I. The crisis of modernity

Nowadays, a tendency prevails to establish the individual as a lone subject of international law, and thus a direct member of the international community; to make one simultaneously a citizen of the world, as well as a citizen of a state. By the privilege of being human, everybody is free, everybody is equal, and all people are said to be born with inalienable Human Rights, which supersede the laws and traditions of particular societies, where rights have traditionally been viewed as privileges tied to particular responsibilities.

When it comes to humanity as such, it either designates a biological category in terms of a species, or a philosophical category, stemming from the tradition of Western thought. However, from the socio-historical viewpoint, man as such does not exist, for one’s position in society is always mediated by a particular cultural disposition. We all share the same human nature and thus the essential human aspirations. Without these shared aspirations we would be unable to understand each other. Nevertheless, these tend to crystallise in different forms according to a different time and place, which is why, in this sense, humanity is essentially plural and diversity is part of its very essence.

To borrow from Nietzsche, we now live in times when “God is dead!” We live in times when nothing is true and all is permitted. When justice
is always relative – seen as a mere advantage of the stronger. We live in times when the concept of dignity, as well as the conception of the “good life”, are dictated by a state of affairs that—ironically enough, despite the elaborate rhetoric and sophistry—instead of uniting nations into a true community, tries to introduce universal standards of ‘humanity’ and force an authoritative, normative, prescriptive, universalist, homogenous view of the world order onto an essentially heterogeneous world.

We now live in times when people enjoy unprecedented advantages stemming from the progress of technology and the global triumph of financial capitalism. We live in times when the majority of human population is spiritually dead. In pursuit of an infinite growth (and pleasure), people have become slaves to the interest that, rather than the one of a proper human being, resembles an ideology of a cancer cell (quote).

Our contemporary era is a product of modernity—a political and philosophical movement of the last three centuries of Western history. It is characterised primarily “by five converging processes: individualisation, through the destruction of old forms of communal life; massification, through the adoption of standardised behaviour and lifestyles; desacralisation, through the displacement of the great religious narratives by a scientific interpretation of the world; rationalisation, through the domination of instrumental reason, the free market, and technical efficiency; and universalisation, through a planetary extension of a model of society postulated implicitly as the only rational possibility and thus as superior” (Benoist & Champetier, 2012, p. 12).

This work does not attempt to provide solutions for reforming either the political or the economic system. It does not attempt to bring about the revival of humanity either. Following on the work of Julius Evola, this work sets to examine the ‘survival manual for the aristocrats of the soul’ (Riding the Tiger) and appeal to those in pursuit of the ‘good life’, who, despite the opposition, facing profound outward decadence and spiritual emptiness, choose, or more accurately, feel constrained to live a
life of dignity, turning the destructive forces surrounding them into inner liberation.

However, it is most essential to note that Evola’s “survival manual” does not concern the ordinary man of our day. “On the contrary”, he has “in mind a man who finds himself involved in today’s world, even at its most problematic and paroxysmal points; yet he does not belong inwardly to such a world, nor will he give in to it”.

II. Dignity

The concept of dignity is used in moral, ethical, and legal discussions in order to demonstrate that a being has an innate and inalienable entitlement to be valued and to receive ethical treatment. Many people associate the concept of dignity with struggle. On this planet, struggle is a norm rather than an exception; people turn their attention to the human being and its dignity in the face of struggle, for they believe that, in his suffering, the individual becomes rid of his dignity.

While in some disciplines and schools of thought dignity is a concept that can indeed be measured, in philosophy, and especially in moral philosophy, dignity is seen as a universal attribute. It stems from the human capacity for self-consciousness and practical reason. The English word comes from Latin dignitas by way of French dignité. It denotes respect in ordinary language and could be used to suggest either that someone is not receiving proper respect, or that they are failing to treat themselves with proper self-respect.

I believe that the majority of people would agree that, in general, the respect of other people—setting aside the reverence which one might receive due to holding particular offices or hereditary positions that are of no interest to us here—has to be earned by the exercise of virtue; i.e. respect for a particular individual, or the lack of thereof, should be based on the actions of that particular individual.

The problem, however, lies in the realm of perception. For, in terms of respect, it seems to be the case that the very exercise of virtue is only
secondary to the way it is actually demonstrated and perceived in the public realm. The phenomenon was neatly described by Nicolló Machiavelli, who argued that “men in general judge by their eyes rather than by their hands; because everyone is in a position to watch, [whereas] few are in a position to come in close touch with you. Everyone sees what you appear to be, [yet] few experience what you really are” (Machiavelli, 2003, p. 58).

Now, when it comes to the sphere of instrumentality, this inherent human flaw of perception might work either to your advantage or against it. But in general, it holds that the respect you incur is of a reflective nature, i.e. dependent on other people. The respect of other people, or the lack thereof, insofar as it is based on evaluating one’s actions, could provide some benefits and a sense of importance to the individual, as does the respect one holds for particular offices and hereditary positions. Nevertheless, it is not accurate at all when it comes to assessing one’s true worthiness, nor does it serve as a reliable indicator of the ‘good life’.

III. Being Oneself

In the era of fragmentation and dissolution of all superstructure—as discussed above with regard to our contemporary era—in order to find integrity, Evola, much like Nietzsche and many existentialists, turns to the concept of ‘discovering’ and ‘being’ oneself. In order to discover oneself and be true to oneself, one has to become acquainted with one’s “true nature”. Which is why “Know thyself”—the inscription that was allegedly in the forecourt of the Temple of Apollo in Delphi—serves as an essential maxim to guide one’s perspective in life.

Like Nietzsche, for Evola, “the only actions that can be valid for this purpose are those that arise from the depths. Peripheral or emotional reactions do not qualify, for those are like reflex movements provoked by a stimulus, arising long before the depth of one’s own being has been touched or questioned” (Evola, 2003, p. 60). He continues by saying that
“the problem of being oneself has a particular and subordinate solution in terms of unification. Once one has discovered through experiment which of one’s manifold tendencies is the central one, one sets about identifying it with one’s will, stabilizing it, and organizing all one’s secondary or divergent tendencies around it” (Evola. 2003, p. 61). This is what, according to Evola, means to give oneself a law, one’s own law. However, as we shall see later on, for Evola, this process does not lead to individualism.

IV. It Is Not Relative

Based on these statements, some people would wrongly make the assumption that everything is relative. They would say that there could be no such thing as the ‘good life’. In modern society, morality is considered to be independent from theology and metaphysics. Divorced from the absolute, devoid of transcendence and spirituality, it is founded almost exclusively on the authority of reason. This ethical rationalism prevalent in our contemporary society is defined by utilitarian ethics. ‘Renouncing any intrinsic or absolute basis for “good” and “evil,” the justification proposed for what is left of moral norms is whatever suits the individual for his own advantage and for his material tranquillity in social life’ (Evola, 2003, p. 17).

Throughout more recent history, the discourse considering human dignity has been shifting towards socio-economic issues and the assumption that existential misery could be reduced to uneven distribution of resources and suffering from material want caused by a given socio-economic system. However, Evola emphasises that these assumptions are based on the “socio-economic myth” for there is no correlation between material and spiritual misery and the meaning of existence can be lacking as much in one class as in the other (Evola, 2003, p. 29).
V. The Man of Tradition

Unlike Nietzsche—and existentialists in general—Evola is interested in a special human type, a “differentiated man”, whose character consists in facing the problems of modernity without being a “modern man” himself – a type belonging to a different world, preserving within himself a different existential dimension. A type for whom considerations of pain and pleasure do not enter as motives when “one must do what must be done”. A type that acts from a perspective of being that obeys a “duty” which supersedes the natural impulses of the individual (Evola, 2003, p. 69).

He illustrates the point by emphasizing the distinction between person and individual. He sees in the concept of an individual an abstract, formless, numerical unity that has no quality of its own and nothing to distinguish itself from the masses. Considered simply as individuals, all men are equal, have equal rights and responsibilities, and presumably equal “dignity” as “human beings” – a concept that is but a “dignified” version of the individual.

Evola emphasises the insignificance and absurdity of the defence of personality on any individual basis by exploring the etymological meaning of the term persona that originally signified mask: a mask worn by actors when “playing a given part, in incarnating a given personage. Thereby the mask possessed something typical, non-individual, especially in the case of divine masks and even more clearly when used in many archaic rites” (Evola, 2003, p. 109). Similarly, a person “is that which the man presents concretely and sensibly in the world, in the position he occupies, but always signifying a form of expression and manifestation of a higher principle in which the true center of being is to be recognised, and on which falls, or should fall, the accent of the Self” (Evola, 2003, p. 109, emphases added).

Unlike the individual, the person is thus not closed to the above. “The personal being is not himself, but has himself (like the relation between
The concept of dignity is something that we attribute exclusively to human beings. As discussed above, it stems from the human capacity for self-consciousness and practical reason. However, dignity is not a given. It is related to one’s capacity to know oneself, improve oneself, and overcome oneself. It is achieved by employing one’s capacities of self-consciousness and reason. It is achieved by identifying one’s “part” (the person), and in doing so, relating oneself to the supra-individual principle and participating in the absolute.

Dignity is a concept that is independent of other people. It is defined by control over oneself. It stems from inner, personal acquaintance with oneself, with authenticity and integrity. We attribute it exclusively to human beings, yet not everybody qualifies by default. A person that fails to identify her main tendency fails to identify one’s part, and thus fails to be authentic and fails to participate in the supra-individual principle. Such a person is a mere individual. It cannot be true to oneself for it does not know what it means to be oneself. Similarly, if the central tendency of an individual is of an exclusively sensual character, if the “part” consists solely of the avoidance of pain and the pursuit of pleasure, this “role” ceases to resemble the one of a human being. It starts to resemble more the one of an animal, for it negates precisely that what is human – self-consciousness, practical reason, and the “power to supersede”.

the actor and the part): it is presence to that which he is, not coalescence with that which he is. Moreover, a kind of antinomy is brought to light: in order to be truly such, the person needs a reference to something more than personal. When this reference is absent, the person transforms itself into an ‘individual’, and individualism and subjectivism come to play... It would be better to define the situation in question as that of being in which the supra-individual principle—the Self, transcendence—remains conscious, and gives to the developing ‘part’ (the person) the objective perfection corresponding to a given function and a given meaning” (Evola, 2003, pp. 109, 110).

The Liberal Herald: Dignity – Cui Bono?
VI. Riding the Tiger

Life is a path. It is a journey – a trial. Struggle, and even suffering, are inherent to the whole process, and are the essential factors that allow one to know oneself.

In order to lead a “good life”—a life of dignity—the “differentiated man” of tradition, who finds himself situated in the modern, corrupt world, should (in fact has no other option, but to) “Ride the Tiger”. This principal metaphor of the whole book—that is, at the same time, its title—comes from a Far Eastern saying. It expresses the idea that “if one succeeds in riding a tiger, not only does one avoid having it leap on one; but if one can keep one’s seat and not fall off, one may eventually get the better of it” (Evola, 2003, p. 8).

When it comes to the application to the external world and environment, Evola summarises the significance of the principle of “riding the tiger” as follows: “When a cycle of civilization is reaching its end, it is difficult to achieve anything by resisting it and by directly opposing the forces of motion. The current is too strong; one could be overwhelmed. The essential thing is not to let oneself be impressed by the omnipotence and apparent triumph of the forces of the epoch. These forces, devoid of connection with a higher principle, are in fact on a short chain. One should not become fixated on the present and on things at hand, but keep in view conditions that may come about in the future. Thus the principle to follow could be that of letting the forces and processes of this epoch to take their own course, while keeping oneself firm and ready to intervene when the tiger, which cannot leap on the person riding it, is tired of running” (Evola, 2003, p. 10).

REFERENCES
