

The Use of Force in a Culture of Death

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ABSTRACT: The present essay addresses the status of a debate in which the pro-choice side has co-opted and determined the use of language in such a way that tips the debate by the definition of terms in favor of the pro-choice position. An uncritical engagement in such debate results in the impotence of the pro-life movement. One such term is “violence,” which is simply defined as the use of force in opposition to some subjective claim. The thesis of the essay is that violence is the unjust use of force and that therefore it is the context of justice that establishes the proper meaning of such terms as “force” and “rights.” The foundation of rights is human existence received as a gift that calls for reciprocity in self-giving. The latter necessarily presupposes self-possession or ownership of one’s own being. Legitimate self-possession justifies the use of force in keeping what is one’s own over against someone who would appropriate it. This metaphysical status of self-possession is the objective foundation for both human dignity and the subjective experience of it. It explains both the possibility of victimhood and of aggression. It also explains the fact that an unjust aggressor will experience the just use of force in defense of the victim as a violation of his own (the aggressor’s) dignity. This experience of violated human dignity plays a fundamental role in the debate and is appealed to against any presumptive divine or human sovereignty that would hinder the claim to what one wants, in this case, the abortion. The author argues that such an appeal to the subjective experience of a “violated” desire has no probative force against human rights as grounded in the transcendent sovereignty of God.

LANGUAGE IN THE ABORTION DEBATE

One of the characteristic but paradoxical marks of our culture of death is its advocacy of freedom and its abhorrence of any force that would curtail this freedom. It is this culture that has co-opted language, pressing it into its own service. Granted, there are no absolutes in language. Words can be made to mean anything. But the very

condition for the democratic process that the pro-lifers are admonished to use, the requirement to dialogue, discuss, debate, persuade and pursue consensus by these means demands a certain stability in language. If the meanings of words shift or are made to shift constantly, if words are systematically equivocal, democracy becomes, at least on that account, impossible. Thus, the pro-choice side has co-opted such terms as “violence” and “force,” to say nothing of “choice” and “freedom.” How often has one heard of the myth of the “agonizing decision” in which a woman makes her “reproductive choice” even as it is affirmed that she has no other “choice?” How often does one hear of the “imposition of morality and opinions,” which obviously means preventing someone, by force, from acting in accord with their “conscience?” The most powerful linguistic tools at the disposition of the pro-death culture are the terms “morality” and “religion.” Any attempt to legislate morality or religion means an attempt to impose, by force, opinions and ideas on everybody in a pluralistic society. And today, one does not need a doctorate to intuitively sense that force and coercion have no place in morality and religion. The very suggestion to the contrary reeks of violence. Has one not heard from feminists that they feel violated by the Church’s mere attempt to impose her sexual morality on the citizens of the United States? And thus, undeniably, the slogan “Keep your rosaries out of my ovaries” has acquired a certain force, even though it violates truth.

Unfortunately, many who are pro-life have become “sensitized” by a terminology determined by the culture of death, to the point that all force as such becomes identified with violence. The very suggestion of force causes panic in the pro-life community for fear that the pro-lifers become accused of inciting violence. A separate reflection is necessary to analyze the attraction of “non-violence” and “pacifism” for our culture of death, especially the confusion between the Christian counsel of perfection that bids each one of us turn the other cheek and the “pacifist” rejection of force on behalf of others, widows, orphans and the unborn violated by even the most brutal force. We will return to this point below.

THE IMPOTENCE OF THE PRO-LIFE MOVEMENT

The pro-life movement, if we evaluate it realistically, not only lacks power, but seems to be in disarray when it comes to a clear articulation of its principles and to consistency in action with these principles. And its powerlessness is evident not only in the present political situation, but in the effectiveness of the terminological weapons used by the culture of death. Linguistic therapy will not bring a solution, but it is a necessary step, if we are to regain clarity about what is involved in abortion and communicate it effectively.

The correct name for something carries its own power. Few would hesitate today about “having a relationship,” but many who are involved in “relationships” would at least be embarrassed at having it called adultery or fornication. The former term is “non-judgmental,” the latter terms aren’t. However much one insists on the freedom of conscience, “adulterer” and “fornicator” still shake that conscience. So too with “murder” and “murderer.” The words are forceful. They are effective. They are truly powerful. Rightly used, or even wrongly, they may dispense the user from having to use force or coercion.

THE WORD IS “MURDER”

There are no absolutes in language. And yet language has its correct usage in context. One of the first tasks for the pro-lifer is to reaffirm the context of our language. We are speaking about abortion. So is the other side. But abortion—direct abortion, to be precise—is an unjust taking of human life. It is murder. Because of this, it is marked by a particular form of injustice making it different from other kinds of killing that are also unjust. Thus, the reality to which our language refers is the fact that abortion is an injustice. The moment of justice is central and decisive.

It is the decisive criterion of justice that allows us to distinguish between just use of force and unjust use of force. The mere presence of force does not imply injustice. The simple term “force,” therefore, is morally neutral. It does not tell us whether the force was used justly or unjustly. Before distinguishing just use from unjust use of force, we need to pause briefly on the meaning of force itself, apart from the

question of justice.

THE CONTEXT OF “FORCE”

Let us take a look at the context of our language. In talking of force, we are talking about force directed at some human action in view either of stopping or preventing that action or bringing it about. Thus we can force somebody not to steal or we can force him to steal; we can use force to keep somebody from helping another, or we can force her to help the other. Now, one of the specific marks of the person, as person, is freedom, so eloquently and forcefully affirmed in the recent encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*. By virtue of our freedom, Pope John Paul II tells us, we share in God’s dominion. In freedom man has dominion over himself. He possesses a certain autonomy. This means that he has a legitimate possession of himself. But this would imply, on the face of it, that any force of any kind that would impede or prevent the individual from being master of his own actions, from choosing his own actions and performing them, would go against his dignity and violate his freedom. It is this basic personal capacity of self-possession that allows the individual to say “mine” of his own being.

But from the principle enunciated by the Pope many erroneously embrace pacifism and reject the use of force as principles that are so attractive to the modern age and its culture of death. It is concluded that the recognition of and heightened sensitivity to this basic and real capacity of self-ownership, of being one’s own master, demands the rejection of force, since force implies the loss of dignity and freedom. Now, this very real and important capacity of self-possession has become erroneously affirmed as absolute. What does this mean? Absolute in this context literally means “untied” or detached. Being absolute here means not being bound by anything, not being subject to anything. Thus, the truth that each individual is his own and belongs to himself is vitiated by the error that nothing “binds” the individual.

THE GIFT OF SELF AS THE VOCATION OF MAN

At the heart of John Paul’s development of the truth about human freedom is the fundamental vocation of the individual to give himself

to others. He rejects a legalistic morality that only sets norms for behavior. And he affirms a true morality grounded in the vocation and the obligation to love. To see how this fits our discussion, we need to note another decisive development in John Paul's teaching.

Man's obligation to give himself to others is itself grounded in a more fundamental truth, namely, the fact that man's own existence is itself a gift to him. This means that man is called to receive his own being. He is not to take it simply. Nor to appropriate it simply. Much rather he is called to receive the gift of his own existence. The true significance of receiving one's existence, instead of simply taking it or appropriating it, can be seen from the feminists' systematic rejection of receptivity, a quintessentially feminine act. Receiving a gift implies a dependence on the giver. And the reception of a gift implicitly binds one to gratitude to the giver, a gratitude that can be realized only in the reciprocal gift of self to the giver. Thus, we have a basic obligation of giving ourselves to the giver of life. We belong to the one who gave us our existence. But because we are persons, this belonging to the Giver of Life must be accomplished and crowned by a free act of self-giving.

THE FOUNDATION OF RIGHTS

At the same time, John Paul II teaches that "man, too, is a gift to man." This means that every other human being is a gift for me. Here too gratitude, as the gift of self to the other, is called for. Thus, the thoroughgoing "gift" character of a contingent human existence establishes two things: (1) that each human being has a right to possess himself because (2) each human being is bound to give himself to others. This reciprocal connection between self-possession and self-donation as well as between all individuals is the metaphysical foundation of justice, the strict obligation of rendering to each what is his own. This keeps justice from becoming a mere affirmation of rights, that is, of being reduced to an abstraction that simply allows me to claim what is "mine." Justice is metaphysically grounded in interpersonal reciprocity that does not allow it to be separated from the obligation to affirm what is "thine," namely what belongs to the other as a person. In the present context we need not

pursue the fact that the ultimate basis for the self-donation to and therefore the belonging to the other is the obligation to love the other. We focus only on the fact that we are somehow bound in justice to the other, we are to give the other his due, not only by respecting what belongs to him but also by giving ourselves.

JUST AND UNJUST FORCE

It is the element of justice that allows a distinction between just and unjust force. The just use of force does not lower or violate human dignity, but it does imply a violated human dignity. How?

The tradition recognizes two distinct forms of human dignity. Let us call them the ontological dignity and the existential dignity of man. The ontological dignity belongs to every individual by virtue of his being human; the existential dignity belongs to the individual by virtue of his acts and actions. We have already seen one basis for the ontological dignity of the human being above. It consists in the fact that he stands above all non-personal beings because of the ability to possess himself. But the reason that he has this capacity, the thing that explains it and makes it intelligible, is his vocation to make a "total gift of self." For this to be possible he must possess himself, for one cannot give what does not belong to oneself.

THE DIGNITY OF SIMPLY BEING HUMAN

Two things have to be noted about this ontological dignity of the human being. First, it cannot be lost or gained, and it cannot be increased or decreased, for it belongs to the individual by virtue of being human. This means that St. Francis and Hitler or Stalin possessed this ontological human dignity in equal degree. Second, the ontological dignity of the human being, justified by and grounded in the obligation to give oneself, is the basis for a norm of strict interpersonal justice that has two sides or aspects, one positive, one negative. Positively expressed, every human individual is obliged in charity and justice to be for others, always in terms of love and respect for the other, and, depending on the circumstances, often in terms of a positive behavior of doing something for the other. This is due to the other in justice. The negative side is in one sense more

important. It forbids not only hatred but also any behavior that takes or appropriates what legitimately belongs to another. The reason the negative side is more important in one sense lies in the fact that in the appropriation of what belongs to the other, particularly when it becomes an absolute “mine,” not only is there an offense against justice but there occurs also that unique and dramatic consequence of the loss of self-possession on the part of the offender: spiritual death. This is the meaning of Christ’s call and warning: he who tries to save his life, that is, keep it for himself in an unconditional “mine!” will lose it. This is the true meaning of death: the loss of self to some inner need or drive within the self—not the “loss” of self in the giving of self to the other. The life of one’s soul can never be taken by another. It is lost only when the soul consumes itself. The wholesale addictions of various sorts in our consumer society are eloquent proofs that ours is not only a dying culture, but a culture of death.

THE DIGNITY OF BEHAVING WELL

Man’s existential dignity, on the other hand, depends on whether he responds to the norm of charity and justice. He can “live up” to his vocation and the norm grounded in human dignity, or he can “fall.” He can rise “higher” or he can fall “lower” than others. Certain kinds of behavior imply a greater loss of this dignity than others. In simple gluttony, the individual “falls” below the level on which he should live. In sexual impurity, there is a greater loss of dignity, one falls even lower than the glutton. There is a unique kind of lowering one’s own dignity, a falling and a failure to be “upright,” when one takes or appropriates what belongs to the other without the other’s consent. In other words, when he uses force unjustly to take what belongs to the other. At the same time, one violates the dignity of the other. In solitary impurity one violates only one’s own dignity. In fornication, which implies a consenting party who does not belong to another, there is no violation of rights and of the dignity of the other, although there is a mutual cooperation in the fall. On the other hand, adultery already includes the violation of another, in as much as something that belongs to the innocent spouse is taken from him or her. Again, an even greater violation of the dignity of the other occurs in rape.

But note, in each of these cases where we speak of the violation of the dignity of the other, it is the ontological dignity of his being human. This means that although the unjust person, the aggressor, acts against that dignity, he cannot take it away, destroy it, taint it or lower it. He commits a grave injustice to the other, but it is he, the aggressor, that lowers himself in his own existential dignity. It is he that has “let himself go” and loses possession of himself, falling to a level similar to that of the animal, which cannot possess himself. And the abasement consists in that he has freely abandoned his freedom.

JUST DEFENSE AGAINST INJUSTICE

The thing that concerns us immediately is that the ontological dignity of the victim of injustice (regardless of his existential dignity and the degree to which he himself may have fallen) is the basis for his strict right in justice to claim and defend what is unjustly being taken from him. Here we can see that force may be justified. It is not used to take something that belongs to the aggressor, although it is used against his free action and against his will in order to stop the act of injustice.

We have come to a crucial point. Even though external force is used justly by the victim against his aggressor, that force stands in a real opposition to the ontological dignity of the aggressor. The very use of external force against the “free action” even of the unjust man is somehow “opposed” to his ontological dignity and can be experienced by the aggressor as violating him, as somehow destructive of him and his humanity. But it is by his own unjust action that he puts himself under the constraint of a just and “external” force, external precisely because he opposes it as he violates the innocent victim. As we noted above, even the just use of force implies a violated human dignity. But it is not the just force as such that violates it, but the man who twice violates his own freedom: first by using it unjustly, and second by putting it under constraint of just force. Whereas he had the freedom of not violating justice, he has no freedom of avoiding the just law of constraint. And it is experienced as constraint precisely because his will opposes it but is impotent in liberating itself from the constraint. In this sense, we can understand why the “law of sin” is experienced as destructive and is the “law of

death.”

THE AGGRESSOR’S EXPERIENCE OF A VIOLATED DIGNITY

The unjust man who has fallen under the just constraint of external force may recognize the justice of the constraint and still experience the objective indignity of being forced to do something against his will, namely, against the power of possessing himself and being master of his wants and choices. The only way he will cease to experience the external constraint as an indignity is if he changes his will, and now acts not because he is forced to act but because he wills to act for the just reason. But the unjust man who fails to see or rejects the very notion of justice will still experience the indignity of being forced against his will. Any demand whatsoever that goes against his will or “choice” will be experienced as an affront against his “dignity.” His basic response is to reject force and to claim that force is in principle “unjust” because it goes against what he has determined with the category “mine.” And if he or she says, “My life, my body, my decision” and then destroys the unborn human being, he or she does not perceive it as unjust because the “operation” or abortifacient act is his, or her own choice and decision. Thus, we have the “bizarre” situation in which a culture of death can invoke pacifism and non-violence as a principle even as it causes death. The inner logic of the position demands that whatever is “mine,” no matter how destructive, be justified by the mere fact that it is “mine.” On the other hand, “force” is anything and everything, and only anything and everything that stands in opposition to what is “me” or “mine.” Force against me has become unjust by definition. And justice is reduced, by definition, to whatever is “mine.” We see this clearly not only in the pro-abortion positions which are defended by someone like Ronald Dworkin in his *Life’s Dominion*. For him, the decisive definition of personhood is “having interests,” in other words, the capacity to say “mine.” We see this also in national politics where the “State’s interest” is as decisive in the State’s intervention in the abortion decision as it is in the failure to respond to the horrendously unjust treatment of women in Bosnia or the critically desperate situation of starving children in Somalia. The formal justification is

“non-intervention,” the principle of inviolability of what is “mine,” as if I simply belonged to myself and am not bound by your suffering or your victim hood.

JUSTICE FOR THE AGGRESSOR

In the case of aggression, it is not the loss of an aggressor’s existential dignity though his own unjust behavior that is the justification of force. Force is not justified because the aggressor is “bad” or “immoral,” because he has fallen. It should be clear that it is the violation of the ontological dignity of the victim of injustice that justifies force against the aggressor. Yet a question still remains. Force may be justified in principle, but how much force is justified in the concrete case? In order to have a just use of force, it cannot simply be justified in principle, it must be justified in the concrete and particular case. And the answer is this: in order to have a just use of force, its use cannot be justified simply in principle, it cannot be the use of more force than is necessary to stop or prevent the injustice to the victim. Here it is the ontological dignity of the aggressor that becomes determinative.

It is the aggressor’s ontological dignity as a human being that demands in justice that no more force than necessary be used in defense of the victim. We can formulate the principle at stake as follows: the maximum force permissible against the aggressor is the minimum necessary to prevent an injustice to the victim. Here again something of crucial importance should be clearly affirmed. No matter how low he has fallen in his existential dignity, no matter how depraved he has become, it is the human dignity of the aggressor that forbids us (including the victim), in strict justice, from taking what belongs to him.

Here too, care with language is necessary. When an aggressor attacks us unjustly and we break his arm or his leg, or otherwise wound him, we do not “take” his health or bodily integrity. We use force not in order to take something from the aggressor. Rather, we use it in order to keep what belongs to us, to safeguard the possession of what legitimately belongs to us. It is the aggressor who is trying to take something from us. In order to be just, force must be the use only

of such power that is necessary to exercise a person's self-possession, to affirm his self-dominion in action against someone who would dispossess that individual of what belongs to him. Such a power may destroy something on the side of the aggressor. But that should not be the intention and is excluded as an intention by the demand, in strict justice, to respect the integrity of the aggressor's humanity.

A KEY TO PACIFISM

We see here another basis for understanding pacifism and the tremendous attractiveness it may exercise for anyone who is sensitive to human dignity as such. Yet, sensitivity to the human dignity even of the aggressor should not blind us to the basic truth that the aggressor can be compared to an individual who voluntarily puts some part of his body under a guillotine. It is the aggressor himself who puts his being or some part of it at risk. It would be a fundamental mistake to say that the victim takes some part or even all of the aggressor's being in defending himself. His activity of defending himself by force may also cause harm to or destruction of the aggressor. But that ought not be his intention.

Here again, we may be in sympathy with every harm to and destruction of being, particularly when it is a free being that is harmed or destroyed. And we may recognize the particular evil of intentional harm or destruction. But again justice is decisive. Because of the innocence of a victim, the aggressor bears the full responsibility for any damage resulting to him from the use of force necessary to stop his unjust act, even though he does not want or intend the damage to himself. Indeed, precisely because of his free will, any force and the resulting damage will be experienced by him as a violation of his freedom. But, we repeat, it is he that violates his own freedom, not the victim or those defending the victim.

The sensitivity to and compassion with any harm or destruction of living beings is faced with a particularly strong pacifist temptation when the fundamental importance of justice is ignored. One may regret the harm to the victim, but then affirm that "two wrongs do not make a right." And with the ignoring of justice the fundamental difference between merely causing unintended harm and intending

harm vanishes. Where a real difference existed from the perspective of justice, we now have an undifferentiated “doing harm” or “taking human life.” Both are redefined as “unjust” and “wrong” because both go against the will and freedom of a human being, regardless whether the individual is a victim or an aggressor.

The “pacifist” error is grounded in the fact that one sees only a part of the truth, namely, one sees human dignity as grounded only in his self-possession. Thus, anything that goes against, any force used against the individual’s “choice” or free decision, is by definition wrong. There is, at the same time, a failure to grasp, even implicitly, that the power and prerogative of self-possession is grounded in and justified by the basic vocation of giving oneself to others. Without this justification, self-possession and human dignity are “justified” by power alone, namely, by the active exercise of mere self-possession. So, the difference between the “pacifist” and his “opposite” become one of perspective, not of kind. The “belligerent” exercises his power of self-possession by extending its scope and appropriating whatever he wants as his “own.” The “pacifist” exercises his power of self-possession by not giving himself to victims by risking himself for them. The “pacifist” restricts the scope of what is “his” not so much in refusing to appropriate as by refusing to say “thine.” This is not to say that the pacifist lacks any compassion or sympathy for the suffering of others, or that he lacks love. Indeed he may be powerful enough to contain or restrain himself despite the power of these feelings. It is, rather, that he does not grasp the justifying obligation to give oneself to others and sometimes for others. It is this principle justifying self-possession that also allows us to distinguish between the unjust use of force which always is a taking of what belongs to the other, and a just use of force that never takes what belongs to the other, but acts to defend self-possession. And one is objectively justified in doing this only because one is objectively called to give oneself.

JUSTICE AND GOD’S AUTHORITY

In terms of the above discussion it should be clear that the distinction between just and unjust force necessarily presupposes an authority

that justifies the self-possession of an individual. No state can be that ultimate authority, since no state can “give” anyone their being and grant them ownership to it. State authority, in turn, can be legitimate only if it holds its authority from God, protecting his sovereign interests in the public order, and ensuring that no one deprives any individual of his being and thus keeps him from giving himself to God. One might object that such a view would imply the imposition of a religious belief in a pluralistic secular society. Very well. What is the alternative? If God’s sovereignty guarantees neither the rights of an individual to self-possession nor the authority of the state to defend that right against possible violators, then no legitimate authority exists. In an atheistic culture and an anti-theistic political order the state represents only the “interests” of the most powerful, as Marx so correctly claimed. The notion of a “democratic majority” is a pious myth used to lend an air of legitimacy to power. It is a myth that continues despite the clear indication that effective rule is in the hands of a minority. We need not pursue the equally clear evidence that, for the most part, power is exercised over the masses not from “without” by means of “raw,” that is, physical force and coercion, but rather by virtue of the loss of self-possession on the part of the “governed” who are effectively ruled by their interests, the need to consume. “Freedom” to pursue one’s [consumer] “interests” appears to be the rule of the land. No one is forced to consume anything, much less to have an abortion. Yet all are guaranteed the right to use raw physical force against those whose needs have no exchange value in the “free market,” including the unborn, the old, the incurable, the homeless, all those who in a special way belong to the God rejected by our culture of death.

THE CULTURE OF DEATH AND WAR AGAINST GOD

The curious paradox of a culture of death that affirms freedom and choice finds its explanation in the rejection of God’s sovereignty. The pro-abortionist cannot challenge the pro-lifer to be consistent with his affirmation of life and to reject capital punishment. Nor can the pro-abortionist claim that he is pro-life because he rejects capital punishment. The key to his consistency is the rejection of God’s

sovereignty. This rejection of God who is the source of the gift of life necessarily implies the affirmation of death that articulates itself in defending both the murderer and the abortionists in their “freedom” to take with impunity life which belongs to God.

Faced with the possible objection that we would impose God on those who do not believe in Him, there is only one response: those who do not believe in God have in effect made the tacit claim that human life belongs to those who can take it as they will. There are in effect, two competing claims to the ownership of human life, God’s and the abortionist’s. The latter demands, in effect, that we submit to his sovereign and divine claim to unborn life and trust that he will not take ours. On what basis shall we trust? God has shown His goodness by giving life. The abortionist have so far shown that they can only take life and defend those who do likewise. But here too, they have shown us that there are two and only two alternatives when faced with a divine claim, either submission or rejection, not dialogue. They have rejected God’s claim to both the innocent and the guilty. Are we to do any less with their claim to the innocent?