

Philosophy in Review



Nayef Al-Rodhan, "Sustainable History and Human Dignity: A Neurophilosophy of History and the Future of Civilisation"

Constantine Sandis

Volume 43, numéro 1, février 2023

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1098269ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1098269ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (imprimé)

1920-8936 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Sandis, C. (2023). Compte rendu de [Nayef Al-Rodhan, "Sustainable History and Human Dignity: A Neurophilosophy of History and the Future of Civilisation"]. *Philosophy in Review*, 43(1), 4–6. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1098269ar>

Copyright © Constantine Sandis, 2023



Cet document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

Nayef Al-Rodhan. *Sustainable History and Human Dignity: A Neurophilosophy of History and the Future of Civilisation*. Lutterworth Press 2022. 503 pp. \$97.50 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780718895709); \$37.50 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780718895716).

Nayef Al-Rodhan's latest book, *Sustainable History and Human Dignity*, is ambitious and wide-ranging, from the distant past into the future, from Confucius to Kardashev, from Al-Farabi to Fukuyama. The scale is evoked by the image of human civilization as an ocean with constantly shifting, dynamic currents fed by discrete rivers (Chapter 1). To chart our future, Al-Rodhan attends to these currents in the history of human thought, and his presentation of our historic, scientific, and philosophical self-conception is keenly informed by non-Western thought (Chapters 2–3). This all leads up to his own accounts of human nature (Chapters 4–5) and knowledge (Chapter 6). According to the first of these (defended more fully in his earlier book *Emotional Amoral Egoism: A Neurophilosophical Theory of Human Nature and its Universal Security Implications*, Lit Verlag 2008), we are 'emotional amoral egoists' motivated by power, pleasure, profit, pride, and permanency. As for our knowledge, this stems from both experience and reason, but is mediated by interpretation (Chapter 6).

At the book's focal point (Chapter 7) is the thesis that the critical role of human dignity in sustainable civilizational progress is insufficiently appreciated. This chapter is essential reading for anyone interested in the very concept of dignity. Al-Rodhan appeals to neuroscientific evidence to advance the view that the term 'dignity' denotes much more than political freedoms and the absence of humiliation but includes the following set of universal human needs: reason, security, human rights, accountability, transparency, justice, opportunity, inclusiveness, and innovation. These conditions are suggested as the foundation for good governance (Chapter 8), which should be implemented nationally through broadly accountable and transparent governance ideals (Chapter 9) and globally through effective multilateralism and genuine global justice (Chapters 10–11). Later in the book, Al-Rodhan suggests a similar approach to trans-cultural relationships (Chapter 15). Such relationships have suffered from power imbalances, a tool for the colonial hegemony underwritten by an exploitative Western-centric essentialism. In its place, he advocates partnerships of dialogue and common values. Through openness, respect, trust, and an understanding of the interconnectedness of cultures, we can embrace a truly relational intercultural exchange.

Time and time again, Al-Rodhan argues for shifting away from historically inaccurate Western or Euro-centric paradigms. For instance, while democratic ideals such as inclusive participation and the rule of law are the most propitious path towards human dignity, they are expressed only imperfectly by the characteristic Western liberal democracy (in its current form). These ideals have precedents far beyond Europe. They can be found in cultures from the Bronze Age to the Vedas and Brahmanas, and the Arab-Islamic Empire. The international order most suited to sustain human dignity must therefore be one that accounts for all geo-cultural domains, without exception. For this reason, international institutions such as the UN Security Council do not currently live up to their multilateral ideals. Owing to their unequal distribution of power, they risk being mere tools in the hands of those who dominate them.



Al-Rodhan suggests that our analytical toolkit must also be updated to reflect contemporary realities. Global security must be understood by means of a ‘multi-sum security principle’ (Chapter 12), which is sensitive to human, environmental, national, transnational, and transcultural dimensions of sustainable national and global security. ‘Symbiotic realism’ conceives of international relations and power as something that is distributed among many kinds of agents, from individuals to the environment itself, and advocates symbiotic win-win relations in a realist world, but ones that allow non-conflictual competition and absolute (rather than relative) gains by states. (Chapter 13). An appropriate geopolitical analysis should consider these agents’ diverse ‘capacities’ and capable statecraft must reconcile their diverse interests, from individual to planetary well-being (Chapter 14).

Throughout this engaging and reflective book, multi-faceted solutions are not bound by a single guiding principle, reflecting the complexity of the author’s thought. Al-Rodhan’s ‘ways forward’ are always driven by practice. This is most clear in the discussion of future challenges (Chapter 17), which include radical advances in artificial intelligence, increasingly capable brain–computer interfaces, and global climate change. In each case, he suggests how the risks of disaster may be viewed as opportunities for advancing human dignity and thus the sustainability of humanity.

A central theme throughout the book is the conflict between our human nature attributes and human dignity needs. Drawing judiciously on neurophilosophy and geopolitics, Al-Rodhan buttresses the latter against the former. In so doing, he resists directly answering the more personal, ethical question: ‘how am I to live?’ The reader may infer part of the answer from the author’s ‘Global Ethic,’ guided by a consensus of non-violence, respect for life, tolerance, truthfulness, and operationalized empathy (137). One might think that any laws or institutions must ultimately be put into practice by individuals, whose interpretation and implementation of them will be guided by their own preferences and beliefs.

Unless these people are driven by the right ethos, they threaten to undermine institutional progress. Without a principled value system, we risk a hollow framework without competent interpreters. Could individuals not contribute to the ‘sustainable history’ that Al-Rodhan defines from the outset as the ‘durable progressive trajectory in which the quality of life on this planet or other planets is premised on the guarantee of human dignity for all at all times and under all circumstances’ (1)?

One response takes inspiration from Al-Rodhan’s claim that our egoism may be ‘channelled’ or put to better use through the provision of opportunity, inclusiveness, and innovation. Perhaps other aspects of our nature might also be channelled to serve human dignity. Thereby, we may alleviate the worry that flawed individuals will undermine the legal and political framework by exploiting their very own flaws. Virtue ethics suggests one example. On that view, moral training involves cultivating the right emotions. Since, Al-Rodhan maintains, we are intrinsically emotional, certain emotions – such as compassion, empathy, an equitable and accountable spirit, or charity – may be channelled to serve the intercultural understanding on which our dignity depends. Provided with an emotional formation, those individuals tasked with implementing policies ‘on the ground’ may better serve the ideals of human dignity; they would not, in so doing, have to go against their nature.

In an impressive feat, the book is itself an instance of the ethos that it recommends. Tellingly, Al-Rodhan devotes the penultimate Chapter 16 to a case study. There, the multi-dimensional flourishing of the Arab–Islamic Golden Age is revealed as the product of the permissive acceptance of diverse influences, good governance, cultural borrowing, and innovation, as well as the triumph of reason over dogma, and mutual respect over hatred. Similar demonstrations permeate the work. It capably threads together lines of commonality from across time and space into an intricate tapestry depicting humanity. This trans-cultural reconciliation itself demonstrates the ethos by which individuals may contribute to the project of universal human dignity, namely by embodying ethical and intellectual virtues including open-mindedness, cultural sensitivity, and tolerance.

Al-Rodhan concludes that ‘our future does not lie in the stars but in ourselves’ (350). Although he probably would not follow Immanuel Kant in thinking that there exists an intrinsic moral law to ‘fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe’ (*Critique of Practical Reason*, 1788), the author has, in this remarkable and persuasive work, offered us a new subject for those attitudes: humanity itself, the reasoned analysis of which may contribute to a better future for all.

Sustainable History and Human Dignity demonstrates that to truly unleash the best in human behaviour we must break away from exploitative and binary zero-sum paradigms with narrow, short-sighted geopolitical goals. The way forward, he contends, is the triumph of all geo-cultural domains as the most certain route for achieving collective and national peace, security, and prosperity in a sustainable way. It is a must-read for any individual, institution, or government who is serious about global sustainability and the challenges ahead.

Constantine Sandis, University of Hertfordshire