



Human Dignity

George Kateb

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Kateb asserts that the defense of universal human rights requires two indispensable components: morality (as promoted or enforced by justice) and human dignity. For Kateb, morality and justice have sound theoretical underpinnings; human dignity, by virtue of its “existential” quality, lacks (but merits) its own theoretical framework. This he proceeds to establish with a critique of the writings of canonical Western political philosophers (Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Mill, Emerson, Thoreau) and contemporary thinkers like Peter Singer and Thomas Nagel. The author argues that while morality compels just governments to prevent, reduce, or eliminate human suffering inasmuch as it is possible, people possess and are entitled to dignity by mere virtue of their “status” as human beings. Homo sapiens, he maintains, have a “stature,” manifest in the species's “great achievements,” that exceeds that of other creatures, even in (or especially in) the secular cosmos.

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