

# Abortion Is More Than “Murder”

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ABSTRACT: Abortion is here shown to be worse than ordinary murder, principally because it involves the betrayal of a dependent by a natural guardian. Furthermore, abortion is emblematic of wider lethal betrayals of radically dependent persons. All these betrayals are rationalized precisely by the victims' lack of autonomy-based dignity. Christianity counters by affirming the concern and respect due to those who helplessly suffer worldly disdain.

SUPPOSE WE WERE to find out that over a quarter of the nation's grandparents are killed each year by their teenaged grandchildren, usually through deliberate dismemberment. Wouldn't responses such as "This is murder!" somehow understate the matter? Wouldn't this response be even more inadequate if grandparent-killing had been declared to be a constitutional right?

Yet such a reaction to the current right to kill unborn children throughout pregnancy is about as hard-hitting as one can find in most pro-life writing. We need to say more. Words such as "murder" inadequately express the full horror of abortion, just as they would be insufficient as expressions of our shock at the mutilation of grandparents.

The main linguistic problem is that the word "murder" conjures up only a single lethal act against an adult stranger. When a murder is particularly horrific in technique or circumstance, we append adjectives to it. By calling abortions simply "murder," we seem to place them in the ordinary, non-horrific category.

Abortion does, in fact, involve extraordinary violence—deliberate dismemberment—often while the child is still alive. Indeed, that is precisely why Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and John Paul Stevens upheld the right to partial-birth abortion in

the year 2000. They said that it is “simply irrational” to object to suctioning out a fetus’s brains partway through birth when the alternative—standard intra-uterine abortion—is, in their words, at least as “brutal,” “gruesome,” “cruel,” and “painful” as abortion during delivery.<sup>1</sup>

Abortions are also not typical murders in that the victim is not an adult, but a helpless child. Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) pointed out, in 1991, that abortion is part of “a true war of the mighty against the weak.... With the complicity of States, colossal means have been used against people at the dawn of their life....”<sup>2</sup> Doesn’t this make it worse than ordinary murder? When we read of troops or terrorists slaughtering the weak—the very old, the very young, the very disabled—this seems more inhuman than the killing of vigorous adults. There is something in us that responds to weakness with compassion and deference. The *Catechism* supports this feeling when it states, “Those whose lives are diminished or weakened deserve special respect” (§2276). When a blind man is robbed of a wallet, our humanity is more deeply injured than when a sighted person has his wallet stolen. The thief has committed an act not only wrong but shameful.

Hans Jonas has argued that our treatment of babies stands out as a kind of archetype for decency. He points to “the newborn, whose mere breathing uncontradictably addresses an ought to the world around, namely, to take care of him.”<sup>3</sup> Abortion reasons

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<sup>1</sup> *Stenberg v. Carhart*, 530 U.S. 914, 946, 952 (2000). Concurring opinions by Justices Ginsburg and Stevens.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “The Problem of Threats to Human Life” (April 8, 1991), Section III, “The War on Life Today,” pgh 1, available online at: [http://www.catholicculture.org/docs/doc\\_view.cfm?recnum=187](http://www.catholicculture.org/docs/doc_view.cfm?recnum=187).

<sup>3</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 131.

to the contrary: *because* the unborn child is utterly dependent, he may be killed. The legalization of abortion past ten to twelve weeks, the point at which even a child can recognize a child in the womb, is shameless.

Still, the most horrific facet of grandparent- or child-killing has yet to be mentioned: betrayal. It is worse for a caretaker (a lifeguard, a nurse, a family member) to kill than for a stranger to do so, because the evil of betrayal is added to the evil of murder. This dimension of abortion was brought home to me when I was teaching in Ukraine. I saw a pro-life poster there with an unborn child sucking its thumb and asked if the caption “Не зрадь мене, Мамо” meant “Don’t kill me, Mommy.” I was told no, that it meant “Do not betray me, Mommy.” *Of course*, I thought, *if there is a life, then there is a child; if a child, then a mother; if a mother, then a betrayal.*

And not just any betrayal. Parental duties are perhaps the most fundamental that we can imagine. Pope John Paul II, in *Evangelium Vitae* (§11), first criticizes abortion and euthanasia for being “attacks [that] strike human life at the time of its greatest frailty,” but he immediately adds that even “more serious is the fact that, most often, those attacks are carried out in the very heart of and with the complicity of the family—the family that by its nature is called to be the ‘sanctuary of life.’” Moreover, by officially authorizing abortion throughout pregnancy, and even into birth, current American law willingly tempts and enables mothers and fathers to turn violently against those little lives that utterly depend on them. Our entire legal system, and those who support it, is itself complicit in an act far worse than ordinary murder.

Some abortion supporters deny that there can be betrayal where there is no person in the full sense to be betrayed. The long answer here would point to the continuity of human development from conception to adulthood and to the fact that a mere change in location (in this case, a movement from inside to outside the uterus) cannot result in a change in the inherent nature or dignity of that developing being. A shorter answer would point out, with Stanley Hauerwas, that one need not be a person

in some full sense in order to be a child.<sup>4</sup>

Other abortion supporters argue that a parent-child fiduciary duty cannot exist without free consent to the relationship, that mere physical bonds have no moral significance. A mother may thus know that she is taking the life of her offspring and yet avoid any special moral guilt as long as she has never autonomously chosen to accept and rear the child. Autonomy trumps life.

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<sup>4</sup> "Must a Person Be a Person to Be a Patient? Or, My Uncle Charlie Is Not Much of a Person but He Is Still My Uncle Charlie," in Stanley M. Hauerwas, David B. Burrell & Richard Bondi, *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1977), pp. 127-28.

Mother Teresa, in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, said: "If a mother can kill her own child, what is left for me to kill you and you to kill me?"<sup>5</sup> If the ancient maternal archetype of devoted care is renounced, what confidence can we still have in one another? Accepting the killing of strangers eats away at our community from the outside in; accepting the killing of our own children rots us from the inside out. How can any dependent human lives be safe?

If we accept that a mother can kill even her own child, why should scientists quail at the dissection of embryos and fetuses unrelated to them? Given that a mother can legitimately destroy her child before birth or during birth, why not doctors after birth, if location cannot seriously be thought to make a difference in a being's inherent dignity? Judge Robert Beezer of the Ninth Circuit has argued that the teaching of the U.S. Supreme Court is that all non-viable people can be treated like fetuses.<sup>6</sup> Dare aging parents ask for care from those who know their siblings were aborted?

According to *The New York Times*, Dr. Eduard Verhagen of the Netherlands, who freely admits to active euthanasia of newborns in apparently irremediable pain, says he could not do the deadly deed to his own suffering child, but would ask someone else to do it.<sup>7</sup> Of course, he is fooling himself if he

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<sup>5</sup> Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, Oslo, Norway (1979).

<sup>6</sup> *Compassion in Dying v. State of Washington*, 79 F.3d 790, 851 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir., 1996). Dissenting opinion.

<sup>7</sup> *The New York Times* (March 15, 2005), p. A4.

thinks such abstention would make him a better father, but his admission does show the deep-seated character of respect for the life of one's own offspring. We tear out the roots of human trust when we authorize the killing of our own children.

Pope John Paul II found the pursuit of individual autonomy to be a root cause of many sorts of betrayals of the weak and vulnerable. The drive for autonomy aims at freedom from all kinds of burdensome dependents. The Pope wrote, in *Evangelium Vitae* (§12), that “a life which would require greater acceptance, love and care is considered useless, or held to be an intolerable burden, and is therefore rejected in one way or another. A person who, because of illness, handicap or, more simply, just by existing, compromises the well-being or life-style of those who are more favored tends to be looked upon as an enemy to be resisted or eliminated.” It is easy to see how such selfishness would demand to be freed from all obligations not freely chosen.

Those unable to bargain out their rights and duties—such as the unborn or the mentally disabled—thus come to count for very little. Their destruction is rationalized by the idea that autonomy alone is the basis for human dignity. Rights are possessed only by “the person who enjoys total or at least incipient autonomy and who emerges from total dependence on others.... There is no place...for anyone who appears completely at the mercy of others and radically dependent on them” (*Evangelium Vitae* §19). By giving more emphasis to abortion as betrayal, we would call attention to our widening rejection of those who depend on us.

Friedrich Nietzsche said: “To go on vegetating in cowardly dependence on physicians and machinations, after the meaning of life, the right to life, has been lost, that ought to prompt a profound contempt in society.”<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche complained that Christians stand against such disdain for the dependent. “If the

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<sup>8</sup> *Twilight of the Idols* in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, vol. 16, ed. Oscar Levy, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici (New York NY: Russell and Russell, 1909-1911; repr. 1964), p. 88.

degenerate and the sick...are to be accorded the same value as the healthy, ...then unnaturalness becomes law. This universal love of men is in practice the *preference* for the suffering, underprivileged, degenerate: it has in fact lowered and weakened the strength, the responsibility, the lofty duty to sacrifice men.... The species requires that the ill-constituted, weak, degenerate perish: but it was precisely to them that Christianity turned as a conserving force.”

Nietzsche was searching, he said, for “a thoroughgoing *practical nihilism*.... Problem: with what means could one attain to a severe form of really contagious nihilism: such as teaches and practices voluntary death with scientific conscientiousness (—and *not* a feeble, vegetable existence in expectation of a false afterlife—)?”<sup>9</sup>

Harvard law professor Mary Ann Glendon has warned that by “making a radical vision of individual autonomy normative, we inevitably imply that dependency is something to be avoided in ourselves and disdained in others.”<sup>10</sup> The leading legal theorist Ronald Dworkin exhibits just such disdain. He writes: “We are distressed by, even disapprove of, someone...who neglects or sacrifices the independence we think dignity requires.” For Dworkin, a person who chooses to live in great dependency denies that he is someone “whose life is important for its own sake.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (Westminster MD: Random House, 1967), pp. 142-43.

<sup>10</sup> Mary Ann Glendon, *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse* (New York NY: Macmillan, The Free Press, 1991), p. 73. Although the context of her remark in the text above is family rather than health law, Professor Glendon emphasizes shortly thereafter (p. 74) that by “exalting autonomy to the degree we do, we systematically slight the very young, the severely ill or disabled, the frail elderly, as well as those who care for them....”

<sup>11</sup> *Life's Dominion: An Argument About Abortion, Euthanasia, and*

Has Nietzsche's "problem" finally been solved, by making the dependent feel themselves contemptible burdens if they do not "autonomously" choose death? How can our "preferential love for the sick" (*Catechism* §1503) be enough to persuade them to live, if the sick themselves come to think they are not worth the trouble?

The Gospel reading for Holy Thursday tells the familiar story of Christ's washing of the Apostles' feet. We draw, appropriately, the lesson that no act of service is too low for us. But we may miss something in the interchange between our Lord and Peter. Peter at first refuses to let his feet be washed, one imagines in part because they smelled. Christ responds, "If I do not wash you, you have no part in me" (John 13:8). We Christians have a duty that may sometimes be harder than even the most heroic service: to let ourselves be served by others even when we think ourselves too insignificant to merit such care.

We are to imitate Christ. True, the Gospel tells us that we shall be judged by how well we serve the needy—"I was thirsty and you gave me drink" (Matt. 25:35). But Christ is here not the server but the one served. It is precisely when we are most afflicted that we have a chance to come closer to Christ, the one who "took our infirmities and bore our diseases." Many of the mysterious Beatitudes are in the same vein, calling those who suffer, and who suffer worldly contempt, "blessed."

Moreover, the Christian transvaluation of values, that which Nietzsche seeks to undo, was not just to dignify the servant but to dignify the slave. For Christ "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, ...humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even

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*Individual Freedom* (New York NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), pp. 235, 237.



death on a cross" (Phil. 2:6-8). Service in His day was associated with dependent slaves, so that His call to serve was itself a call to suffer worldly disdain and, perhaps, an apparently humiliating death.

Here is the Good News we have for all dependent, and potentially dependent, persons: Your dignity is not a function of autonomy or pleasant smell. Living in dependency, risking a death of apparent humiliation, can itself be heroic resistance to the enfolding Culture of Contempt and Betrayal. And God gave you a great exemplar in our own day, seen by millions around the world: our late dear John Paul, ever more dependent on others' help, even to wipe his mouth as he drooled while seeking to speak.