I began this project with a few thoughts on one topic, and they grew into many on a larger one. I wanted to say something about vulnerability and discovered that there was much to say about human dignity. Once a rather die-hard Kantian, I have made over the last decade or so a fairly radical transition to a basically Aristotelian way of thinking. Persistent thoughts over the status of personal ties in the moral life first led me away from Kant and toward Aristotle. Though I think some of the criticisms of Kant regarding friendship, for example, are misguided, in the end I do not think Kant gives us a very satisfactory way of thinking about what is most important to us in personal relationships. What Kant is supposed to give us, however, is an insightful way of thinking about human dignity and the worth of persons. I do not believe he does. In fact, I think that Kant and his predecessors, the Christians and the Stoics, deeply mislead us about our dignity. In this sense, this book is an attack on a certain tradition and what is thought to be its greatest strength. I hope, however, that what emerges is more positive than negative, that what I say provides some insight into what we actually do value in ourselves and others.

My debts are many and varied. Most I owe to my wife, Patty, and my daughters, Rachel and Jenny, for tolerating the idiosyncrasies of a husband and a father who is also a philosopher, a writer, and a sometimes distant life-form. What I owe them most is not just for their nurturing, though I certainly owe them for this, but for the subject matter of which I write, of life and what is best in it.
For critical response I owe several a deep debt of gratitude. Lawrence Blum, Keith Butler, Paul Davies, James Harris, Margaret Holmgren, Robert Kane, Noah Lemos, Andrew Melnyk—all provided written feedback on the manuscript. I am especially indebted to Paul Davies, not only for almost daily conversations but also for numerous readings of parts of the manuscript, particularly chapter 4. To Larry Becker and the members of his political philosophy discussion group, I am thankful for their discussion of chapters 1 through 3 and chapter 7. Students in two seminars I have taught here at the College of William and Mary over the last several years also helped me to formulate my thoughts. And, of course, there are the many conversations on these and similar topics that have influenced me greatly but for which I lack specific recall. For such conversations on Aristotle, Nietzsche, and friendship, I owe much, as always, to Douglas Browning, Chuck Krecz, Steven Leighton, and the late Edmund Pincoffs.

For financial support I am grateful to my home institution, the College of William and Mary, for a summer grant in 1995 and a Faculty Research Assignment for the academic year 1994–1995. I am also thankful for a Summer Research Stipend from the National Endowment for the Humanities for the summer of 1994.