

BUILDING THE BELOVED COMMUNITY WITH DIGNITY

I. INTRODUCTION

Building the beloved community is a complex process that involves the participation of individuals, groups, political entities, systemic features, and exterior forces (e.g. neighboring individuals, groups, and/or communities) working together – either actively or passively – towards a common goal: regardless of each one’s motivation(s). The crux of this process is the individual, which serves as the foundation for the remaining aspects of the community. However, focusing on individuals and their role(s) in building the beloved community is no easy task, due to the complexity of individual ideologies, psychologies, and motivations (among other factors), but I suggest there is an attribute of individuals that can encompass most, if not all, of these factors: dignity.

In this essay, I will focus on dignity as the basis for individual participation in social and political activities and the building of the beloved community. I will argue that there is a particular phenomenon – what I will refer to as dual perception – that continually occurs during an individuals’ social and political engagement. This dual perception is best represented by the term ‘dignity.’ Dignity, however, is a complex concept that is not clearly understood, and as my examination will bear, there remains the threat of radicalism that might prevent the building of our beloved community. Therefore, I will show how radicalism can be avoided by incorporating the willingness to compromise into our understanding of what dignity means, which will both *inhibit* radicalism and *foster* positive political action based on compromise.

II. DIGNITY EXPLAINED

An individual's experience and position within a society directly influences how that individual *views* oneself and how that individual *is viewed* by others (i.e. society). It is this dual perception that dictates an individual's drive and desire to be politically active and to speak-out against social injustices – what I will refer to as being politically engaged. This dual perception is tied directly to one's political engagement because of its close conjunction with an individual's status and worth: both as an individual perceives himself or herself and as society perceives that individual. An individual is emboldened and empowered to be socially and politically engaged by one's sense of self-worth and confidence in one's conception of the good. What is more, the way society views and reacts to an individual bolsters that individual's confidence in a particular conception of the good. Of course, the same effect can occur in the negative too. For example, one who has a conception of the good that does not create feelings of self-worth and confidence, and does not garner respect from society, will be less likely to be politically engaged. If, however, both perceptions are positive, one's active political engagement will be fostered.

There is a common term in the English vernacular that captures what I am referring to as the dual perception, and the term is “dignity.” According to the *Oxford American College Dictionary*, dignity is, “The state or quality of being worthy of honor or respect... a sense of pride in oneself; self-respect... a high or honorable rank or position.”¹ The *definition* of dignity makes the *phenomenon* of dignity dependent upon both a person's internal sense of pride or self-respect and an external social recognition of an individual's actions. It is important that both these features are met. If dignity is merely based on one's personal sense of pride or self-respect, then dignity is obtainable by anyone who has a favorable opinion of oneself. While, on the other hand, if dignity is merely based on forces external to the individual, then dignity is lost in the

¹ *Oxford American College Dictionary*, (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2002), 381.

vast abyss of public opinion; in other words, what makes one dignified is too unstable, due to the steady fluctuation of public opinion.

Looking beyond the mere definition of dignity will help explain what it means to be dignified and will illustrate its importance in building the beloved community. Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative² gives insight into how one can live a life of dignity by promoting the innate worth of all humans (i.e. rational creatures), while, at the same time, having his or her innate worth respected (i.e. reciprocity). Kant suggests that each individual is to be treated not merely as a means but as an end in themselves.³ Individuals are autonomous creatures that should be treated with respect, or as one would prefer themselves to be treated. For example, the slave who is viewed merely as a tool to perform certain types of labor is being treated merely as a means and without the respect that an autonomous individual deserves as a rational creature. Whereas, a laborer who is free, paid, and open to other benefits and options is treated as an autonomous person who has made an agreement to perform a certain task for a certain wage. It is the respect one shows for others and the reciprocated respect from others, which follows, that makes one dignified. Though a full examination of Kant is beyond the scope of this essay, the reader should see that respect – in some form or another – for all persons is important for one to be considered dignified.

Kant's categorical imperative sheds light on what one might mean by 'dignity,' but it does not satisfy the practical concerns of building the beloved community. There are many great theoretical schemata (e.g. Rawls's "justice as fairness") that easily answer the question, "how?", but this essay needs a practical empirical explanation. The examination of Central/Eastern

² Though Kant's Categorical Imperative is used in this essay, I am confident other ethical theories may be used to explain a basic principle of respect for others.

³ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 4th edition, 2001), 31.

European social dissidents during the oppression of Communist rule will achieve the practical empirical task that is needed.

III. DIGNITY EXEMPLIFIED

The main focus of this essay is Adam Michnik's formulation of dignity. Michnik opposed communist rule in Poland and Central/Eastern Europe, and his writings present a cogent (and I would argue successful) attempt to build a dignified community. Michnik's opposition to the communist, totalitarian regime of Poland takes a different approach than many other dissidents; he supports the claim that dignity, above all else, secures the integrity of a government and its people. Michnik suggests that armed struggle and radical opposition are not effective in creating *real, stable, and positive* change; rather, positive change depends on "compromise" and a sustained personal and political dignity.

An example of personal and political dignity arises in the case of Polish "loyalty agreements." In an attempt to squash social unrest, the Polish government coerced dissidents into signing loyalty agreements that praised the communist system and denounced all counter-communist writings and actions. The coercion of the government came in the form of forced incarceration, interrogation, and other forms of harassment. After a period of time, the government offered dissidents the opportunity to leave jail and be exiled from Poland in exchange for their renouncement of previous writings and actions. Michnik claims that such an attempt exemplifies the undignified nature of the Polish government under communist rule.⁴ The government gave dissidents only two options: sign a declaration and be free; or not sign and remain in jail. Michnik posits that for one to sign such an agreement one must give up common

⁴ Adam Michnik, *Letters From Prison: And Other Essays*, trans. May Latynski, foreword by Czesław Miłosz, intro. Jonathan Schell (Berkeley, London, and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 5-6.

sense, being true to oneself, and being true to the memory of Poland's struggle for freedom; to sign the loyalty agreement, one must give up one's dignity.⁵

Michnik's example of loyalty agreements suggests that dignity requires three features: *commonsense, be true to oneself, and be true to the historical memory of one's society* (i.e. maintaining one's national self-determination). What is meant by "commonsense," "being true to oneself," and "being true to the historical memory of one's society" is unclear, and more importantly, these requirements are not sufficient in guaranteeing one will act or a government will act in a dignified manner. For example, imagine an individual – I will call him Dean – who is very commonsensical, a thoroughly convinced and devout fascist, and was raised in a society that is historically based on fascist ideals. According to the requirements mentioned so far, Dean acts dignified when he *promotes* fascism and *resists* non-fascist social and political forces. In other words, there is nothing in the three requirements to prevent some sort of radicalism from being considered dignified, and it is important that dignified action negate the possibility of radicalism, which is I maintain, at its heart, undignified because of its absolute resistance to counter-conceptions of the good. So, "commonsense," "being true to oneself," and "being true to the historical memory of one's society" must be clarified, and possibly, other requirements added to insure one's actions are dignified.

If dignity requires commonsense, being true to oneself, and being true to the historical identity of one's society, then we need some way of explaining how positive actions or societal changes will necessarily occur. Maybe the infusion of conceptions like integrity, honesty, and right actions can help clear up the problem at hand. Integrity, honesty, and "right actions"⁶

⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁶ What is meant by "right actions" will remain broad (and open to interpretation) because some leeway is required for determining what is considered "right" in a variety of different actions.

correlate nicely with what I have said so far about dignity, because all play a role in determining how an individual feels about oneself and how others view him or her. For example, one is considered by oneself and society to be a person with integrity, if he or she consistently performs right actions and is consistently honest. Honest individuals have a sense of self-respect and are honored by society with both titles (e.g. trustworthiness) and/or positions. And, right actions imply (but not necessarily) that an individual is performing actions that are deemed right – both by the individual and society.

Combining both sets of characteristics, however, does not help in the prevention of radicalism. Dean, our upstanding fascist, can be honest and have integrity and be a fascist; he can also have commonsense, be true to himself, and be true to the historical identity of his society and be a fascist; and sadly, Dean can be a fascist and perform right actions. Right actions require at least some minimal consideration of others, and consequently, one's actions against others require some sort of justification – at least the possibility of some *ad hoc* justification. Such considerations are based on the prime facie duties that result for Kant's categorical imperative mentioned above: the treating of others as rational creatures. Dignity requires not only an internal feeling of dignified behavior, but it also requires some sort of societal acceptance of one's actions; and, both can be achieved in the case of Dean. So, we must look for some other feature to insure that radicalism does not become the basis of building our beloved community.

IV. INHIBITING THE DEVELOPMENT OF RADICALISM

Let us look at two examples of radicals that Michnik describes. Michnik warns against two types of radical and undignified individuals, who appear in unstable societies: “maggots”

and “angels.” “Maggots” are those who conform and feed off the “state of decay” in a society. These are individuals who profit and collaborate with the state power system. “Maggots” get their name from the idea that they feed off of the “corpse” of civil society, which is the result of a lack of public participation in governmental policies. “Angels,” on the other hand, gain their name from the fact that they only criticize the state power system and its collaborators. “Angels” separate themselves from the realm of complex human obligations and live in the realm of the “crystal clear.”⁷ In other words, they are idealists – in a pejorative sense – who have no foundation in the reality of complex social and political relationships. The “angels” only know how to criticize and tear down; they are incapable of compromise and offering anything of substance to society.

From the discussion of “angels” and “maggots,” Michnik proposes three steps for one to interact with the government and to foster the emergence of a positive civil society. The first step Michnik proposes, and probably the most difficult one, is that people must learn to work with those in power, no matter how tough it may be. A society must maintain its cohesion through solidarity and (with debate and participation) forge a situation where the government listens and acts based on the needs of individuals in society. Society must recognize the complex interactions and pressures of state, national, and international politics, and learn to work within these complex interactions to enact change. Second, a society must not lose hope that change will come (i.e. they must be patient and perseverant). This second step is a personal test of one’s integrity and honesty; an individual must be able to persevere when times are difficult. Finally, a society must recognize the historical actions of their state or nation and use their heritage to bolster the existence of individual rights and dignity, which will lead to an overall societal

⁷ Michnik, 187.

dignity. If a society has a negative historical identity, then the emerging, dignified, society must accept its past and work to develop a new identity based on dignity. These steps separate one from the maggots and angels, and give insight into what might be added to commonsense, being true to oneself, and being true to the historical identity of one's nation to inhibit radicalism.

As seen earlier, Dean can have commonsense, be true to himself and to the historical identity of the state, have integrity, honesty, and perform right actions and still be a good fascist. Perseverance, too, does not prevent radicalism. It is not hard to imagine a radical – and possibly even point to individuals one knows – who is perseverant. So, perseverance does not help. The recognition of past harms and reciprocation of those harms may help prevent radicalism, but there is no guarantee that it will. Recognition and reciprocation might help in the case of Nazi Germany or South African apartheid because a large and recognizable atrocity occurred that is impossible to completely ignore. German and South African citizens were forced to recognize the error(s) of their fascist pasts, and in some way or another, work to build a new society based on different conceptions of the good. Imagine, however, a state or nation that, due to extraordinary circumstance, has consistently held a fascist worldview, yet never had to oppress any particular group or peoples; or, maybe this state's wrongdoing occurred so long ago that it has been erased from the minds and history books of its people; or, maybe the society splintered and left no cohesive group that identifies with prior acts of wrongdoing based on one's fascist views. However one wishes to parse recognition and reciprocation out, there is nothing about it that necessarily prevents the building of a radical community or the fostering of radicalism. There is no guarantee that the past will, or can, be remembered in all circumstances. So, recognition and reciprocity, though important, due to their role in holding parties responsible, does not solve the problem at hand.

The last step, compromise, seems to have more promise. Unlike recognition and reciprocity, compromise requires a willingness and openness to competing conceptions of the good in the present and the future. Imagine Dean, our “dignified” fascist, with the willingness to compromise. Dean would retain his fascist tendencies because they comprise his conception of the good, but within his conception of the good lies the willingness to consider and tolerate competing conceptions. Now, add an individual from a competing society: one that Dean has a dislike towards. Let us call this individual Jerry. Furthermore, imagine Dean and Jerry placed in charge of formulating a set of societal rules for how to interact with strangers: Dean being the native, Jerry being the stranger. Dean (*with* the willingness to compromise) has the basis for coming up with rules that cohere with both his and Jerry’s conception of the good. In other words, Dean and Jerry have found a way to coexist, interact, and work together to build the beloved community. On the other hand, Dean (*without* the willingness to compromise) has no basis for coming up with any rules, and their attempt would be an abject failure: as we have seen from our discussion so far.

Let us consider Dean from the point of view of dignity (i.e. dual perception). As a society that knows of Dean’s fascist leanings, we would look on Dean’s compromising as a sign of great character and dignity, especially if we did not subscribe to his fascist views. We would see that Dean is a dignified person who does not let his personal conception of the good interfere with the good of society or the relationships he has with others in society, especially individuals he dislikes, like Jerry. Dean is merely an eccentric individual who maintains certain views about himself and his race’s self-worth, but his beliefs are not so strong as to force them onto others. Dean’s fascist views (*with* the willingness to compromise) are not so radical. We may not agree with Dean, but just as we expect him not to force his conception of the good on us, we cannot

force our conception of the good on him. And, the fact that Dean is willing to compromise means that he is capable of being a participator in our attempt to build the beloved community. In fact, Dean's willingness to compromise fosters a sense of self-respect and self-worth that might even ameliorate his fascist views: sort of like a reflective equilibrium. So, we have found a way of applying 'compromise' to 'dignity,' and as a result, we see how the use of dignity fosters the building of a beloved community and inhibiting of radicalism.

V. DIGNITY AS COMPROMISE IN ACTION: A CASE STUDY

Michnik gives examples of how compromising is a key component of dignity, and how it inhibits radicalism and promotes the beloved community. Michnik claims the goal of a dignified struggle is a struggle for independence, not the gaining of power. As an example, Michnik says about Poland's Solidarity (a Polish social movement that began in the early 1980s), "[It] defends the rights of the working people," "prosecutes lawbreakers in the power apparatus," defends "political prisoners," and is a "true representative of the people," but it is not a "political party aiming to take over power."⁸ Solidarity and what it represents creates empowerment and is empowered by the dignity of people. Solidarity of the people restores civil society by infusing the people with a sense of dignity. Solidarity replaces the coercive and alienating relationship one has with the government with a positive social and political interaction, with a community of people with similar interests. In Poland, through the Solidarity movement and the active role of the Church, people regained their dignity by bolstering the feeling that they, themselves, determined the fate of their own lives.⁹ No longer were citizens merely pawns of some oppressive power; rather, they controlled the outcomes of their lives. The people of Poland

⁸ Ibid., 129.

⁹ Ibid., 160.

fought to heal the wounds created by the alienating system of communism and retook control of their own destiny. Michnik suggests that each person must decide if one will remain true to oneself and maintain his or her dignity or if one will become a “maggot” or “angel.” The maintaining of one’s dignity requires that one defend his or her beliefs by honorable means, because to defend a system by dishonorable means is a sure sign that one’s system is wrong.

Conformity and physical violence by citizens is as undignified as enforcing the dishonorable methods of the Soviet system. Michnik refers to those who sit back while indignities occur as being no better than Pontius Pilate, who allowed Christ to be executed unjustly.¹⁰ According to Michnik, history requires people to seek independence and dignity, and that it is a mark of dignified historical leaders that they fill the people with dignity. For example, the Polish leader Joseph Pilsudski gave “Poles a sense of dignity, which is as essential to the health of a nation as oxygen is to the human body.”¹¹ Michnik’s imagery is similar to that of Plato’s imagery in the *Republic*, where Plato posits that the health of the state is comparable to that of a human. In both cases, health depends on acting in an appropriate manner, and in both cases, acting with dignity.

Michnik also presents Pope John Paul II as an example of a dignified leader. Michnik uses the illustration of Nowa Huta, which the Pope used during one of his early visits to Poland. At Nowa Huta (a large steel mill) workers built a church, against the wishes of the authorities. John Paul II used Nowa Huta as an example to show that Christ died on the cross to “protest and degradation of man, including degradation through work.” Michnik suggests that the “workers’ fight for the Cross, to build a church in Nowa Huta was a struggle for dignity and identity and

¹⁰ Ibid., 168.

¹¹ Ibid., 222.

proof that ‘man does not live by bread alone.’”¹² In other words, there are things in life that one must stand his or her ground and fight for. To barely survive (to live by bread alone) is not enough; people need their dignity. Michnik shows how there are basic aspects of humanity that must be met and maintained if civil society is to exist and prosper. Though there are many examples of people who do not seem concerned with dignity and integrity, there are vast amounts of others who do, and as Michnik suggests, the combined forces of a determined civil society will eventually reach a compromise that restores their dignity.

VI. CONCLUSION

Though individuals might feel powerless in the face of a corrupt governmental system, the individual always maintains some facet of power over societal events. As Michnik suggests, one must not forget that a powerful system, let alone the complex relationships one encounters throughout life, creates pressures and vulnerabilities that must be considered. Václav Havel’s formulation of the “power of the powerless” is helpful in explaining the facet of power individuals have. Havel introduces the terms “existential pressure” and “existential vulnerability” to help explain the effects of the communist system on individuals. Such existential occurrences happen when individuals lose their individuality and attempt to exist in a system that keeps them in a constant state of fear. Havel uses the example of a physicist who lives in fear of not being a physicist to show the pressure and fear forced on people (i.e. one is not allowed to be oneself).¹³ Havel also uses the example of a store owner who places a sign

¹² Ibid., 165.

¹³ Václav Havel, *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990*, Selected and Edited by Paul Wilson (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 54.

which reads, “workers of the world unite!” in his store front window to illustrate the power of fear in the system and the indirect acceptance and support of the system.

The passive acceptance and fear of the system keeps governmental and oppressive systems in power. The store owner has “abdicated” his “reason and conscience to a higher authority”: the authority of the communist system.¹⁴ By the store owner’s actions he “confirm[s] the system, fulfill[s] the system, make[s] the system, [is] the system.”¹⁵ The same conclusion holds for all individuals who relinquish their individuality for the security of life under the control of a corrupt, undignified system. At the same time, the system cannot survive if individuals maintain their individuality and resist the system. Havel claims that the powerlessness of the individual who struggles to maintain one’s individuality creates “parallel structures” that rival the system in place.¹⁶ The individual’s fight for dignity, therefore, gives both the individual and society power: what Havel calls the “power of the powerless.” It is the power of individual dignity, with the willingness to compromise, that empowers individuals and fosters positive political change, which is *necessary* for building the beloved community.

¹⁴ Ibid., 130.

¹⁵ Ibid., 136.

¹⁶ Ibid., 192.

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