

Overloading Human Dignity

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This paper examines the role of human dignity in contemporary political philosophy, with a focus on recent Confucian debates. Human dignity is typically understood as universal, equal, and inalienable, and often invoked as the necessary and/or sufficient foundation for equality before the law, human rights, and democratic governance. For this reason, some contemporary Confucian scholars have sought to recover a conception of dignity in early Confucianism that could underwrite this full modern package of political values. I argue that such an expansive use overloads the concept with more justificatory weight than it can bear. Instead, I propose a more modest account of dignity, one that highlights its distinctive but limited role, while exploring other normative resources consistent with Confucianism that can support the modern package.