

George Parkin Grant on the Unthought Ontology of Abortion: Bringing the “Poisoned Cup to the Lips of Liberalism”

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ABSTRACT

George Parkin Grant argued that the legalization of abortion reveals to us the extent to which the desire for technological mastery has replaced steadfast attention to the whole and philosophical contemplation as the highest end of human endeavor. Technological mastery results from a changed understanding of being, the ontic, which privileges becoming over being. The effect of this metaphysic on society has been a loss of respect for those who are weak by the strong, and liberal polities have sacrificed their founding principle that all life should be treated as equal because they have forgotten that being depends not on what is passing but on what is always.

THE CANADIAN PHILOSOPHER George Parkin Grant (1918-1988) wrote about the way that modern technology combined with liberalism to produce a new and fundamentally inegalitarian account of justice in Western society. He was a theologically educated public philosopher, whose intellectual engagement with current events was thought provoking and original. He began and concluded his career teaching at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and served as chairman of the Department of Religion at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. Grant authored a number of essays for broadcast on CBC radio and some very influential books. He steadfastly maintained a critique of establishment academic views in defense of the Christian and Platonic philosophical tradition. His participation in the formative years of Canada’s pro-life movement was provoked by his concern that modernity viewed all nature technologically, as something to be mastered,

rather than as a participation in goodness itself.

In *English Speaking Justice* (1974), Grant observed that “however ‘liberal’ *Roe vs. Wade* may have seemed on the surface, it raises a cup of poison to the lips of liberalism. The poison is presented in the unthought ontology.”¹ This “unthought ontology,” including the concepts of “personhood” and “human being,” voiced by the court, was, in his opinion, entirely contrary to the “liberal” belief that all human beings have innate and inalienable rights by nature. He remarked that the court distinguished between human beings who deserve rights and those who do not:

In adjudicating for the right of the mother to choose whether another member of her species lives or dies, the judge is required to make an ontological distinction between members of the same species. The mother is a person; the foetus is not. In deciding what is due in justice to beings of the same species, he bases such differing dueeness on the ontology. By calling the distinction ontological I mean simply that the knowledge which the judge has about mothers and foetuses is not scientific. To call certain beings ‘persons’ is not a scientific statement.²

Although the court claimed to be confining its decision to the categories given by the American Constitution, interpreted within a liberal world view, it still found a basis “for denying the most elementary right of traditional justice to members of our species.”³ Thus, the justices must have held certain philosophical assumptions about being (nature) that were genealogically connected to some other philosophical tradition, a tradition guided neither by the Constitution, nor by what might be known scientifically about the development of the fetus *in utero*. In fact, the evidence of science would have made it more, rather than less, reasonable to hold that the foetus is a distinct individual with a given nature.

Grant would have argued that in light of the growing demand for foetal tissue in contemporary medicine, this same ‘ontology’ continues to

¹ George Parkin Grant, *English-Speaking Justice* (Notre Dame IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1985 [1974]), p. 71.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

dominate our culture. I have seen it said that abortion and stem cell research are quite different public issues and should not be confused, because from a rhetorical standpoint these issues look different, one connected to the freedom of scientific research, the other to women's rights. However, the ontological thinking of the court in *Roe* is common to those who defend stem cell research because the use of incipient human life in both cases is justified in terms of our right to technological mastery and in opposition to a teleological account of nature.

Grant observed that the account of the individual found in classical liberal rights theory has been weakened by the 'technological' account of *nature*, both human and non-human, found in American culture. In 1976 he wrote: "As we move into a society where we will be able to shape not only non-human nature but humanity itself, why should we limit that shaping by doctrines of equal rights which come out of a world view that 'history' has swept away?"⁴ The terminology of natural rights belongs to a historical, philosophical language that speaks of rights and personhood as "natural," where "nature" means something given in the nature of things, not made by mankind. In this older view, justice was not grounded in the agreement of men, or convention, but known by reasoning about what was called "natural order" or "final ends"—in short, the given.⁵ However, as centuries passed, European philosophers came to conceive of nature as accidental and arational, ultimately in some way dependent upon or a product of human making, not intrinsically ordered by a transcendent source. Nature seen as accident was made subject to human freedom and creativity. This shift in thinking has weakened the philosophy of natural rights by consistently defining nature and human freedom

⁴ Ibid., p. 80.

⁵ Two of the best known passages relating to this subject are found in Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Part I, chapters 13 and 14, and in John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, chapter 2. Rights are real in Hobbes because they stem from his conviction of the truth of scientific materialism, action and reaction moves natural and material bodies. In Locke, that rights are innate to man's nature is asserted in his political theory and then confused by his treatment of human nature as a blank slate in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, where by denying the presence of innate ideas, he begs the question of where one might find the natural ground of the rights and justice in the polity.

in a way contrary to the idea that it belongs to a divinely created, intelligible, and purposeful order.⁶

Philosophy in the older Christian tradition taught that there is an underlying essence and source common to the flux of existence, to all those things that pass in and out of being, discoverable by reasoned argument. Plato called it the Good, Aristotle identified it as being, and Christians have called it God. Because of this source, transitory existence has a purpose or meaning beyond the exercise of the desire for comfort, wealth, and self-preservation.⁷ The highest end and purpose in life for the ancient and medieval philosophers was to know this source of human and natural order. Different accounts were given about the particular characteristics of that order, but that this order existed and could be known to a greater or lesser degree by contemplation of the world around them, was not in doubt.

For various reasons that are complex, and indeed much disputed among those who study the history of Western thought, since the time of the Renaissance the confidence expressed in “natural theology” passed into history as a “stage” in our development. What replaced it was the belief that all knowledge, all truth arises from the dynamic and changing context of human life; the final end suddenly seemed unknowable in itself and what we know of truth was constantly in flux. In fact, it was posited that our knowledge of the truth was time-bound. The older view (held by such figures as Anselm and Aquinas) that one could argue about philosophical proofs for God’s existence passed into our consciousness as “historic.” Although the Christian religion continued to be practiced and Christian morality was the social norm, it was generally held that God

⁶ Attempts to resuscitate the rights tradition within the older understanding have taken place in twentieth century Roman Catholic philosophy. Jacques Maritain took the liberal account of natural rights and brought to it a more sophisticated reading through his use of Thomas Aquinas, thereby protecting it from a simple equation of natural law with material nature as found in Hobbes. However, the ontological trajectory of modernity has, arguably, defeated that attempt.

⁷ Locke and Hobbes broke with the Christian tradition in so far as their views combined a theory of human nature based on a connection between nature and the transcendent with the view that our end is self-preservation.

could be known only by faith and no longer by faith and reason together.

In modernity, when philosophy returns to the question of being, it is as something known in a very attenuated way. Gone is the confidence that Thomas Aquinas had in constructing a *Summa* of all knowledge about God, man and society, or the multiple volumes of Albert the Great that drew natural science and theology together into one scheme. The *Summa* has been replaced by the encyclopaedia, a very different thing; the idea of what can be thought has changed.

Grant understood this change as the replacement of contemplation with technological rationality. Greek philosophers had distinguished between two kinds of knowledge, one that was needed to practice an art (*techne*), and the other a kind of knowledge that sought out the nature of things (*episteme*). *Techne* was related to production or performance, music, carpentry, engineering, medicine, and politics. Of it Grant wrote:

Art was concerned with what might or might not be—in that language, with entities that were accidentally. Science was concerned with what must be—in that language, with entities that were necessary.⁸

Episteme took form in Aristotle's study of biology, metaphysics, physics, and astronomy, in Plato's study of geometry and ideas, studies that attempted to uncover the unchanging essences of things found in this world. For it was these unchanging essences that govern the changing. For Aristotle, all the business of life exists for the sake of contemplation of what always is. The other crafts exist for the sake of philosophy. So too in the medieval world, it was the contemplative life that was prized, the life of the monastery and the convent. It was in the silence of prayer and study that one could best know God.⁹

⁸ George Parkin Grant, "Technology as Warning," *The George Grant Reader* (Toronto, Ontario: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1998), pp. 410-11.

⁹ The parable of Martha and Mary, who sat at the feet of Jesus, was commonly thought to instruct on this point, and so too the allegorical reading of the story of Leah and Rachel, Jacob's two wives. In the writings of the twelfth century mystic, Richard of St Victor, these pairs represent the active and contemplative lives. The active life is abundant and fruitful in good works but those who peruse it cannot see far in the things of the spirit, just as Martha was corrected by the Lord for

The making involved in *techne* held another significance as well. The Greeks considered it part of the broader activity of *poesis* (“production” or the “leading forth” into becoming). *Poesis* describes how all things are “led forth” into the world in a given order. Human making (*techne*) is a *poesis*, but in a secondary way. Plato saw craft as a form of “imitation” (*mimesis*) because our art merely calls into existence as something already in the mind of God, the Ideas or Forms that always exist, as Plato suggests in the tenth book of the *Republic*. As Grant remarked: “The fish hawk in the Atlantic storm would be for the Greeks a *poesis*—a veritable production—as much as this desk has been led forth.”¹⁰ Plato was content to speak of work as an imitation of a natural order that was already there. In the first book of his *Ethics* Aristotle spoke of each craft as connected to a practical good, as distinguished from the good that is universal. Thus, while the less circumspect of today’s biologists speak as if they will someday have the power to create human life like a god, from a teleological perspective even cloning is no more than an imitation of something given because human making is in every way derivative, working with what is given, not a matter of creating *ab initio*.

Because the Greeks recognized that the goods of the world are derivative from what is always, they linked all making or *techne* to the question of goodness. In our time, the lack of any rational relation to the eternal not only leads to grandiose claims of “scientific creativity” but also confines what can be objectively known to the realm of the changing, rather than to that what is always. Hence, scientists tend to consider questions of good extrinsic to their activity. This has led to the dominance of what is called instrumental thinking.

The word “technology” itself reveals that reasoning is confined to instrumental ends. The fusion of “art” and “reason” in one word exhibits the trajectory of reason toward making. In Grant’s words: “The co-penetration of *logos* and *techne* affirmed at its heart that in understanding

criticizing Mary when she was sitting at his feet.

¹⁰ George Parkin Grant, “Technology as Warning,” *The George Grant Reader* (Toronto, Ontario: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1998), p. 410.

anything we know it as ruled by necessity and chance. This affirmation entailed the elimination of the ancient notion of good from the understanding of anything.”¹¹ The idea that one might think of nature as something with a purpose outside of “chance” and “necessity” does not conform to instrumental thinking. For one thing, regarding nature in this way sets limits on action by requiring that one ask that fundamentally speculative question, what is the purpose of this thing?

The idea of thinking as “contemplation” is just as incomprehensible to the popular mind as speaking of making as “mimesis.” Grant wrote that “absent for us is the affirmation of a possible apprehension of the world beyond that as a field of objects considered as *pragmata* –an apprehension present not only in its height as ‘theory’ but as the undergirding of our loves and friendships, our arts and reverences, and indeed as the setting for our dealing with the objects of the human and non-human world.”¹² In a technological world, the content of man’s freedom lies in making. As Grant put it, the “elimination of the idea of final purpose from the scientific study of the human and non-human things not only led to the progress of science and improvement of conditions but also had consequences on the public understanding of what it was to live.”¹³

The moral result, at least for those who are not bound to the Good by faith, has been that in public debate, while people continue to talk about inalienable individual rights as if they are inherent to human nature, the categories imposed on “justice” and “human nature” are rooted in human will. The language of rights may be, as he puts it, the “flesh and bones of our institutions,”¹⁴ but the notion of equal rights is “being played out within a destiny more comprehensive than itself.”¹⁵ There is a conflict

¹¹ George Parkin Grant, “Thinking about Technology,” *Technology and Justice* (Notre Dame IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1986), p. 19.

¹² George Parkin Grant, “In Defence of North America,” *Technology and Empire* (Toronto, Ontario: Anansi Press, 1969), p. 35.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁴ George Parkin Grant, *English-Speaking Justice* (Notre Dame IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1985[1974]), p. 80.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

between those who hold to equal and individual rights within the larger context of Christian teaching or an older philosophical tradition, and those who hold to equal rights without such knowledge because it suits other purposes. Thus the language of rights continues to be used both by traditionalists and technocrats but with a different meaning.

Grant argued that neither Locke's philosophy of social contract, nor those of other classical liberal political philosophers, offers a metaphysics of good, of something unchanging on which to base human rights. He wrote that "for Locke the great question about justice must be: how can the foundations of justice be laid when rational human beings are not given the conception of the highest good?"¹⁶ Locke broke with the tradition which preceded him in Europe to the degree that his account of the state of nature, that nature which these rational calculators know "does not provide us with the conception of the highest good,"¹⁷ although it may very well provide one with knowledge of the greatest evil, which is defined not in medieval terms as separation from our good, or God, but very simply as death. As Heidegger, the last of the great modern philosophers said, it is "being toward death," and not, as Grant would have it, "being toward good."¹⁸

Grant argued that we have inherited this ambiguity. Liberal political theory looks both forward and backward. It looks backward in that it depends on an older account of human nature that holds the principle that what is just for one person belongs to a general account of what is just for all, as given in the nature of things. It looks forward in promoting the idea

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 17-18.

¹⁸ George Parkin Grant, "Faith and the Multiversity," *Technology and Justice* (Notre Dame IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1986), p. 43. Heidegger attempts in *Being and Time* and other works to construct a source for Being in nihilism and thereby rehabilitate metaphysics on a new basis, without transcendentals. This is connected to his understanding of ourselves as directed towards death. Much was said by Nietzsche and Heidegger about how quickly and directly Enlightenment metaphysics leads to nihilism. Heidegger takes this to signify the end of Western metaphysical discussions of being and the need to found a new account of being in something other than good and truth, as understood in the tradition.

that constructing and producing a just human community requires leaving nature, because polities are based on human invention, contract and will. (Locke broke with the late medieval idea of the state as 'natural' in the sense of belonging to the natural order.) Liberal political theory takes freedom to lie in the pursuit of material self-interest, guided not by nature but by will. Liberal democracies are therefore: (1) unencumbered by a transcendent understanding of goodness, or religion, and (2) a matter of calculation. The outcome of this tension between technological reason and natural right has strengthened the progressive assumption that contract and convention should be made to serve the rights of the "creative and dynamic."¹⁹

In Immanuel Kant, the last of the great liberal philosophers, the idea of self-legislation, self-rule became the foundation of right. In this work, one begins to glimpse the Romantic belief that human nature is not given in the nature of things, but is a matter of "development" or "growth," and that personhood is a thing willed consequent upon self-realization. From there it is not far to see the uncreative and undynamic as lacking full personhood.

In Kant one finds a division between nature and freedom developed to its fullest extent because freedom and justice are present only to our wills in "the mood of command."²⁰ Freedom lies in transcending nature because nature has no intrinsic relation to goodness, rather goodness is expressed in following the moral imperative. "The human species depends for its progress not on God or nature, but on its own freedom, and the direction of that progress is determined by the fact that we can rationally give ourselves our own moral laws."²¹ All the darkness and "uncertainties about whether we are fitted for anything...arises from our sense of nature's arbitrariness."²² The good will becomes for Kant an escape from an irrational and amoral nature, the only possible foundation

¹⁹ George Parkin Grant, *English-Speaking Justice* (Notre Dame IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1985 [1974]), p. 80.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

for good without restriction.²³

From Locke to Kant contract theory moved increasingly against nature, first having divorced the political contract from nature, except in prompting and urges found in natural man, and finally in divorcing goodness from nature itself. Now it is still found in reason, that is true, but it is a reason that has no relation to nature, a move which is fundamentally un-Platonic and at odds with the pre-modern philosophical tradition. For, late moderns query, how could reason lie within nature when it is accidentally formed, the product of chance and necessity? Nature can be known scientifically, in its parts, piecemeal via the application of scientific method, but not philosophically as a whole. And when it comes to discussing questions of personhood, or of human nature, these questions are determined not by science, nor by the older philosophy of personhood, nor by connecting it to a given source which is goodness itself, nor through contemplation, but entirely as something that has creativity and exerts its will. Personhood belongs to those who best exercise freedom.

Ultimately, this bodes ill for those who are incapacitated and incapable of protecting themselves by the exercise of will and power. The mentally disabled, the old and infirm, as well as the unborn fall into this category and have systematically come to be regarded as less than full persons. Their fate is increasingly put at risk.²⁴

George Parkin Grant observed that the court in *Roe vs. Wade*, bound in its thinking by modern ontology, excluded the question of human nature from the discussion of the unborn because freedom and rights are to their mind established by will and convention, rather than by an account of being as established nature. The West, which gave birth to modernity with a metaphysics which held nature's being and goodness to

²³ "The first sentence of *The Laying of the Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* expresses the ontological basis of that affirmation. 'Es ist überall nichts in der Welt, ja überhaupt auch ausser derselben zu denken möglich was ohne Einschränkung für gut konnte gehalten werden, als allein ein guter Wille.'" Grant took this to be the central teaching on goodness in Kant." *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²⁴ George Parkin Grant, "The Language of Euthanasia," *Technology and Justice* (Notre Dame IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1986), pp. 102-15.

be derived from a transcendent source of being, and through which one might come to understand the whole of things, has turned against itself. Being, the ontic, is now understood to be matter in flux, subject to human will, and people perceive “what is” as the pre-eminence of becoming over being. On this account, the court based its decision to legalize abortion on the ontological assumptions of the age: that we are beings toward death, that our eternity is grasped only in what we make; that no reality or purpose exists outside of our purposeful mastery. Grant spoke against abortion, much as John Paul II would later speak against “the culture of death,” because he saw abortion as symptomatic of the ethos of the age, of its anti-contemplative nature. Against it, he called for a “steadfast attention to the whole,” and for the need to renew the study of philosophy, especially that of Plato, who was the first to identify “what is” with a good that is always. The instrumental or technological thinking of the present day, useful as it is, is incapable of distinguishing justice from technological mastery, and ensnares society into using death as a means to justice and self-expression.