

Max Weber Lecture by Jeremy Waldron

"Dignity, Rights, and Responsibilities"

19 May 2010 at 17.00

Max Weber Programme, EUI, Villa la Fonte

Abstract:

What difference does a foundation in dignity make to the way we think about rights? In this lecture I will argue that dignity ideas have contributed to a move away from subjective rights, that is, rights conceived as the property of the individual, which individuals can use or bargain away as they please. Some commentators deplore this move (referring, for example, to recent decisions about prostitution and "dwarf-tossing"). I shall argue that the rejection of "subjective" rights has long been a feature of the natural rights, constitutional rights, and human rights movements and that this renewed emphasis should, on the whole, be welcomed. I will also connect these themes to recent efforts in Britain and elsewhere to emphasize "responsibilities" as well as rights. From some points of view, this looks like a renewed focus upon social duty. But it may also be read as a particular way of conceiving of rights, associating rights with roles and tasks (like parenthood and citizenship) which, though vested in the individual and privileging his or her decisions, are not simply valued as occasions for willful indulgence or caprice.