

Commentary on Bostrom

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In his essay for this volume, Nick Bostrom acknowledges that the consequences of emerging technologies for what he, following Aurel Kolnai, calls “Dignity as Quality” are hard to predict and even harder to judge. What Bostrom doesn’t seem to notice is that Kolnai himself would almost certainly have opposed the transhumanist agenda and that the very essay Bostrom draws upon provides ample grounds for doubting the wisdom of transhumanism’s ultimate goals. Rather than supporting his case, the attempt to enlist Kolnai in his cause reveals instead how Bostrom fails to appreciate that genuine human dignity, like all human excellence, requires that we acknowledge and accept certain natural necessities, even those we sometimes struggle against.

Kolnai (1900-73) would seem to be an odd source for the case for transhumanism. A Hungarian-born philosopher who converted to Catholicism after reading G. K. Chesterton, Kolnai spent much of his career as an expatriate. Trained in phenomenology by Husserl, Kolnai articulated a politics of “Christian imperfectionism” and a powerful anti-utopianism, a politics not at all well suited to a thoroughgoing project to remake human nature.¹ In particular, the essay “Dignity,” to which Bostrom refers, provides no grounds for thinking that our dignity, in the sense Kolnai is most interested in, could be

enhanced by an increase in our power—indeed, quite the opposite.

Unlike most writers on dignity, Kolnai is at pains to distinguish the dignity he cares about—“dignity as quality”—from the related notions of human dignity and human rights. “Dignity as quality” is primarily a characteristic that elicits from us reverence and awe, “a ‘bowing’ gesture if I may so call it” (252).² Kolnai is at pains to avoid reducing “dignity as quality” to a merely moral claim, such as “the so-called rights of man” (257). He is skeptical of the natural basis of such rights, and he thinks that the moral imperative implied in them obscures our appreciation of “dignity as quality.” As for the notion of human dignity, he finds it to be a hybrid concept halfway between the prescriptive character of rights and the descriptive character of “dignity as quality” (258).

“Dignity as quality” in this sense would seem to be tailor-made for Bostrom’s purposes, since it transcends merely human dignity and can be attributed to elephants, cats, bulls, and even landscapes (254). As Bostrom might well ask, if a cat can have dignity, why not Cat Man? If nonhuman beings can have it, why not transhuman beings?

Furthermore, we would be remiss if we failed to acknowledge that Kolnai’s discussion of these matters is itself fraught with ambiguity and uncertainty, some of which may have seemed to Bostrom to point in his direction. In particular Kolnai’s skepticism about there being a true natural basis of natural rights spills over into questions he raises about the place of “dignity as quality” in human life. But despite this skepticism, Kolnai seems genuinely to wonder whether there is a moral order congruent with being human, for which human beings are not simply responsible but which makes sense of human dignity even if it does not resolve all ambiguities. “Dignity as quality” is an effort to give an account of dignity without starting from an answer to this question. Kolnai proceeds instead by elucidating the lived experience of the phenomenon of dignity. But Kolnai chooses not to evade the issue of the ultimate ground of dignity altogether.

Bostrom, on the other hand, leaves all Kolnai’s nuance and uncertainty aside. To be sure, Bostrom makes the anodyne observation that any given potential enhancement to human life may or may not turn out to enhance human dignity. Yet when he turns to the logical culmination of his defense of enhancement, his concluding “leap into an imaginary future posthuman world,” Bostrom fails to confront

many passages in Kolnai that warn against just such a world and that suggest that its fundamental assumptions could not help but make it undignified. For example, Kolnai finds Condorcet's "rationally and scientifically redrawn world" to be a place where "there would be no opportunity for the exercise of heroic virtue nor any sense in revering it" (262). Why should we not think that Kolnai would see Bostrom's Plastic World as just another "Utopian Delusion" like Condorcet's?

Here again, Kolnai goes some way toward Bostrom's point of view when he writes that "an elementary, not to say elemental, feature of dignity...[is] clarifying, developing, pursuing, and making valid personal tastes and choices" (261). Bostrom thinks, of course, that posthuman capacities can only widen the realm of such activity. And yet, for Kolnai, this aspect of dignity exists within a larger framework of "what is most important," which is "not to 'get what one likes' but to be able to endure what one 'gets' without necessarily assenting to it or growing to 'like' it" (262). The dignified attitude thus has an element of resignation quite antithetical to the very plasticity of Plastic World. Why should autopotent human beings ever concern themselves with the constraints of "an existing order of things" or the "tension between Value and Reality" (262)? Yet refusal to "recognize, experience, and bear with" that tension is for Kolnai "the core of Un-dignity" (262).

Bostrom suggests that his posthumans will be "Bayesian rationalists" who have "no convictions but only a fluid network of revisable beliefs." While such qualities may appear to allow a dignified-sounding "self-transcendence," it is hard to distinguish such rationalism from what Kolnai calls a meretricious "flitting mobility of a weightless self" (266). While Bostrom might well be right that a posthuman being will have "spectacular success" at "creating around himself a world for his own use," he fails to note that Kolnai thinks such self-creation is precisely what will lead to dignity as quality being "crowded out" (266).

We might also pose to Bostrom the question George Orwell asked in *The Road to Wigan Pier* about H. G. Wells's portrayal of the physical traits of the man of the future. In a highly mechanized society, Orwell wondered, why should we expect to find human beings of the godlike physique and fitness Wells describes? It seems to Orwell far more likely that, as the necessity for physical fitness declines, one

would find “little fat men,”³ a point that early 21st-century Americans can hardly gainsay. Of course, we might reply to Orwell that we will choose to constrain ourselves: physical fitness is better for our health, a fun hobby besides! And yet somehow rigorous programs of diet and exercise are hardly the norm. Many more indulge the freedom of separating high caloric consumption from intense physical activity and are on the lookout for the magic pill that will free them from the consequences of such indulgence.

In Plastic World dignity will become a quality as rare as is physical excellence in a mechanized world. Perhaps the best we can expect is that, just as we today admire intensive physical cultivation in boutique settings, e.g., sports, there will be a super-intelligent audience in Plastic World for “dignity games.” After all, we see in contemporary America a taste for “Masterpiece Theatre” renditions of vanished worlds of honor and gentlemanliness. The inhabitants of Plastic World, we might imagine, will enjoy highly ritualized moral encounters, appreciated by some for the display of antiquated excellence and by most for the frisson of horrific insight they provide into a barbaric past.

According to Kolnai, true dignity (and its opposite) arises only in how we come to terms with things not of our own choice or making. But if that is the case, there can be no dignity in the world of autopotent posthumans, who know no restraint or constraint not of their own making. Unlike Kolnai, Bostrom is confident that posthuman inhabitants of plastic world will exhibit the “dignity of the strong.” Out of their autopotency they will choose to restrain themselves in accordance with “quiet values.” In human terms we know what that might mean: the mercy of the king or conqueror, the act of noblesse oblige. But in the world we have known hitherto, the dignity of such acts still depends on external constraints felt by the strong, such as the binding power of religious obligation, the existence of powerful social hierarchies, even the mere sense of prudence that restraint is good today because one never knows what tomorrow will bring. Will “quiet values” produce any like reasons to compel the strong in plastic world to show self-restraint? Bostrom never worries that the strong might not want to restrain themselves in Plastic World, or that there might be a real ugliness in the human will that will only be exposed once we are freed of natural constraints.

By Kolnai's lights, then, it seems likely that Bostrom has fallen into a utopian trap, a classic expression of which can be found in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The old courtier Gonzalo expatiates on the ideal commonwealth he would create if he were king, concluding paradoxically that there would be "No sovereignty." The not merely cynical Antonio comments, "The latter end of his commonwealth forgets the beginning" (*The Tempest* 2.1.160, 162-3.) Likewise, Bostrom begins by having us seek the power of gods, though in the "latter end" he paradoxically expects us to refrain from using our godlike powers to the maximum.

Notes

¹ David Wiggins and Bernard Williams, "Aurel Thomas Kolnai (1900-1973)," in *Ethics, Values, and Reality: Selected Papers of Aurel Kolnai* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett, 1978), ix-xxv.

² All references to Kolnai in the text are to Aurel Kolnai, "Dignity," in *Philosophy* 51 (1976): 251-271.

³ George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1958), p. 193.