, a challenge.

The Renaissance conception of Pico is not ready-made for the modern discourse about human rights and human dignity, because Pico considers the dignity of the human prototype, of “Adam”, of the created archetype. Much like Jan Amos Comenius did after him, Pico firmly differentiates between the terrestrial, celestial and supreme (ultramundanum) Works – what Comenius called physics, metaphysics and hyperphysics.

But, let us now allow Pico himself to speak to us. He begins his Oratio with these words:

“...what was most worthy of awe and wonder in this theater of the world ... there is nothing to see more wonderful than man! A great miracle... is man! However, when I began to consider the reasons for these opinions, all these reasons given for the magnificence of human nature failed to convince me: that man is the intermediary between creatures, close to the gods, master of all the lower creatures, with the sharpness of his senses, the acuity of his reason, and the brilliance of his intelligence, the interpreter of nature, the nodal point between eternity and time... the
intimate bond or marriage song of the world, just a little lower than angels...I concede these are magnificent reasons, but they do not seem to go to the heart of the matter, that is, those reasons which truly claim admiration...

After thinking a long time, I have figured out why man is the most fortunate of all creatures, and as a result, worthy of the highest admiration and earning his rank on the chain of being, a rank to be envied not merely by the beasts but by the stars themselves and by the spiritual natures beyond and above this world.”

Pico considers the following as the chief reasons for the wonderfulness of the status of humankind:

“God the Father, Supreme Architect of the Universe, built this home, this universe we see all around us, a venerable temple of his Godhead, through the sublime laws of his ineffable Mind.“

This architect has furnished every level of this house by His creations. And in the end, he thought of man.

“But he had no Archetype from which to fashion some new child... nor did the universe contain a single place from which the whole of creation might be surveyed. All was perfected, all created things stood in their proper place...

Finally, the Great Artisan mandated that this creature who would receive nothing proper to himself shall have joint possession of whatever nature had been given to any other creature.

He made man a creature of indeterminate and indifferent nature, and, placing him in the middle of the world, said to him “Adam, we give you no fixed place to live... according to your desires and judgment, you will have and possess whatever place to live... you may choose for yourself the limits and bounds of your nature. We have placed you at the world's center so that ... with free choice and dignity, you may fashion yourself into whatever form you choose. To you is granted the power of degrading yourself into the lower forms of life, the beasts, and to you is granted the
power, contained in your intellect and judgment, to be reborn into the higher forms, the divine.”

Pico thus gives conclusion to his thoughts:

“...To man it is allowed to be whatever he chooses to be! ... man, when he entered life, the Father gave the seeds of every kind and every way of life possible. Whatever seeds each man sows and cultivates will grow and bear him their proper fruit.

If these seeds are vegetative, he will be like a plant. If these seeds are sensitive, he will be like an animal. If these seeds are intellectual, he will be an angel and the son of God. And if, satisfied with no created thing, he removes himself to the center of his own unity, his spiritual soul, united with God, alone in the darkness of God, who is above all things, he will surpass every created thing. Who could not help but admire this great shape-shifter? In fact, how could one admire anything else?”

Pico rightly gives us the following counsel:

“...we need to understand that we must take earnest care about this, so that it will never be said to our disadvantage that we were born to a privileged position but failed to realize it and became animals and senseless beasts... let a holy ambition enter into our souls; let us not be content with mediocrity, but rather strive after the highest and expend all our strength in achieving it.

Let us disdain (consider as unworthy) earthly things, and despise(look down on) the things of heaven, and, judging little of what is in the world, fly to the court beyond the world and next to God.”

The challenge towards true humanness as a spiritual path

Pico later shows us the inner path, that is, an actual way of turning his sublime words into reality within our own life. He speaks about man knowing him or herself, about the recognition of the dialectical (that is, contradictory) nature of reality,
about the purification of life in the moral and rational sense, and about the unification of the soul with the spirit.

May the “King of Glory, the Father” enter the House of the Soul as a guest of the soul. The soul, as a bride, adorned with a golden gown, shall take him for her husband, never again to be sundered from him, “forgetting even her own self and desiring to die, so as to live within her husband”.

Pico helps us unmask our own state of being, that is, the state of debased fallen humanity, but also shows us that there really exists a seed of true humanness and that there is a pathway towards it, a well-trod, solid path! This amounts to the supreme challenge for the modern man, man as a being, as a creation within the Universe.

Primary literature, quotes:

1. Oratio Ioannis Pici Mirandulae Concordieae comitis (De dignitate hominis) in PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA, Giovanni: O důstojnosti člověka. OIKOYMENTH, Praha 2005, p.135