Book Review

Sangiovanni, A. (2017). *Humanity without dignity: Moral equality, respect, and human rights*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Reviewed by Peter A. Kindle, Ph.D, CPA, LMSW
The University of South Dakota, Vermillion, South Dakota

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Sangiovanni, a philosopher at King's College, London, when this volume was published, does not address those opposed to moral equality. Instead, he addresses those, like social work professionals, who support it. He sets out to argue that arguments for moral equality that are rooted in the idea of human dignity are not logically consistent. His alternative argues that moral equality rests more firmly on a rejection of forms of inferiority that violate our common humanity and sociability. In this manner, he provides a stronger base for the assertion of human rights, one that is completely free of any taint of merit-based criticism. Organized into two sections of three chapters each, Sangiovanni addresses the foundational philosophical issues in the first section that are probably most relevant to social work professionals desiring a deeper insight into our values related to human dignity and the importance of human relationships. The second section reflects on how Sangiovanni's philosophy would influence our understanding of international human rights, the international legal human rights system, and our understanding of basic rights, fundamental rights, and hierarchies of human rights.

The arguments against basing moral equality on human dignity are uprooted by Sangiovanni. If dignity is the base of moral equality, then our explanation of what dignity means must justify the claim that all persons warrant equal treatment, regardless of capacities or conduct, and that equal treatment is reasonable or rationally defensible. The argument for human dignity that social workers are most likely to relate to is the Christian argument that everyone is created in the image of God, but Sangiovanni also addresses the Aristocratic and Kantian arguments as well.

He describes the contemporary Catholic understanding of human dignity, "man's rational and volitional capacities are manifestations of the special bond that connects him to God, with whom he shares an image and likeness shared by no other creature" (p. 28). This argument cannot explain moral equality without appeal to a soul that is an organizing principle prior to bodily form. To Sangiovanni, this argument is persuasive only to those holding this belief system because non-instrumental, unconditional, and absolute value and dignity cannot be justified from bodily form alone. Accordingly, this argument fails the reasonableness test in his view.

The Aristocratic (e.g., Aristotle, Cicero) and Kantian perspectives, respectively, argue that human dignity is rooted in greatness of soul understood as honor and decorum or in our capacity for rational choice. Generalization of these characteristics to all humanity is a weak argument for human dignity in that these characteristics are not universally and equitably distributed. Accordingly, they fail the equal treatment test.

Dignity-first arguments in which the dignity of the person precedes respect for the person dominates moral equality arguments historically, but Sangiovanni disagrees. The basis of respect for the person is better rooted in an understanding of what it means to treat someone as a moral unequal and as inferior – and why such treatment is wrong.

The consequences of treating someone as a moral equal are not based on inherent value and dignity, but on social relations of mutual concern that develops from that treatment. Social relations are valuable in their own right as they are essential to the development of a sense of self. Sense of self requires (a) partial control over what is inner and what is outer, (b) a sustaining social environment or place where one fits, and (c) partial control over how our sense of self presents through our body.

Treating another as a moral unequal or inferior takes five forms: (a) dehumanizing (treating as an animal), (b) infantilizing (treating as a child), (c) objectifying (lacking subjectivity or interiority), (d) instrumentalizing (treating like a tool), and (e) stigmatizing (treating as if polluted or spoiled). None are necessarily wrong as each form has examples of when they are appropriate; however, "It strikes me that the most salient feature shared by all instances of treating as an inferior in the relevant sense is the cruelty" (p. 75). "Social cruelty involves the unauthorized, harmful, and wrongful use of another's vulnerability to attack or obliterate their capacity to develop and maintain an integral sense of self" (p. 76). Treating another as inferior is not wrong due to equal worth or dignity, or due to inherent flaws in hierarchies of status, but it is wrong due to the wrongness of social cruelty and the related right against inferiorizing treatment.

Accordingly, each person is worthy of respect, not that owed by virtue of achievements, character, or office, but in a way that reflects commitment to moral equality. This form of respect allows the other space to maintain a sense of self, a degree of opacity from full exposure of the inner self by treating the external self with respect. It is cruel to both denigrate the inner based on external station and to reinforce the self-denunciation of the fractured self. "Respect . . . is a response to our vulnerability rather than our worth as sociable beings" (p. 104). Sangiovanni is essentially arguing that it is not worth or value that justifies moral equality, but our vulnerability and the fragility of our sense of self. He terms this the Negative Argument.

Therefore, the wrongness in discrimination is not in the downstream social consequences or in the animus of the perpetrator, but in the social meaning of the act which harms not only the group but also the particular individuals effected. The explanation for the wrongfulness of stigmatization as it relates to racial discrimination does not rely on the harmful actions, but on the social-relational aspect. "Objectification is wrong when and because it uses our vulnerability to attack our capacity to develop and maintain an integral sense of self" (p. 158).

When applied to international human rights, Sangiovanni argues for the contextualization of the human rights discourse. The right to education in Somalia is different that the right to education in Baltimore, and should be. What is common between the two is human vulnerability and the intrinsic need for the development of an integral sense of self through social relationships. International legal human rights, he argues, should be grounded in a duty of reciprocal protection. In this way, he rejects the indivisibility of human rights as enunciated in United Nations documents in favor of a potential hierarchy of human rights based on empirical grounds. The empirical necessity of a right is determined by noting that its absence suggests that it is likely that other rights will be violated, or that violations of any basic right will impede individual opportunity to enjoy other rights. The most predominant way to diminish opportunities to enjoy rights is through fear. "Fear of deprivation . . . makes it very difficult to focus on anything other than the fear" (p. 241).

Social work values embrace human dignity and the importance of human relationships, but may do so within an unstated framework that requires a Christian worldview. Many will not be dissuaded from their value commitments due to this perceived flaw, but I take comfort in the atheocentric arguments of Sangiovanni who establishes moral equality in something that all humanity shares – our mutual vulnerability and need for others.