

# THE RIGHT TO CHOOSE

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**Abstract:** The concept of human dignity is familiar to us, yet we can hardly define it. We know intuitively what it refers to, but this apprehension is always dependent on a cultural and social context. Our own view of what is dignified to be or to do may differ from other people's views. This leads sometimes to a conflict of values that is not easily resolved. But should it be resolved? Isaiah Berlin held the firm belief that value pluralism is essential for the good life in a free society and that freedom can only manifest itself in our capacity of choice. Therefore, genuine values can clash and it is the objective of each functional democracy to balance them in order to avoid chaos. Choice means inevitably putting a value above others, at least for a certain period of time. Sometimes it is dignity, other times it could be life, security, or health. And these are all personal choices. Yet, the problem arises when personal choice is indistinguishable from the choices imposed by or onto a group of people, either in a society or in a state. It will be this paper's task to show that a society which imposes its own definition of dignity is trampling upon the very own human dignity it implies.

**Keywords:** human dignity, freedom, Isaiah Berlin, choice, values

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## **Some theoretical considerations on human dignity and freedom**

Dignity is a concept familiar to us all. We can easily think about a list of things to associate dignity with. It is a notion mostly related to religious and human rights issues:

“We believe that God created human beings equal in rights, duties and dignity, and he calls them to live as brothers and sisters and to spread the values of goodness, love and peace (...). That is why freedom of conscience and religious freedom – which is not limited to freedom of worship alone, but allows all to live in accordance with their religious

convictions – are inseparably linked to human dignity”, said Pope Francis on a visit to Morocco.<sup>1</sup>

It is stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

“Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.”<sup>2</sup>

However, the concept is nowhere defined. It is stated, affirmed, cherished, imposed and presupposed without ever being defined. The problem with the definition of human dignity is that there is none, or to put it more correctly, there is no sole definition, but a variety of them. And they all depend on the person holding certain views about the world – their *Weltanschauung* – on the culture and the social environment they live in or have been brought up into, on the historical time etc. Of course, this does not mean that in absence of a clear definition one doesn't know the meaning of the word “dignity”.

The Austrian philosopher of science Karl Popper insisted that we should not be obsessed with definitions because they do not help us to clarify concepts. Definitions are mere conventions; they do not add to clarity. Philosophy does not gain anything by demanding that everyone should strictly define their concepts. Even if we do not know exactly how to define justice that does not mean that we do not know what justice is. Definitions lead to a “pretentious, false precision”, not to genuine clarity. Popper stands for “plain, clear speaking”, meaning that the only way to obtain clarity is to express our ideas clear and simple. In *The Open Society and Its Enemies*<sup>3</sup>, he showed that political philosophy is full of such vain discussions about concepts and definitions which should be replaced by more practical political topics about what should be done and accomplished in political life.<sup>4</sup>

1 Hannah Brockhaus, “Religious freedom is about human dignity, Pope says in Morocco”, 31 March 2019, <https://catholicherald.co.uk/news/2019/03/31/religious-freedom-is-about-human-dignity-pope-says-in-morocco/>

2 The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights>

3 Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Routledge, London, 2002

4 Karl Popper in 1974 documentary “Philosophie gegen falsche Propheten”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sLDpj8dx0UU>

Popper was not the only philosopher to endorse the virtues of clear speaking. Isaiah Berlin pointed to the dishonesty of those who try to hide their lack of understanding behind an overemphasized way of speaking.

Dignity is a relative concept, or, as neuropsychologist Steven Pinker argues, it is a phenomenon of human perception, dependent on the beholder. It is also fungible, for people trade it off for other things they value more, like health, life, or safety. And sometimes it can be harmful too, because “totalitarianism is often the imposition of a leader’s concept of dignity on a population.” Thus, “a free society disempowers the state from enforcing a conception of dignity on its citizens.”<sup>5</sup>

There are other authors that find the concept completely useless in their field of research, like Ruth Macklin does. In an article expressing this point of view, she analyses the way in which this notion has been used in medical ethics. In medicine, dignity is all about the right to be correctly informed in order to be able to take decisions. But this only affirms the autonomy of human beings. So, instead of dignity she proposes the concept of personal autonomy, which implies our capacity to reason, to choose, to prosper, and to suffer.<sup>6</sup>

And it is mostly the topic of choice that is of particular interest here, because we, as human beings, must be free to choose. Or, as Sir Isaiah Berlin famously put it when expressing the negative form of liberty, there should be no obstacles to our freedom of choice. If the positive version of liberty states the ability to pursue goals, in its negative form liberty is all about the absence of constraints. Both types of liberty help us understand the societies we live in, whether they are free or unfree. The ideal situation would be when both types are held in equilibrium, because overemphasizing one of them dangerously reduces the freedom of individuals.

To most people in the world freedom (or liberty) is one of the most cherished values. But sometimes they are ready to trade it for other values. There are fanatics of freedom who would never compromise just as there are fanatics of equality who never compromise. According to Isaiah Berlin, both are wrong because our core values are not always

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5 Pinker, “The Stupidity of Dignity”, *The New Republic*, May, 2008, <https://newrepublic.com/article/64674/the-stupidity-dignity>

6 Ruth Macklin, “Dignity is a Useless Concept”, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC300789/>

harmonious with each other: complete liberty is sometimes incompatible with complete equality, justice is not always compatible with mercy, and neither is knowledge and happiness. Because some values clash, we must always weight them against each other and compromise in order to avoid that one value gets trampled upon. There is no universal recipe for achieving happiness; we have to do it by trial and error. Yet, major errors that lead to destruction and harm to other people's lives must be avoided. For this very reason Berlin considers that even liberty has to be restricted sometimes in order to allow other people to live freely, for otherwise if humans were completely free, "the wolves would be free to eat the sheep."<sup>7</sup>

Free societies are pluralistic ones where a multitude of opinions are tolerated, where people are taught to reach agreements, to compromise, to communicate with each other. Berlin was aware that not all democracies were pluralistic, namely those where the majority imposes its own system of values.<sup>8</sup> In this situation freedom of choice outside the established norms imposed by a majority is greatly reduced.

### **The strangers among us ...**

For some years now, most press headlines in Europe have been dealing with the issue of migrants/refugees. They are presented as a calamity invading our continent, jeopardizing our lives, cities, jobs, budgets, culture and so on. Depending on the political spectrum the press is reflecting, we read about how we ought to help them in or help them out of Europe. Namely we are told what to think, say, and do about them.

Nationalism is again on the rise in Europe despite the optimism that marked the decade after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Even Isaiah Berlin thought that a "brighter future" awaits us for all great tyrannies, China included, are in ruin. He wrote this in 1994.<sup>9</sup> One cannot help but wonder what he would have said seeing the map depicting the rise of nationalism in Europe. Not only that China is not in ruin, but other countries are on the road to unfreedom as well. And some of these are

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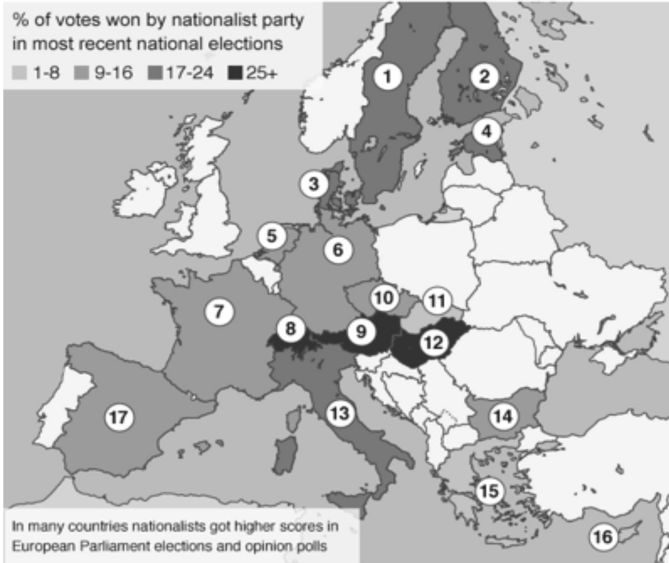
7 Isaiah Berlin, "A Message to the 21st Century", *New York Review of Books*, October 23, 2014, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2014/10/23/message-21st-century/>

8 Isaiah Berlin, Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1991

9 Isaiah Berlin, "A Message to the 21st Century", *New York Review of Books*, October 23, 2014, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2014/10/23/message-21st-century/>

in Europe. According to Isaiah Berlin, nationalism comes in two forms. One is cultural and implies a sense of belonging, of cultural identity (like the nationalism of Herder), and the other is an exacerbated form of the first one, leading to hatred, resentment, and humiliation.

### Rise of nationalism in Europe



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| ① <b>Sweden</b><br>Sweden Democrats 17.6%             | ⑩ <b>Czech Republic</b><br>Freedom and Direct Democracy 11% |
| ② <b>Finland</b><br>The Finns 17.7%                   | ⑪ <b>Slovakia</b><br>Our Slovakia 8%                        |
| ③ <b>Denmark</b><br>Danish People's Party 21%         | ⑫ <b>Hungary</b><br>Fidesz 49%, Jobbik 19%                  |
| ④ <b>Estonia</b><br>Conservative People's Party 17.8% | ⑬ <b>Italy</b><br>The League 17.4%                          |
| ⑤ <b>Netherlands</b><br>Freedom Party 13%             | ⑭ <b>Bulgaria</b><br>United Patriots 9%                     |
| ⑥ <b>Germany</b><br>Alternative for Germany 12.6%     | ⑮ <b>Greece</b><br>Golden Dawn 7%                           |
| ⑦ <b>France</b><br>National Rally 13%                 | ⑯ <b>Cyprus</b><br>ELAM 3.7%                                |
| ⑧ <b>Switzerland</b><br>Swiss People's Party 29%      | ⑰ <b>Spain</b><br>Vox 10.3%                                 |
| ⑨ <b>Austria</b><br>Freedom Party 26%                 |   |

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A proper sense of belonging is a human need, it helps people construct an identity and a social life. Opposite this we find an inflamed sense of belonging, one that makes people imagine they live in a healthy, vigorous organism which must be defended from pathogens. As inhabitants of this organism some begin to act as agents of an immune system that must expel undesired elements for the benefit of the whole.

Karl Popper already showed in *The Open Society* how harmful such holistic ideas can be. Putting individual life under the constraint of public/common good was a temptation even for Plato, but it was Karl Marx and his followers who managed to impose the value of such an ideal on a large scale. And it did not lead to freedom or happiness, nor to equality and justice for that matter.

It is not for the state or the society to decide what kind of ideas we should harbor, or how and where to express them. Every attempt to mold opinions borders manipulation. It might be wishful thinking to expect from a society or a state to encourage the critical attitude of its people or citizens. Nevertheless, it seems more realistic to expect a state to guarantee the right of each individual to make critical assessments and to choose.

Every nation has a story of heroism, pride, and dignity to tell. Nationalism feeds on such historical moments and tries to keep them alive by constantly reenacting the mythological narrative: good versus bad, virtue versus sin. Such ideas can be easily traced in Donald Trump's speech on the Mexicans crossing the American frontier, in Viktor Orban's demand that "Europe once again belongs to Europeans" because "in a European 'liberal empire', we will all lose our liberties".<sup>10</sup> But this is a fallacy, because liberty is not a good that can be traded and lost on the market, it is a value. And as such it is a value among many other values. Berlin points out that we should have the freedom not to choose it if we consider some other value more important at a given moment in our lives.

Orban has like-minded friends in Poland, Italy, France, Austria, and UK to name only a few. And they all propagate fear and hatred in the name of Europe and their own national states. The first thing that goes out of the window when fear takes reign is the capacity of rational thinking, understanding rationality as "the readiness to pay attention to

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10 Daniel McLaughlin, "Hungary's leader urges Europe to reject liberal values and immigration", in *The Irish Times*, March 15, 2019, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/hungary-s-leader-urges-europe-to-reject-liberal-values-and-immigration-1.3827401>

criticism and argument – to other people’s criticism of what one thinks and says, and to be highly critical of one’s own views and predilections.”<sup>11</sup> And of course, when controlled by fear one is not free to make choices.

Nationalism also feeds on resentment and humiliation. Dealing extensively with the German Romantic movement and the rise of nationalism in Europe, Isaiah Berlin pinned the origin of modern European nationalism in Prussia. A backward, militarized, French-controlled little country at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Prussia harbored strong resentments towards its occupiers. What it hated most was the French cosmopolitanism and its openness to other cultures and ideas. So they responded with a German, organic view which emphasized the particularities of each culture, especially the identity given by a common language, religion, history. Very soon this romantic view of the monadic cultures would spread throughout Europe with dire political consequences. Modern nationalism, even in its murderous National-Socialist form, can be traced back to these ideas. Of course, that is not to say that Herder’s cultural theory is to blame for Hitler’s atrocities. Isaiah Berlin was interested only to identify the roots of certain modern political phenomenon.

Each nation has its own “national mythology” to defend while also defending its national pride and dignity. We have already seen that human dignity, despite being a relative concept and lacking a definition, is at the same time a concept that we understand and are able to describe. But can we do the same when talking about the dignity of a nation?

The most obvious answer is no, because human dignity does not equal an abstract concept like “national dignity”. A transfer of attributes takes place when people are giving in to speeches about the pride, dignity, greatness of a nation. The nation becomes personified and gains human attributes, like nature in most fairytales and romantic literature. It is easy then to relate to your own nation as you would do to a member of your family. Steven Pinker describes the phenomenon of “moralizing emotions” – disgust, for instance – when analyzing how emotions can be misguided and misused to inflict pain on other people.<sup>12</sup> Nationalist, populist discourses all do that.

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11 A letter of Karl Popper from February 17 1959 to Isaiah Berlin, in Isaiah Berlin, *Enlightening. Letters 1946-1960*, Random House, 2011

12 Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature. A History of Violence and Humanity*, Penguin Books, London, 2011, p. xx

## What should be done?

Nationalism is not likely to go away. No ideology vanishes from history without leaving traces. Populists will keep on tricking people into believing that their ideas – mostly borrowed ones – are in perfect concordance with people's most intimate desires, and that they, unlike all other mainstream politicians, are not afraid to voice the truth. They boast about having found the Solution, the one that will redeem all mankind worthy of being redeemed. This is how Brexit happened, this is what Marine Le Pen, Viktor Orban, Donald Trump, Matteo Salvini and others are promising: to save their countries and Europe from real or imagined perils.

In an address given at Aachen, in May 1996, Czech president Václav Havel spoke about Europe as a place of shared values, spiritual and intellectual identity which is not going to lose anything by expanding.

“If it squanders this opportunity in the name of short-term, particular, or even exclusively economic interests, it will have to pay for it. It would open the door, in both of its halves, to all those who prefer confrontation to dialogue, who would rather define themselves in opposition to others than as neighbors. It is no good pretending that people of this type no longer exist. To put it another way: if democrats do not soon begin to reconstruct Europe as a single political entity, others will start structuring it their own way, and the democrats will have nothing left but their tears.”<sup>13</sup>

Havel is right if we assess the present situation in Europe. It is being torn apart by those who prefer confrontation to dialogue. And the problem of migration – which is a serious one, but not in the way the nationalists think – is only one of the motives for dissent. If not the Muslims, then the East-Europeans or some other people depicted as strangers jeopardizing national or European dignity. After the Second World War we grew accustomed to a rather homogenous continent which is now beginning to change.

In his brilliant history of Europe after the war, Tony Judt writes about the infamous legacy Hitler and Stalin left us by using massive deportations to remodel the continent according to their psychotic whims. Forced population exchange, ethnic cleansing, deportations, the

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13 Václav Havel, “The Hope for Europe”, *New York Review of Books*, May 15, 1996, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1996/06/20/the-hope-for-europe/>



disappearance of the ancient diasporas of Europe changed the continent forever. A new divided Europe grew gradually out of the ashes, the Western half prosperous and free, the Eastern part poor and unfree. Thirty years ago it reunited itself with a promise of more democratic freedom and is now facing “a multicultural future” again.

“This new presence of Europe’s living ‘others’ (...) has thrown into relief not just Europe’s current discomfort at the prospect of ever greater variety, but also the ease with which the dead ‘others’ of Europe’s past were cast far out of mind. Since 1989 it has become clearer than it was before just how much the stability of post-war Europe rested upon the accomplishments of Josef Stalin and Adolf Hitler. Between them, and assisted by wartime collaborators, the dictators blasted flat the demographic heath upon which the foundations of a new and less complicated continent were then laid.”<sup>14</sup>

Having mostly forgotten what diversity is, Europe needs to relearn it. And in the process of learning anew it has to remember that many values clash and some ways of life are incompatible. It does not have to be tolerant to the intolerants, but it has to learn not to moralize emotions and to think rationally about other people as individuals, not as generic concepts. It is not dignity that Europe has to defend, but its moral compass.

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14 Tony Judt, *Postwar. A History of Europe Since 1945*, Vintage, London, 2010, p.9

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