

That the circumstances in which he urges us to undertake this project are in part and at the deepest levels informed by ideas arguably inimical to the religious elements of our contemporary pluralism suggests that this is no small undertaking.

Let us hope that Baker continues to urge us down this path and that he finds the time to delve still more deeply into the roots of our predicament. This book offers a promising beginning to “the end of secularism” but can hardly be said to be the last word.

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## Neither Beast Nor God: The Dignity of the Human Person

**Gilbert Meilaender**

New York: Encounter Books, 2009 (118 pages)

By all accounts, Gilbert Meilaender, the Richard and Phyllis Duesenberg Professor of Ethics in the Department of Theology at Valparaiso University, is a heavyweight in his field. With over a dozen books published in theological ethics, Meilaender has been a key voice for Christians in both the academy and the culture wars for a quarter-century. From 2002–2009, he was a member of the Bush administration’s *President’s Council on Bioethics* (PCBE). Together with Edmund Pellegrino, Leon Kass, William Hurlbut, and Robert George, Meilaender faithfully brought to bear the sane and salubrious truths of the Judeo-Christian ethical tradition on a wide range of complex issues. He established a name for himself in bioethics with the publication of his *Bioethics: A Primer for Christians* (1996; 2nd ed., 2005). Although his prominence as a public intellectual elevated by his association with the PCBE, Meilaender is in the first place a theologian, a Christian ethicist. Because bioethics raises issues fundamental to human existence, about life and death, flourishing and suffering, enhancement and alteration—questions in the end that are decidedly theological—Meilaender is well situated to make a contribution.

In *Neither Beast Nor God*, Meilaender works out ideas that he began formulating for a volume of essays commissioned by the PCBE entitled *Human Dignity and Bioethics*. The council was challenged by critics of the concept of dignity to articulate a substantive definition for the term. In a now-famous 2003 editorial in the *British Medical Journal*, “Dignity Is a Useless Concept,” bioethicist Ruth Macklin excoriates the council for throwing the term *dignity* around without ever defining it. In Macklin’s judgment, the concept is useless, because it covers no ethical ground not already covered by the principle of autonomy.

Meilaender disagrees. His guiding thesis in *Neither Beast Nor God* is that the language of dignity functions as a proxy concept—a placeholder—for a larger concept of the human person that includes truths embedded in human nature that both positively define and limit what is humanly good and fulfilling.

In chapter 1, he sets down a distinction crucial to the book's analysis (a distinction he finds latent in the writings of Kierkegaard). He distinguishes two senses of the term *dignity* ("human dignity" and "personal dignity"), both of which appear confusingly intertwined in the public conversation. Because they are not properly distinguished and prioritized, the concept of dignity can appear slippery and evasive: in the word of one critic, "squishy." Human dignity is a comparative term grounded in various forms of excellence that not all people share. It singles out the particular, what Kierkegaard calls "the one and only." Personal dignity meanwhile refers to the equal value all share by virtue of being equally human. Not grounded in particular abilities, personal dignity derives from the fact that "every person is equidistant from Eternity." Measured against our relationship to God, "all other distinctions are radically relativized." Both terms refer to something true about human beings: the first, that we are not all equal in our abilities and usefulness to society; the second—which provides the "*cantus firmus* underlying and sustaining the whole" concept of dignity—that we share a common humanity.

In chapter 2, Meilaender lays the groundwork for a philosophical anthropology. Drawing on Aristotle, Aquinas, and the German-born philosopher Hans Jonas, he probes the question: What, if anything, is fundamental to *being human*? Are there truths embedded in our being that help explain us, that illuminate paths to fulfillment, and that witness against the temptation to radically alter what we are? He argues that humans, especially because of the quality of "inwardness," are *purposeful* beings, oriented toward certain goods. The orientation is expressed in three natural inclinations: to preserve themselves in being, to propagate their race through sexual reproduction, and to seek the truth about God. (The influence of Aquinas here is obvious; see *ST*, I-II, q. 94, a. 2c.)

In a marvelous chapter entitled "Birth and Breeding," Meilaender criticizes what he calls the "transhumanist" idea that prioritizes overcoming *the human* in a giddy march toward the "posthuman." Underlying the idea is a concept of the person who rocks ambivalently between two erroneous extremes: Humans are merely beasts—complicated animals sufficiently explicable in terms of their bodies; and humans are gods—disembodied sources of mental life merely using their bodies to advance the interests of the conscious self. Whatever attraction these might hold for science fiction, neither describes human beings: "the human person—neither beast nor god—is a real union of body (that ties us to the beasts) and soul (that directs us toward God)." The dualists of today, he argues, are "Hobbes's children," disquieted monads clamoring to be other than they are. The dualists are most offended by "birth and breeding and death" (like the character of Filostrato in Lewis's *That Hideous Strength*). Thus, they try to conquer birth with artificial reproductive technologies, breeding with germ-line engineering, and death with cryogenics. This however is naïve; it misses the point of what it means to be human. If we fundamentally alter birth, breeding, and death, we alter what we are. Treat reproduction like production, and we end by treating children like products, no longer "begotten" but merely "made." Meilaender sees a cliff at the end of this road.

In chapter 7, the usually mild-mannered Meilaender rolls up his sleeves and goes fisticuffs with Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker, a prominent critic of the concept of human dignity. In a widely publicized essay in *The New Republic*, “The Stupidity of Dignity,” Pinker (in the spirit of Macklin) takes to task the PCBE for its volume, *Human Dignity and Bioethics*. Pinker dismisses the text as “the culmination of a long effort by the Council to place dignity at the center of bioethics.” The council’s motive, he avers, is reflective of “a movement to impose a radical political agenda, fed by fervent religious impulses, onto American biomedicine.” Although Meilaender is not without criticisms of the PCBE text, he believes the effort to grapple with the concept is worthwhile. He faults Pinker for failing to consider that *dignity* might be anything more than a religious trope meant to shut down pluralistic debate over controversial ideas in bioethics. Meilaender notes that any inconsistency in the language of dignity may be due to the fact that the term does different work in ethical discourse. We say at once that slavery takes away a person’s dignity *and* that nothing, including enslavement, can diminish a person’s dignity. Both, he says, are true. Our concept needs to be flexible enough to accommodate both construals. He thinks the confusion is clarified by distinguishing between *human* and *personal* dignity.

Most books spend their thunder by the final chapter: not *Neither Beast Nor God*. If you are going to read only one, read chapter 8, “Equal Persons.” The temperature of Meilaender’s peaceful prose elevates—no fervor, no ranting, but the warmth of felt conviction. In so many words, he argues that the proposition of equal dignity can be plausibly sustained only on theological grounds. It is not man’s relationship to man that convinces us we are radically equal. When we look around, we see difference, not sameness; a vast spectrum of aptitudes, of social utility; and a dizzying hierarchy of merit, beauty, and accomplishment. With all manifest differences, what convinces us we are equal? Meilaender beautifully replies, “because none of us is the ‘maker’ of another one of us.” Life is equally received as a gift. “Equal respect ... is grounded ... not in our relation to each other but in our relation to God, from Whom ... we are all equidistant.” Quoting Kierkegaard, Meilaender writes, “the thought of God’s presence makes a person modest in relation to another person because the presence of God makes the two essentially equal.” Although his text is in bioethics and not political philosophy, Meilaender cannot help—nor can we—noting the implications of his view: “An appreciation of the many and various distinctions in human flourishing ... is safe only in a public square that can affirm the relation to the Creator which grounds our equality of persons.”

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