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Group 4

Human Dignity vs. The Ability to Suffer

Question: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 was innovative in justifying a set of rights solely on the basis of human dignity. Should that foundation now be replaced by ‘ability to suffer’?

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) was founded based on the concept of human dignity. The International Human Rights Covenants of 1996, which tie closely to the UDHR, claim that “[human] rights derive from the inherent dignity of the human person” (Donnelly 28). One problem with this claim is, however, that the exact meaning of human dignity and how it gives rise to or grounds human rights is extremely vague. According to Schachter, “We do not find an explicit definition of the expression ‘dignity of the human person.’... Its intrinsic meaning has been left to intuitive understanding...” (Donnelly 28-29). Is dignity the best basis for the UDHR? Many scholars believe that the foundation of human dignity should be switched to “ability to suffer.”

First, let us discuss dignity. Many argue that dignity is a crucial foundation for human rights, and thus the UDHR because it ties directly with inalienable rights, which in turn are globally accepted. The claim of human dignity is that “simply being human makes one worthy or deserving of respect; that there is an inherent worth that demands respect in all of us” (Donnelly 29). Today, dignity is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “The quality of being worthy or honorable; worthiness, worth, nobleness, excellence.”

The “quality of being worthy” part implies that dignity must be earned. This concept goes along with world religions, including Islam and Christianity. In said religions, scholars widely debate the concept of inalienable rights. Religion includes the idea of the afterlife. In Islam and Christianity, generally speaking, a follower must earn their dignity vis-à-vis the modern definition through both following God and committing righteous acts for humankind in order to gain entrance to heaven. “Any moral idea of equal dignity at best referred to the potential of every Christian to be saved in the afterlife” (Donnelly 84). Referring to Islam, “rights were earned and differed according to social status rather than being inherent and equal” (Donnelly 81). The prevalence/existence of “earning dignity” and “earning rights” carries factual weight. Extremists, such as Muslims in ISIS, do not believe one has dignity without converting to Islam. This example applies to white nationalist Christians as well, such as Ku Klux Klan members who believe in torture and inequality (which directly opposes dignity). Thus, followers of these religions (extremist or not) can and do argue that dignity is not inherent, creating an immediate disagreement between religious followers and people without a religious background.

“The concept of dignity is vague” (Freeman 70). Many argue whether people have dignity if said people do not respect others’ dignity. This argument only adds to the evidence of dignity’s imperfection as the basis of the UDHR. Do people such as Jeffrey Dahmer and Adolf Hitler have dignity? Are they “worthy” of life and liberty? Many believe that people such as Dahmer and Hitler do not have dignity; they are undeserving of “inalienable rights.” The death penalty exists in many countries around the globe, which is further evidence that, while many acknowledge dignity is inherent, those same people will strip the dignity of human beings under certain circumstances. Immanuel Kant, a central figure in philosophy, made dignity a focus in his work. Kant himself, however, once stated “by a lie, a man...annihilates his dignity as a man.” If

a figure central to philosophy and human rights argues himself that dignity can be lost, then he is consequently arguing that dignity is not inherent. If dignity is not inherent to everybody, then it is not the ideal foundation for the UDHR. The UDHR is meant to unite people, but its dignity-based background unintentionally obscures its goal. Dignity is a culturally relative term, especially across religions. While I acknowledge that dignity is a noble term for the foundation of the UDHR in theory, human dignity as a concept does not have the capacity to solve major conflicts between human rights.

In 1789, Jeremy Bentham stated “The question is not, Can they reason?, nor Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?” Here, Bentham is questioning the basis of what makes us human and therefore deserving of rights. Recently, animal rights have become a pressing matter because of animals’ ability to suffer. The argument is that it is inhumane to kill or hurt animals because they can suffer just as humans can. Thus, an inherent issue with making “ability to suffer” the foundation of human rights is that it would “open the flood gates.” Imagine a world where animals have the rights to life and liberty. While I do not question the virtuousness of this possibility, the feasibility and rationality of such a world are questionable.

I would argue, however, that on a cross-cultural basis, “ability to suffer” is more inherent compared to dignity. While religious people (and others) can argue based on their beliefs that dignity is not inherent, it would be foolish to argue that one’s ability to suffer is not inherent. When a baby is born, it will cry. Being lost without your mother as a child will create suffering. Suffering is much more universal than dignity. Thus, because “ability to suffer” is more inherent to human beings, it could be a better foundation of the UDHR because it overcomes cultural relativism. Is ending human suffering not the main goal of not only the UDHR, of all humans in general too? The preamble of the UDHR states that it “is the foundation of freedom, justice and

peace in the world.” Without common ground for people to agree, achieving peace is impossible. While making the world free of suffering seems impossible, making “suffering” the headline could, at very least, bolster global attention to suffering. Rationally speaking, people will argue that humans deserve to suffer after they commit crimes (i.e. imprisonment). Although ability to suffer is not perfect, the fact that it is more inherent than dignity and less culturally relative could make it a better foundation for the UDHR and increase the chances that the UDHR achieves its goal of world peace.

Word count: 1000

Works Cited

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