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**Review: European Sources of Human Dignity: A Commented Anthology Mette Lebech. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2019. pp. 345. On the Problem of Human Dignity: A Hermeneutical and Phenomenological Investigation Mette Lebech.**

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# Review

## ***European Sources of Human Dignity: A Commented Anthology***

Mette Lebech. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2019. pp. 345.

## ***On the Problem of Human Dignity: A Hermeneutical and Phenomenological Investigation***

Mette Lebech. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009. pp. 327.

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A coordinating feature of much contemporary discourse—philosophical and theological, social and cultural, political and legal—is the idea of human dignity. The sense of its necessity as an idea grounding and organizing thought, feeling, and action about the human being is shared across different and often otherwise contrary worldviews. But to what does the expression “human dignity” refer? What is human dignity? And why is it important? Anyone who has looked at the problem with anything more than a cursory glance knows

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that these are not easy questions, and Mette Lebech sets herself the task of attaining an answer in two complementary volumes, through a hermeneutical and phenomenological investigation in *On the Problem of Human Dignity*, coupled with a later published commented anthology of key texts of the Western tradition in *European Sources of Human Dignity*. The significance of the investigation together with anthology of sources lies in the fact that, according to Lebech, “the affirmation of human dignity occupies so central a place in human experience that its denial would render the latter unrecognizable” (Lebech, 2009: 20).

The investigation of the first volume is divided into three parts and proceeds from a “multiplicity of interpretations (Part I) through hypothetical clarification (Part II), to existential substantiation (Part III)” (Lebech, 2009: 19). The first part unfolds the history of human dignity by examining its manifestation in four historically distinct though related contexts, the Cosmo-centric, Christo-centric, Modern, and Contemporary. The second part directly explores the meaning of human dignity through a thorough phenomenological investigation of its essence, while successively analyzing its meaning as it shows up in Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and Immanuel Kant. The third part focusses on the constitution of human dignity via human experience through a phased progression of analyses, where Lebech first surveys the motivational structure of constitution, then attends to the constitution of the human being and the constitution of values, and finally concentrates on the specific constitution of “the fundamental value of the human being.” With this quotation, Lebech provides basic clarity over the meaning of human dignity, the truth that the human being has intrinsic, essential value, which foundationally coordinates the experience of *being* human.

The second volume is divided into four parts comprised of twelve chapters. Here Lebech begins with ancient sources localized around Aristotle, Cicero, and the Dead Sea Scrolls, proceeds through Patristic, Carolingian, and Scholastic sources, treats of the early modern sources associated with the Renaissance and Enlightenment, Reformation and Counterreformation, and moves on to the modern era, covering the French Revolution and Industrialization and Democracy, before concluding with sources illustrating the impact of the Second World War. In each area Lebech provides an insightful presentation by commenting astutely on representative texts, and thereby delivers an ever-developing picture of human dignity through its primary European sources, a clarifying touchpoint that grows through time as European intellectual history progresses. Lebech prefaces the

anthology with a coordinating notion, quoting from Axel Stern's "On Value and Human Dignity" (*Listening*, 1975: 83), where he locates dignity in our attributing intrinsic value to the human being, as such, and as one who values—that is, to *the value of the valuer*—and to the kind of interpersonal relationships possible on the basis of this intrinsic value.

In delving into Western thought in this spacious way, and in waiting patiently with the question of the dignity of the human being throughout her research, Lebech has prepared an immensely valuable contribution to research into the question of human dignity, and a valuable aid toward resolving the difficult questions surrounding its adequate recognition. Indeed, *European Sources of Human Dignity* provides an exceptional documentary resource for ongoing reflection on the idea of human dignity, a resource to be returned to again and again, neatly annotated with insightful and instructive commentary from Lebech. The earlier published *On the Problem of Human Dignity* deepens the notions exposed in the commented anthology by supplying a lucid exposition of the essence of human dignity itself, and its related personal and social constitution. The progressive way this essence is laid bare for the intuition of the reader, coupled with the precision with which Lebech details its motivated constitution, not only clarifies the nature of dignity but also provides a wonderful example of using the phenomenological method to solve difficult philosophical (cultural, social, legal, political, etc.) problems. Such unveiling—via documentary sources and phenomenological examination—is needed if discourse involving competing theories of human dignity is to be entered upon with openness.

Particularly helpful toward locating the remote ground of the idea is the first chapter of *European Sources of Human Dignity*, where Lebech identifies the Aristotelian referent of "human dignity" in the human being as "rational animal," exhibited most clearly in the human capacity for intuition (νοῦς) by which first principles are grasped. In addition to providing Aristotle's Greek original, Lebech provides a standard Latin translation that transposes the Greek ἀξίωμα (*axioma*) and ἀξία (*axia*) into the Latin *dignitas*. As becomes apparent through a collation of extracts from *Posterior Analytics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*, the ancient root of the idea of dignity is discovered together with "something of basic importance, which influences whatever comes after it" (Lebech, 2019: 12). The same notion is then attributed to persons in authority, οἱ ἄξιοι (*hoi axioi*), those who are efficacious and powerful as originating loci of order and action. Thus, already in its origins, dignity reveals its face as something "unfounded and first," something attributable to one possessing value, who is also established in relation to everything else possessing value.

Similarly insightful is Lebech's inclusion of the Biblical heritage of the idea in Hebrew reference to human dignity (or glory) כבוד האדם (*kvod ha-adam*) and to the dignity of creatures כבוד הבריות (*kvod HaBeriyot*)—even while the latter is often restricted to its human referent. Though not actually found in the canonical scriptures, the Dead Sea scrolls provide textual basis for the phrase, and a related phrase in fragments of Ecclesiasticus among the Qumran scrolls—הפאדה אדם, the splendor of Adam—allows for a common line of interpretation that takes in biblical sources.

Having also included many texts of Cicero among Ancient sources, and thereby shown how the idea is being thought through in its moral, political, and legal import, Lebech proceeds to the Patristic and Carolingian sources of the medieval era, in which she discerns two tendencies, namely, a critique of the Roman cult of honor and rank, and a recognition of the fundamental value of the human being, who is marvelously created and still more marvelously redeemed. In the Scholastic sources of Peter Abélard, Bernard of Clairvaux, Robert Grosseteste, and Thomas Aquinas, Lebech shows that medieval thinkers assume and synthesize the tradition up to this point and come to systematically identify the *person* and *dignity*—a clear highpoint in the historical evolution of the idea. Among late medieval sources, Lebech also includes numerous women thinkers who variously modify the idea by affirming “aspects of dignity too often forgotten: the dignity of the ill, the pregnant woman, and ordinary layperson” (Lebech, 2019: 64). Among early Modern sources, Lebech includes such figures as Pico della Mirandola, Erasmus of Rotterdam, Bartholémé de Las Casas, Thomas Hobbes, and David Hume, and among Modern sources, Johann Herder, Immanuel Kant, Mary Wollstonecraft, Georg Hegel, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Finally, capping the anthology, Lebech reflects on the profound impact of World War II on the establishment of the idea, inasmuch as the war “forged the notion of human dignity definitively into a constitutional principle” (Lebech, 2019: 283), and thus secures its place as foundational in political and legal thought and action.

Covering many of the same thinkers in *On the Problem of Human Dignity*—and thus providing a series of contexts out of which the idea develops—Lebech proceeds with an involved phenomenological analysis of its essence and motivated constitution. After first analyzing its linguistic essence, its essence as value, and its related essentiality, Lebech proceeds to phenomenologically examine Aristotle's, Aquinas's, and Kant's accounts of essence. With the help of each in turn, Lebech reflects on their (not entirely unrelated) theories of essence and questions the kind of essence embodying human dignity that is

traceable to each thinker. In Aquinas, she extends her reflection by exploring the relation of person and dignity and their common relation to the *imago Dei*, and in Kant, by exploring the transcendental location of human dignity in the human being as end. Having thereby secured insight into its essence, Lebech proceeds to a constitutional analysis of human dignity. Here she performs a wide-ranging investigation that first attends to the nature of constitution and its motivated character, to the constitution of the I, the living-body, and the types “human” and “person,” before moving on to a consideration of the constitution of values, their order and rank, as well as their objectivity and role in community formation. Having thus resolved certain decisive questions that are presupposed to an adequate answer to the question of human dignity, Lebech concludes her investigation with a constitutional analysis of fundamental value of the human being, including, with attention, the constitution of the value of the I, the living-body, and the types “human” and “person.”

In employing phenomenology as the coordinating centerpiece of her investigation in this way, Lebech is intentionally following the method detailed by Edmund Husserl in *Ideas I* (1913) and Edith Stein in *On the Problem of Empathy* (1917), and heavily leans on Stein’s particular “phenomenological perspective.” The reason for this leaning lies in the way Stein attends to the social dimension of experience, through her understanding of the intersubjective constitution of objects and the objective world, coupled with her focused attention to the phenomena of valuation, wherein values are given as objects for cognition, affection, and striving—for individuals and for communities. Though Stein does not treat directly of the idea of human dignity (*Menschenwürde*), even while she has evident appreciation for the essential value of the human being, her works nonetheless contain valuable resources for investigating human dignity as a fundamental value that is essentially socially constituted within communal settings. Though it is human individuals who experience the value of being human, of human nature as it is found extant in every singular human being—oneself and the other—the concept of human dignity is shown by Lebech, in consort with Stein, to be communally conditioned, mediated, and communicated.

To help the reader unfamiliar with the method of phenomenology, Lebech provides a useful glossary of phenomenological terms; and to help the reader effortlessly refer to the differing presentations of dignity across its many textual sources, Lebech includes all original language texts and bolds the expression **human dignity** in originals

and translation(s). These features reveal something of Lebech's concern for the topic of human dignity and its import in human life, a concern that will bear abundant fruit if future thinkers return to the representative texts of the tradition provided by Lebech in her anthology, and further reflect on this most important value with the help of her insightful phenomenological exposition.

Certainly, the primary significance of Lebech's volumes is to be found in this dual dimensionality of her research: in the *expansive* way she unveils the significance of the expression "human dignity" in the development of Western thought through key documentary sources; and in the corresponding *intensive* way she makes manifest the essence of human dignity together with its constitution in human experience, "as the fundamental value of the subject of human experience" (Lebech, 2019: 1). Particularly helpful in this regard is the hermeneutical-phenomenological method employed by Lebech in approaching the problem. Such an approach includes the patience required to wait before the philosophically difficult problem of human dignity, in addition to the insight needed to progressively manifest its intrinsic and foundational character. When further grounded in the openness by which Lebech approaches the primary sources and the clear way she exposes both the ground and the fruit of her research, we undoubtedly find in these volumes decisive reference texts for any future exploration of the question of human dignity.