

Liberal Democracy as a Culture of Death: Why John Paul II Was Right

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To claim the right to abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia, and to recognize that right in law, means to attribute to human freedom a perverse and evil significance: that of an absolute power over others and against others. This is the death of true freedom.

John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life*

Pope John Paul II's encyclical *The Gospel of Life* is the *locus classicus* for the claim that a culture of death is enshrouding the modern world. His identification and critique of what he calls the "culture of death" directly challenge liberal democracy, particularly on its separation of freedom from truth. This essay will focus on that challenge. The first part offers an analytic introduction to the term "culture of death," the second part unfolds the late pope's argument, and the third part advances a defense of it.

What and Where is the "Culture of Death"?

Critics of abortion, euthanasia, and embryo stem-cell research have found the ultimate war cry in the "culture of death." It is the kind of term that people who create advertisements dream about. It immediately catches the attention and sparks curiosity, and it is addictively repeatable. It was destined to adorn the title page of books.¹ Although the term appears only several times in *The Gospel of Life* and its focus is confined to the first chapter, while the remaining three chapters are devoted to the "culture of

1. E.g., Wesley Smith, *The Culture of Death: The Assault on Medical Ethics in America* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2001); *Culture of Life, Culture of Death*, ed. Luke Gormally (London: Linacre Centre for Healthcare Ethics, 2002); Donald Demarco and Benjamin Wiker, *Architects of the Culture of Death* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004).

life,” what is remembered and discussed is “culture of death.” But since every negative assertion presupposes an affirmative assertion, the term “culture of life” has its force in the debate nevertheless. The negativity of “death” gives opponents of the “liberal social agenda” the opportunity to state their case in terms even more positive than “pro-life.” By framing the debate as the struggle between the “culture of death” and the “culture of life,” liberals become the barbarians at the gates and conservatives, the defenders of civilization. So instead of coming across as inhumane obstructors of medical research that promises to find cures for a host of afflictions, from Parkinson’s Disease to presently irreparable and paralyzing spinal injuries, critics of embryonic stem-cell research can assume the positive stance of defending the most fundamental of all values, life. As the *Washington Post* reported last year, “President Bush told thousands of anti-abortion marchers yesterday that his administration is making progress toward fostering a ‘culture of life’ by enacting measures that limit abortion and stem cell research while expanding the legal definition of life.”² The mavens of Madison Avenue must be envious.

But no matter how appealing or powerful a phrase, it can nevertheless be misleading. Several decades ago, “eurocommunism” enjoyed widespread use among journalists and the intelligentsia, but despite its euphony and tantalizing prospect of a pan-European Marxism, the corresponding economic and political realities never materialized, and the communist political parties that remain in Western European parliaments are not what they were. Accordingly, the term “culture of death” raises the two questions that the Scholastic thinkers asked at the start of every inquiry: What is it? (*Quid est?*) and Does it exist? (*An sit?*).

What does “culture of death” mean? John Paul II uses the term broadly to embrace injustices, actions, and policies that dehumanize and otherwise frustrate the human striving for fulfillment, but he primarily applies “culture of death” to forms of unjustifiable homicide, especially abortion and euthanasia. Without application to the latter, the term “culture of death” would be reduced to metaphor. Thomas Nagel expresses that point when in reply to those who say that dying is worse than actual death, he writes, “I would not mind dying if death did not follow.” By connecting unjustifiable homicide with other kinds of injustice, the latter

2. Michael A. Fletcher, “Bush Hails Progress Toward ‘Culture of Life,’” *Washington Post*, January 25, 2005.

threats to human life appear as integral to the ultimate injustice: the deliberate killing of innocent people.

What about “culture”? Does it apply only to the dominant culture or to subcultures as well? There are subcultures, such as the academic culture or the Jewish culture or even the devil-worshipping culture; but for the “culture of death” to have the significance that the late pope assigned to it, the term must apply to an entire society. The importance of subcultures in a society notwithstanding, the purposes and values of any given subculture do not represent those of the society itself, even though its formation and activities may be a reaction to the laws or policies of the larger society (as was the case with the formation of the black militancy movement in the United States during the 1960s). Reactive subcultures define themselves in terms of their opposition to the dominant culture and without it would lose their rationale. Then, too, what starts as a subculture can become the culture of a political society and even a civilization, as when Christianity developed from a marginal group of believers to become the heart and soul of the western world, Christendom. A helpful generic definition of “culture” is “the conscious pursuit of an ideal.”³ If it means anything to talk about an ideal consciously pursued by society, it must mean that that ideal dominates all its defining institutions.

Imagine, for example, a nation of vampires. It would have its own government, with political leaders and legislators, economic, educational, health care, and transportation systems, even its own armed forces. Because the driving force in a vampire’s life is to maintain him- or herself by sucking blood from others, resulting either in their death or their recruitment as foot soldiers in the killing of other people, all the social and political institutions, including the schools, would be organized to facilitate that one purpose. Such a society would surely qualify as a culture of death. Admittedly this is an extreme example, but it has the virtue of almost all extremes: it highlights the relevant points.⁴ One might suppose that there is no need to tarry with vampires. Hitler’s Germany, Stalin’s Russia, Mao’s China, and Pot’s Cambodia are all nations to which the term “culture of death” applies, insofar as their programs of mass

3. Werner Jaeger, *Paidia: the Ideals of Greek Culture*, 2nd ed., vol. 1, trans. Gilbert Highet (New York: Oxford UP, 1945), p. xvii.

4. But the example is not so extreme as to preclude analogous examples in contemporary culture. See Raymond Dennehy, “The Vampire’s Kiss,” in *Anti-Abortionist at Large: How to Argue Intelligently About Abortion and Live to Tell About It* (Vancouver: Trafford Publishing, 2002), chap. 8.

murder metastasized, infecting the social, educational, juridical, and political institutions.

But John Paul II did not have in mind obviously repressive, tyrannous political societies when he leveled the accusation “culture of death.” The objects of his accusation are liberal democracies, such as the United States. Do the widespread practice of legalized abortion, support for embryonic stem-cell research, and the movement for legalizing physician-assisted suicide justify tarring liberal democracies with the same brush that was used to tar tyrannical regimes? Is not democracy in the United States committed to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”? An affirmative answer is in order, but that hardly obviates the possibility of a democratic nation adopting laws and policies that are in principle tyrannous and thus incompatible with its ethos. Plato’s analysis of the forces that contribute to the declination of democracies into tyrannies makes it clear that members of a democracy do not voluntarily trade the one for the other but instead surrender their freedom by inches as they lose their moral virtue.⁵ Yves R. Simon observed that, in order for murderers to ascend to political power, it is necessary for respectable citizens to compromise themselves—at first in relatively small ways and later in large ways:

Not many constituencies would give majorities to candidates proposing abruptly to murder six or seven million persons never declared guilty by any court. During the early phases, in which elections are not yet entirely meaningless, the hope of murderers rests upon the action of moderate and respectable men who never dreamed of sending any women or children to gas chambers but feel obligated to demand quotas for the Jews in a number of occupations, their complete exclusion from government positions, etc. A movement aimed at crime would have no success with the people if it were not started under virtuous auspices.⁶

Simon thus furnishes an historical example of the slippery slope: supporting work quotas for the Jews did not imply support for murdering them; what it did support, however, was government violation of their right to equality of opportunity. Public acceptance emboldened the government to embark upon further violations of the rights of Jews in other fields, while

5. Plato *Republic* 557a–566e.

6. Yves R. Simon, *Philosophy of Democratic Government* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 83.

at the same time it became easier for the public to accept the violations. But the imagery of the slippery slope is about abuse and increasing loss of control: if by choosing to take step A, one eventually finds oneself taking steps B, C, and finally D, that is not because step D was a necessary consequence of step A, but only because the intermediate steps eased the transition between steps A and D. Five decades ago the American Dental Association started the push for fluoridating the nation's drinking water as a means of reducing the incidence of tooth decay. Some groups objected to the project on the grounds that allowing the municipalities to add fluoride to the drinking water would lead to lacing the water with other chemicals later on. From a practical standpoint such abuses are always possible, but in this particular instance, permission to do the latter was not implied by permission to do the former.

The approval of some actions *is* logically implied by the permission to do other actions. Suppose the United States Supreme Court upheld a state law that allowed medical experimentation on retarded children for the purpose of finding ways to eliminate hereditary mental deficiencies, such as Down syndrome. The experiments were not therapeutic or beneficial to the subjects of the experiments; rather they were life-threatening and, since the subjects were children, involuntary. Despite the desirable goal of the experiments, the permission to conduct them implies that human beings may be used as mere objects of social purpose. But this implication contradicts the doctrine of rights that underlies democratic society—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Attempts to restrict such permissions to instances where the goal is proportionate to the risk would not work, for two reasons. First, forcing innocent people to submit to the risk of bodily harm or death collides with democratic principles, except in the conduct of war; and when missions are regarded as so sufficiently dangerous that the risk of survival is minimal, then volunteers are requested. Second, what is considered a proportionate risk depends on the mentality of the researchers and the courts, as exemplified by the infamous Tuskegee syphilis study.⁷ To put matters in Kantian terms, persons are ends in themselves, and thus using a person as a mere means to an end

7. This study extended from 1932 to 1972. Three hundred ninety-nine African-American males were denied treatment for syphilis and misled by Federal Public Health officials (e.g., some were not informed that they had tested positive for syphilis). The aim of the study was to examine, by autopsy, the effect of untreated syphilis on the human body. See T. G. Benedek, "The 'Tuskegee Study' of Syphilis: Analysis of Moral versus Methodological Aspects," *Journal of Chronic Diseases* 31 (1978): 35–50.

does violence to his or her nature. If it is morally justifiable deliberately to endanger the life of one innocent human being without his or her consent, it logically follows that the life of any innocent human being may deliberately be endangered without his or her consent. The principle involved has the clarity of geometrical reasoning: a theorem that applies to a specific polygon as such, say a triangle, necessarily applies to all triangles, whether equilateral, scalene, or obtuse. Equally, any justification for using a person as a mere means to an end—for example, as an object of social purpose—necessarily implies that *any* person may be used as a mere means to an end.

There is, therefore, no reason why the term “culture of death” cannot be applied to any society that adopts laws and policies that in principle contradict the right to life of innocent men and women, even while it continues to defend human rights, condemn the violation of human rights, and promote the democratic ethos of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Can the term be given a wider extension yet? Strict vegetarians, for example, might insist that any society that kills animals for food, clothing, or medical experimentation counts as a “culture of death.” But this is not the usage intended by the pope—not to mention the fact that the inclusion of animals implies that human beings differ from the rest only in degree, not in kind. And, because it is axiomatic that, of things essentially the same in kind, what applies to any of them in the relevant sense, applies to all of them, it thereby follows that if it is morally unjustifiable deliberately to kill humans, it is equally immoral deliberately to kill animals. Conversely, if humans differ from animals in kind as well as in degree, then the immorality of deliberately killing humans does not imply the immorality of deliberately killing animals.⁸

It might seem that the second question, “Does a culture of death exist?” has already been answered above in the discussion of whether a democracy, such as the United States, can be called a “culture of death.” But all that discussion determined is that it is *possible* for such a democracy to exist, not that any actually does exist.

The evidence cited by John Paul II for the existence of a culture of death includes a number of injustices, ranging from poverty, child labor, forced prostitution, and war, to (especially) abortion, euthanasia, and the

8. See Mortimer Adler, *The Difference of Man and the Difference It Makes* (New York: Fordham UP, 1993), chaps. 17 and 18.

laboratory reproduction of human beings.⁹ As will be shown further on, John Paul II argues that the legalization of abortion and euthanasia are attached to psychological and social attitudes, along with philosophical and theological positions that are essential characteristics of a “culture of death.” But although no one can reasonably doubt the *facts* of widespread abortion, euthanasia, and the laboratory reproduction of human beings in democracies, any debate about whether those practices are sufficient to warrant the denomination “culture of death” involves not the *facts* but the *interpretation of the facts*. Whether they count as evidence of a “culture of death” depends upon what one regards as an evil act, a determination that depends, in turn, on one’s philosophical outlook. For example, a core principle of the utilitarian ethic is that no act is moral or immoral in itself but only in its consequences; accordingly, the goal of action is to produce a balance of benefits over harms. This principle permits utilitarians to argue that, on the contrary, abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia can be beneficial and moral: “When the death of a disabled infant will lead to the birth of another infant with better prospects of a happy life, the total amount of happiness will be greater if the disabled infant is killed. The loss of happy life for the first infant is outweighed by the gain of a happier life for the second. Therefore, if killing the hemophiliac infant has no adverse effect on others, it would, according to the total view, be right to kill him.”¹⁰

The distinction between the *facts* and the *interpretation of the facts* provides an acceptable occasion for stating the obvious. A culture that had death as its consciously pursued ideal would be an absurdity, for if it were successful, it would also soon be extinct. Clearly, any culture that matches what John Paul II meant by “culture of death” is one that promotes abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia, but only as a means to what it construes as a better life overall for its population. The vampire kills so that she herself might live. As for achieving a better life, the crucial question is, by what criteria does one determine whether “killing the hemophiliac infant has no adverse effect on others”?

Thus anyone arguing that a culture of death does indeed exist must establish three things. The first is that the society in question engages in the deliberate killing of innocent human beings. The second is that the justifications for abortion and euthanasia exert a dominating influence on

9. John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life* (New York: Times Books, 1995), pp. 7–8.

10. Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), p. 186.

the defining institutions of the society (i.e., the legal, political, scientific, medical, educational, etc.). The third is that there is only one correct interpretation of the facts of abortion and euthanasia: the deliberate killing of innocent human beings is never morally justifiable, and, accordingly, induced abortion and euthanasia, insofar as these procedures deliberately kill innocent human beings, are grave moral evils that strike fatal blows against civilized society.

John Paul II and the “Culture of Death”

How does John Paul II’s attribution of the term “culture of death” to liberal democracy meet these three criteria? Regarding the first criterion—that the society in question engages in the deliberate killing of innocent human beings—the pope takes it as a forgone conclusion that induced abortion is the deliberate killing of an innocent human being inasmuch as scientific data, not to mention Church teaching, support that position. But his condemnations of the deliberate killing of the innocent are frequently based on premises of religious belief, such as that God created human beings in his own image and that he alone is the master of life and death.¹¹ At the same time, he also claims that the immorality of such killing, as in abortion and euthanasia, is validated by natural reason.¹² Both premises collide with the belief of a growing number of advocates of abortion, euthanasia, and even infanticide, that homicide is not a moral issue. Thus, it would be well at the outset to clarify his view of the relation between religious faith and reason.

In the tradition of the Scholastic Doctors, John Paul II held that theology is the highest form of knowledge: religious faith furnishes the human mind with knowledge that it cannot get by natural reason, and without it, “the mystery of personal existence remains an insoluble riddle. Where might the human being seek the answer to dramatic questions such as pain, the suffering of the innocent and death, if not in the light streaming from Christ’s passion, death and resurrection?”¹³ But reason and faith need each other; separating them reduces the human capacity to know themselves, the world, and God.¹⁴ The truths of faith cannot collide with the truths of philosophy, because the God who created the natural world—the source of knowledge for philosophy—is the same God who

11. John Paul II, *Faith and Reason* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1998), pp. 97–98.

12. John Paul II, *Splendor of Truth* (Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, 1993), pp. 105–6.

13. John Paul II, *Faith and Reason*, p. 21.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

reveals divine truths to humans. Thus there is a unity of truth made possible by philosophy and theology, reason and faith, together.¹⁵

Although Thomistic philosophy has been the traditionally supported philosophy in the Catholic Church, the Church endorses no particular philosophy as its own. Philosophy must retain its autonomy in order to be faithful to itself. Theology and philosophy have different criteria of truth.¹⁶ The criterion of truth for philosophy, as is the case with all branches of natural knowledge, is the evidence of the object. For example, the criterion of truth for the statement “Salt dissolves in water” is the observation of salt being poured into water; the criterion of truth for the statement that human beings are rational animals is the observation of human behavior. The criterion of truth for a statement based on faith is not the evidence of the object, but the veracity of the one revealing it, God. For example, it is in principle impossible, whether by philosophy or science, to prove or disprove the biblical claim that the world was created and is therefore not eternal. Science can determine the age of the universe on the basis, say, of the rate of decomposition of carbon-14 found in fossils and rocks, but that cannot resolve whether it had a beginning, because there is nothing in the concept of age that implies a beginning. It will not do to appeal to the “Big Bang” theory in order to show that the universe had a beginning, because that hypothesis assumes the preexistence of matter and energy. Thus to hold that God created the world when there was nothing before it, is to accept it as true by faith. Nevertheless, given that philosophy searches for truth in the natural order, to be consistent with itself, it must remain open, “at least implicitly,” to the supernatural.¹⁷ It is clear that what one holds to be true by religious faith cannot be presented as philosophically or scientifically true; but at the same time one who believes a faith proposition to be true cannot simultaneously accept as true a philosophical or scientific proposition that contradicts it.¹⁸

Second, the late pope’s philosophical presuppositions are also important for understanding the positions he takes with regard to the “culture of death.” This is especially so because he defends a natural law ethics, maintaining that the ethical principles that prohibit the deliberate killing of innocent persons, and *a fortiori* prohibit abortion and euthanasia, apply

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 47–48.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

18. *Pace* the Latin Averroists in the Medieval and Renaissance periods, who subscribed to the “double truth” theory.

always and everywhere and can be known by all peoples through unaided reason.¹⁹ This version of the natural law differs crucially from deductive versions, such as Leibnizian innatism or those proffered by Puffendorf or Grotius, whereby universal moral laws are deduced, after the manner of geometry, from a pure idea that is supposedly self-evident: “Man is a being that seeks happiness” or “Man is a being that seeks to live in society.” Instead the version of natural law to which John Paul II subscribes maintains that humans are born with no moral knowledge but instead learn it through historical and social experience, as that experience reveals with increasing clarity the nature and finalities of the human person. Actions are moral or immoral depending on whether they facilitate or frustrate those finalities.

Epistemological representationalists and nominalists can be expected to challenge the claim that objective moral rules can be inferred from a knowledge of human nature on the grounds that knowledge of the way things really are is impossible. But John Paul’s writings show that in metaphysics and epistemology, he is a moderate realist in the tradition of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. Accordingly, he holds that the world exists independently of our knowledge of it; that we can attain an objective knowledge of the things that compose the world, not perfectly or completely, but in their essential being; and that from that knowledge we can derive objective rules of conduct that reason can grasp on its own.²⁰ On that basis he rejects eclecticism, scientism, pragmatism, and nihilism, all of which deny the meaningfulness of being and consequently deny truth as the indispensable ground of freedom.²¹ Though influenced by the German phenomenologist Max Scheler, John Paul II claimed that the influence extends only so far as Scheler’s phenomenological method—especially as a phenomenology of consciousness—and not his phenomenology itself, which the late pope criticized for its lack of metaphysical foundation.²² He identified his own philosophy as an “existential personalism,” examples of which appear in his discussions of sexual morality and the socio-economic conditions required for the person’s fulfill-

19. John Paul II, *Splendor of Truth*, pp. 68, 71–72; John Paul II, *Gospel of Life*, p. 128.

20. John Paul II, *Faith and Reason*, pp. 32–33, 103–4; John Paul II, *Splendor of Truth*, pp. 48–49.

21. John Paul II, *Faith and Reason*, pp. 108–11.

22. E.g., see Karol Wojtyła (John Paul II), “Metaphysics of Shame,” in *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H. T. Willetts (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981), pp. 174–93. See also Andrew N. Woznicki, *A Christian Humanism: Karol Wojtyła’s Existential Personalism* (New Britain, CT: Mariel Publications, 1980), pp. 9, 18–29.

ment.”²³ Thus, although it would be a distortion of his positions to eliminate his use of Catholic doctrine from any representation of his writings on the “culture of death,” his claim that natural reason can understand the threats from that culture make plain that he thinks his position on it can be evaluated by natural reason alone. In fact, natural reason is for him the coin of the world realm, transcending all national and cultural boundaries.²⁴

Regarding the first of the three criteria for a “culture of death” to obtain—that the society in question engages in the deliberate killing of innocent human beings—it would be useful to parse John Paul II’s criticism not only of abortion but contraception, laboratory reproduction, euthanasia, and the death penalty, all of which he takes as signs of the culture of death.

Abortion: Keeping with Catholic doctrine, the late pope’s criticism applies to *direct*, not *indirect*, abortion. An abortion is *direct* when killing the unborn is a necessary condition for avoiding some undesired consequence: one intends to kill the fetus as a necessary means to some end. Subscribing to a natural law ethic, the Church holds that evil—in this case, the direct abortion—may never be done to attain even a good end. An abortion is *indirect* when it is a foreseen but undesired side-effect of a procedure necessary to save the mother’s life, such as the removal of a cancerous uterus. The appellation *indirect* is used to indicate that the killing of the unborn is not a necessary condition for saving the woman’s life, since as the prescribed treatment for a cancerous organ, the uterus is removed whether or not she is pregnant.²⁵

Contraception: John Paul II insisted that the widespread practice of contraception cannot be overlooked as a contributor to the increasing

23. For examples, see his *Love and Responsibility; On Human Work* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1981); *The Apostolic Exhortation on the Family* (Collegeville, MN: The Human Life Center, 1984); and *Gospel of Life*.

24. John Paul II, *Gospel of Life*, p. 146.

25. “Double effect” is the operative principle. Besides prohibiting the *direct* commission of an evil, it requires that the good end be desired while the evil end, although *foreseen* as probable or even certain, not be desired, as well as that the desired good be proportionate to the foreseen evil consequence. One has a right and often even a duty to take reasonable means to preserve one’s life, and saving the woman’s life is a good proportionate to the indirect killing of the unborn. The principle of “double effect” is not to be confused with the utilitarian principle—the greatest good for the greatest number of people—since utilitarianism recognizes no acts that are intrinsically evil. For an illuminating account of the principle of double effect, see Thomas Cavanaugh, *Double Effect Reasoning: Doing Good and Avoiding Evil* (Clarendon: Oxford UP, forthcoming).

practice of abortion, although he acknowledged they are two different “moral evils”: contraception, as the term indicates, prevents the possibility of conception; abortion destroys a life already conceived. However, the pope cited two considerations that reveal a powerful connection between them. The first is pharmaceutical. The fact that chemical and vaccine abortifacients as well as intrauterine devices are distributed as easily as contraceptive pills tends to blur their difference in the public’s mind.²⁶ The second is psychological. The contraceptive society reinforces a “self-centered concept of freedom” that recoils from procreation as a threat to personal fulfillment. The life that might result from sexual intercourse becomes an enemy against which abortion is the only response.²⁷ In answer to the claim that the promotion of contraception will reduce the incidence of abortion, John Paul II replied that abortion rates are highest in countries critical of the Church’s teaching on contraception.²⁸

Artificial Reproduction: John Paul II’s reasoning for pronouncing artificial insemination, *in vitro* fertilization, and cloning to be immoral is threefold.²⁹ First, they separate “procreation from the fully human context of the conjugal act”; second, *in vitro* fertilization has a high failure rate,

26. John Paul II, *Gospel of Life*, p. 22.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 23. John Paul II’s condemnation of contraception as “immoral” does not depend on its dynamism toward abortion, as in the above arguments, which he advances in order to show how contraception is linked to the “culture of death.” Rather his argument against contraception has a twofold source: the first is the Catholic Church’s traditional claim that that practice frustrates the natural end of sexual intercourse, which is the openness to procreation; the second is based on his philosophy of personalism, which employs a variant of Kant’s second formulation of the Categorical Imperative, “Whenever a person is the object of your activity, remember that you may not treat that person as only the means to an end, as an instrument, but must allow for the fact that he or she, too, has, or at least should have, distinct personal ends.” To obviate the possibility of one partner becoming a mere means for the selfish end of the other—the woman for the man or the man for the woman—the couple must share the same end: “Such an end, where marriage is concerned, is procreation, the future generation, a family, and, at the same time, the continual ripening of the relationship between two people in all areas of activity which conjugal life includes.” Keeping the sex act open to procreation keeps the mutual respect of husband and wife as persons on an objective plane, since the goal is objective. Sex for pleasure alone, even when there is concern for the spouse’s pleasure, leaves the relationship in constant jeopardy of one using the other as a mere means to an end insofar as pleasure is by nature a subjective desire. John Paul II, *Love and Responsibility*, pp. 25–39. William E. May argues that contraception has a direct causal connection with the “culture of death.” See William E. May, “Contraception, Gateway to the ‘Culture of Death,’” *Faith* 31:4 (2001): 7–15.

29. Only after *The Gospel of Life* was published did human cloning of embryo stem-cells become an issue.

not only in fertilization but also in the embryo's development, in which case, it must be destroyed; third, spare embryos are either destroyed or used for research, which "reduces human life to the level of simple 'biological material' to be freely disposed of."³⁰ He observed that prenatal diagnosis is not morally objectionable in itself, since the procedure can be used for the early detection of illnesses or malformations in order to prepare for appropriate treatment and care when the child is born. But he added that the use of prenatal diagnosis to determine whether the fetus is to be aborted is immoral and is only a step away from outright infanticide, which is now being considered as an option for dealing with sickly babies. That, he warned, is a return to barbarism.³¹

Euthanasia: John Paul II called euthanasia "one of the more alarming symptoms of the culture of death," but he does not have in mind cases of withholding or withdrawing extraordinary (disproportionate) means of treatment from patients³² He writes: "*Euthanasia in the strict sense* is understood to be an action or omission which of itself and by intention causes death, with the purpose of eliminating all suffering. Euthanasia's terms of reference, therefore, are to be found in the intention of the will and in the methods used."³³ Here, as with abortion, the principle of "double effect" obtains. What John Paul II condemns is deliberately intending the patient's death, either by directly killing him or her or by deliberately withholding ordinary (proportionate) means treatment. Treatment is ordinary when it is therapeutic and available, and when it does not place an unreasonable financial or emotional burden on the patient or the family. Absent any one of these three conditions, the treatment comes under the heading of *extraordinary means*, and no obligation exists to employ them. The pope observed that euthanasia can be a compassionate, albeit misguided, response to suffering, usually in a secular setting where death and especially suffering may seem unintelligible.³⁴

Death Penalty: If John Paul II regarded the death penalty as one of the crimes against life, he did not do so in the way that he regarded abortion and euthanasia to be such. The topic appears nowhere in the first chapter of *The Gospel of Life*, which is where he framed and critiqued the "culture of death" and the kinds of acts that cause it. Only in subsequent

30. John Paul II, *Gospel of Life*, p. 25.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

chapters, where he introduced his blueprint for establishing a “culture of life” in the world, did he see fit to bring in the death penalty and express his moral repugnance toward it, arguing that it ought “either to be abolished or substantially limited”—a position, he emphasized, that derives its rationale from the Biblical doctrine that God, not man, is the master of life and death.³⁵ Because the death penalty presupposes that the purpose of punishment is “to redress the disorder caused by the offense,” public officials must make the prudential decision on what constitutes appropriate redress for various offenses. Life imprisonment is a punishment proportionate to capital crimes. The pope’s only concession was to allow that State execution can only rarely, if at all, be justified, as when society has no means of protecting itself from a demonstrably violent person. This is a concession that applies to no industrialized society.³⁶ What his position does is justify execution by the state for self-defense, not punishment.

Regarding the second criterion—that the justification for abortion and euthanasia exerts a dominating influence on the defining institutions of society, to wit, the legal, political, scientific, medical, educational, and so on—John Paul II makes an important qualification. Although citing abortion, euthanasia, and artificial reproduction as evidence for the “culture of death,” he did not mean that they are in themselves sufficient to establish it. He included them in the category of “crimes and attacks against human life,” along with any kind of murder, genocide, or other violation of a person’s dignity, such as arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, mutilation, exploitation of women and children, etc.³⁷ The emergence of the “culture of death” had to await “new forms of attack on the dignity of the human being.” Scientific and technological advances, he wrote, have created “a new cultural climate” that confers on crimes against life an “even more sinister character than before.”³⁸

To show that this new climate is truly a profound change in the culture, John Paul II enumerated its features: (1) public opinion increasingly justifies abortion and euthanasia by appealing to individual freedom; (2) the demand that those procedures be exempt from punishment and instead have State authorization, so that what were traditionally crimes now become rights; (3) a disastrous deterioration of morals, caused by the fact that “Choices once unanimously considered criminal and rejected by

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 94–99.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 99–100.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

the common moral sense are gradually becoming morally acceptable”; (4) the support of the medical profession for abortion and euthanasia in contradiction to its ethos of healing and saving life; (5) the accompanying social conditioning of conscience renders the members of society increasingly incapable of discriminating good and evil in decisions pertaining to the “basic value of human life”; (6) the public acceptance of abortion and euthanasia violate the “kinship of flesh and blood,” because women kill their unborn children and children kill their parents; (7) the adoption of an ideology so that the claims of common moral sensibility, science, and ethics will not be present to point the finger of accusation.³⁹

The causes of the new cultural climate proceed from the existential and interpersonal to the philosophical and theological. The background for these causes is “the profound crisis of culture” that leads to skepticism with regard to the foundations of knowledge and ethics. The result is society’s inability to arrive at a clear understanding of the “meaning of man, the meaning of his rights and duties.”⁴⁰ The existential and interpersonal refer to social conditions that frequently leave individuals, couples, and families isolated from society in dealing with their problems. Add to this extreme poverty, the struggle to make ends meet, unbearable pain, violence (particularly against women), all of which sometimes demands heroic attempts to defend life.⁴¹ Although these forces explain to some degree the devaluation of human life, by themselves they lack the power to silence the human conscience, as is evidenced by the use of abstract medical terms to mask the reality that abortion and euthanasia destroy human life.⁴²

John Paul II identified three forces that comprise the larger—the philosophical and theological—explanations for the attacks on human life and dignity: (1) a “veritable structure of sin”: Today’s culture denies solidarity, often to the point of becoming a “veritable culture of death.” Powerful cultural, economic, and political forces drive this culture and are themselves driven by the worship of efficiency; (2) a “war of the powerful against the weak”: The poor, the weak, the sickly and deformed—in short, all those needing love and care—are viewed as intolerable burdens whose existence threatens the well-being of those who are better off and should accordingly be disposed of in one way or another; (3) the aforesaid causes

39. *Ibid.*, pp. 8–21 *passim*.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*, pp. 21–22.

produce a “conspiracy against life”: This conspiracy stretches beyond individuals in their personal, familial, and social relationships to the international level where it harms relations between peoples and States.⁴³ The pope’s reference to the international level concerns the neo-Malthusian programs to reduce Third World population by contraception, sterilization, and abortion, with methods that are often coercive in that they are accompanied by the threat of economic sanctions for failure to cooperate.⁴⁴

Taken together, this explains why John Paul II reserved the accusation “culture of death” for political societies that have legalized abortion and euthanasia. The genocidal policies of Nazi Germany, corrupted the nation’s institutions—the political, the legal, the medical, the educational, and so on. But this corruption was imposed from the top down: it was the result of tyranny. The constitutive reasons for the emergence of a “culture of death” in a democratic society results from internalizing the deliberate killing of the unborn and feeble by the absorption of such practices into its institutions of freedom and rights as well as into professions and family life.

But John Paul II was even more concerned with what he regarded as the changes in the foundational premises of culture, which inevitably corrupt its defining institutions. These he called the “roots” of the “attacks on life”: a “concept of subjectivity carried to an excess” and a “concept of freedom based on the isolated individual.”⁴⁵ However, he regarded these as penultimate causes; the ultimate and most important change is the “eclipse of the sense of God and man.”⁴⁶

The phrase “concept of subjectivity carried to an extreme” refers to what, at first blush, can fairly be called a Cartesian theory of personhood.⁴⁷ According to that theory, a being qualifies as a person who is capable of exercising cognitive faculties, the most important of which is self-awareness.⁴⁸ The ethical inference that some draw from this ontology is that, since only persons can be subjects of rights and since fetuses,

43. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

44. *Ibid.*, pp. 28–29.

45. *Ibid.*, pp. 33, 34.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

47. Rejecting Aristotle’s definition of man as a “rational animal” because it failed to meet the criteria of “clear and distinct” ideas, René Descartes concluded instead that “thinking substance” was the correct definition. René Descartes, *Meditations On First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies*, trans. John Cottingham (New York: Cambridge UP, 1996), 50–62.

infants, and adults whose cerebral cortex is irreparably damaged cannot meet the criteria of personhood, the latter are not subjects of rights, including the right to life—therefore, induced abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia in such cases violate no right to life and hence are not immoral.⁴⁹ Equally expendable are those dependent on others for their basic living and mobility, because autonomy, the capacity to run one's own life, is considered crucial to human dignity.⁵⁰ John Paul II wrote:

It is clear that on the basis of these presuppositions there is no place in the world for anyone who, like the unborn or the dying, is a weak element in the social structure, or for anyone who appears completely at the mercy of others and radically dependent on them, and can only communicate through the silent language of a profound sharing of affection. In this case it is force which becomes the criterion for choice and action in interpersonal relations and in social life. But this is the exact opposite of what a State ruled by law, as a community in which the “reasons of force” are replaced by the “force of reason,” historically confirm.⁵¹

A “completely individualistic concept of freedom” that glorifies the individual and rejects a human being's communal nature, puts the readiness to help others and service to society in contradiction to it. This is the “freedom of the ‘strong’ against the weak who have no choice but to submit.”⁵² It is clear that the late pope was a proponent of positive rather than negative freedom: freedom is not simply the absence of external restraint but rather the ability to do what one ought to do or to do what is worth while.⁵³ When freedom seeks to abandon authority and tradition, to disown its subservience to “objective and universal truth,” it inevitably

48. The *loci classici* for pro-abortion arguments based on this conception of personhood are Mary Ann Warren, “On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion,” *The Monist*, 57, no. 1 (1973): 43–61; and Michael Tooley, *Abortion and Infanticide* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1983).

49. See Joseph Fletcher, *To Live and Die: When, Why, and How* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1973), pp. 113–22.

50. For an argument advocating infanticide as a means to avoid burdening family members and society, see Helga Khuse and Peter Singer, *Should the Baby Live? The Problem of Handicapped Infants* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985). For an argument advocating voluntary euthanasia as a means to avoid burdening family members, see John Hardwig, “Is There a Duty to Die?” *Hastings Center Report*, 27, no. 2 (1997): 34–42.

51. John Paul II, *Gospel of Life*, pp. 33–34.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

53. For the distinction between negative and positive liberty, see Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958).

destroys itself and others. Personal and social life cannot exist without truth. Failing to base his choices on the objective universal truth of good and evil, the person is left with his subjectivity, changeable opinion, and even selfishness and caprice, as the basis of choice.⁵⁴

Accordingly, John Paul II claimed that this construal of freedom distorts what it means to be a social being, and in its extreme consequences leads to a denial of human nature.⁵⁵ If self-fulfillment requires unfettered autonomy, social disintegration inevitably follows since it is impossible to live with others without reducing one's own freedom; therefore, everyone else is seen as a threat to one's self-fulfillment. The only practical response is to construct a society in which everyone's autonomy is respected and everyone enjoys the maximum freedom. Common values and absolute truths binding on everyone are incompatible with such a response, and relativism remains the only outlook. "At that point, everything is negotiable, even the first of the fundamental rights, the right to life."⁵⁶ That corruption of the sense of a right must also dominate politics as well. The "sinister result" of relativism expresses itself in the practice of making the defensibility of the right to life a matter of democratic vote. Ironically, democracy thus contradicts its own principles by eviscerating the meaning of "right": whereas before it indicated a moral claim grounded in the "inviolable dignity of the person," it now becomes subject to the will of the stronger element in the State. Democracy thus starts down the path to totalitarianism.⁵⁷

The eclipse of the sense of God and man robs the human person of dignity by reducing him to a mere biological entity. It darkens conscience and distorts the understanding of human sexuality, and it leads to a materialistic view of the universe and a utilitarian standard of value.⁵⁸ This assessment of secularized culture parallels that dramatized by Dostoyevsky, through his characters Ivan Karamazov and Stavrogin: when man denies God, objective morality loses its rationale and he finally

54. John Paul II, *Gospel of Life*, pp. 34–35.

55. John Paul II, *Splendor of Truth*, p. 49.

56. John Paul II, *Gospel of Life*, pp. 35–36. This account seems identical to the dangers of which Hegel warned in *The Philosophy of Right*, where he traces the journey of freedom through "Abstract Right," "Morality," and "Ethical Life."

57. For a pragmatic defense of relativism as the basis of democratic society, see Richard Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," in *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991), 1:175–96.

58. John Paul II, *Gospel of Life*, pp. 38–39.

destroys himself by succumbing to the delusion that he himself is God.⁵⁹ The attempts of the European Union to form a purely secular state whose constitution systematically avoids use of the word “God” is doubtless an example of what John Paul II had in mind. But can one find meaning and value in a Godless universe? If there is a primary tension between pessimistic atheism (Camus) and optimistic atheism (Marx), it is over that question.⁶⁰

The above leaves no doubt that, in the eyes of John Paul II, liberal democracy’s acceptance of abortion and euthanasia has profoundly changed social institutions insofar as democracy has abandoned its commitment to protect the right to life in favor of totalitarian practices. The existence of objective truth is denied, and the understanding—and, indeed, the very existence—of God has become ambiguous, one major result of which is a growing reluctance to acknowledge the special dignity of the human person in nature.

Regarding the third criterion—that there is only one correct interpretation of the facts of abortion and euthanasia, which is that the deliberate killing of innocent human beings is never morally justifiable and, accordingly, that induced abortion and euthanasia, insofar as these procedures deliberately kill innocent human beings, are grave moral evils that strike fatal blows against civilized society—John Paul II argued that the afore-said cultural changes, as they manifested themselves in abortion and euthanasia, were destructive of the human person’s dignity and *a fortiori* democracy, for the following reasons:

First, the ambiguity surrounding the meaning of the human person, consequent to the ambiguity about God, leads to individualism, utilitarianism, and hedonism, not to mention rendering suffering unintelligible.⁶¹ The inability to make sense of human suffering confers on euthanasia the trappings of a humane response as well as fueling the Promethean delusion of taking charge over life and death.⁶² Within this cultural climate, the “body is no longer perceived as a properly personal reality, a sign and place of relations with others, with God, and with the world. It is reduced

59. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: The Heritage Press, 1949), p. 50; Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Possessed*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Dell Publishing, 1961), pp. 634–35.

60. For a recent attempt to defend optimistic atheism, see Erik J. Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005).

61. John Paul II, *Gospel of Life*, p. 41.

62. *Ibid.*, pp. 26–27.

to pure materiality; it is simply a complex of organs, functions, and energies to be used according to the sole criteria of pleasure and efficiency. Sexuality, too, is depersonalized and exploited.”⁶³

Second, the excessive valorization of subjectivity and an individualist assertion of freedom separates freedom from truth—or, put in other terms, creates a tension between freedom and law and ultimately between freedom and nature.⁶⁴

And third, democracy legalizes abortion and euthanasia, thereby surrendering its most cherished premise, the right to life. But it is impossible fully to grasp John Paul II’s critique of the “culture of death” apart from his “theology of the body.”

Vivere Viventibus Est Esse

As noted in the introduction to this essay, only the first of the four chapters that comprise *The Gospel of Life* is written under the rubric “culture of death”; the remaining three chapters are devoted to a proposal for a triumph throughout the world of a “culture of life.” It is under the latter rubric that John Paul II had recourse to his “theology of the body” as the context for a critique of the modern world that, for its originality and incisiveness, fully deserves to be called brilliant. Although the term “theology of the body” appears nowhere in his discussions of the “culture of death” or the “culture of life,” it is nonetheless the implicit context for the proper understanding of his critique of moral relativism and the excesses of subjectivity and freedom.⁶⁵

The theory of the human person that this theology entertains is traditionally known as a “moderate dualism.” It is dualistic because, unlike the monistic premise of materialism, which holds that humans engage in no activities that are not reducible to purely physical activities, moderate dualism holds that the human person is a unity of body and soul, which is to say, both a material and immaterial principle. Unlike the extreme dualism of Platonism, which holds that what makes the human person is an immaterial soul while the body is a prison to be escaped from, moderate dualism holds that a human being is an integral composite of body

63. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

64. *Ibid.*, pp. 34–35; John Paul II, *Splendor of Truth*, pp. 62–64.

65. John Paul II introduced the term “theology of the body” in his Wednesday lectures at the Vatican, which he began in the 1980s. The lectures have since been published as a collection: John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997).

and soul. Although the present discussion is under the rubric of the “*theology* of the body,” the “*philosophy* of the body” is also an appropriate title, since the arguments advanced by the major dualists—Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Descartes—are philosophical insofar as they are based on natural reason’s interpretation of experience: the immateriality of the soul is the only sufficient explanation for the distinctively human operations of knowing, choosing, and loving.⁶⁶ If, as the moderate dualists maintain, body and soul combine to produce one unified reality, it follows that there can be no sensation without intellection and no intellection without sensation. In short, the body is as much a part of the human person as is the soul.

This ontology of the human person furnishes the basis for John Paul II’s defense of the natural law as an answer to relativism. The natural law expresses itself through human nature as that nature strives for fulfillment through its spontaneous inclinations: “[T]he natural law involves universality. Inasmuch as it is inscribed in the rational nature of the person, it makes itself felt to all beings endowed with reason and living in history. In order to perfect himself in his specific order, the person must do good and avoid evil.”⁶⁷ “Good” and “evil,” as used here, are not emotive terms, nor do they refer to concepts that lack any corresponding reality; rather the criteria for good and evil actions are the spontaneous inclinations of human nature, which reveal that the person must “be concerned for the transmission and preservation of life, refine and develop the riches of the material world, cultivate social life, seek truth, practice good, and contemplate beauty.”⁶⁸ This is not to say that the moral principles indicated by the inclinations are immediately evident, let alone understood. That kind of perception and understanding requires a progressively deeper understanding of the human person’s nature, which in turn requires social and historical experience. The pope’s philosophy of personalism manifests itself in his defense of the natural law. He does not base the obligation to preserve human life solely on the traditional Aristotelian-Thomistic doctrine of the spontaneous inclination to preserve one’s own life, but also on “the dignity proper to the human person.”⁶⁹ Because all men and women have the same human nature, he infers that

66. E.g., see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981), 1:76.1.

67. John Paul II, *Splendor of Truth*, pp. 68–69.

68. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

ethical principles are universal and absolute, and thus transcend all cultural and historical boundaries.⁷⁰

John Paul II insisted that the universality and absoluteness of natural law precepts are compatible with the uniqueness of the person and individual conscience: “These universal and permanent laws correspond to things known by practical reason and are applied to particular acts through the judgment of conscience.”⁷¹ Having understood that the given ethical principle is true, the acting person appropriates it to himself and acts according to it.⁷² This conception of the personal appropriation of universal moral principles is as different as night and day from the “concept of subjectivity carried to an extreme” that John Paul II criticizes. Whereas the theory of natural law he advanced expresses itself bodily, the affirmation of subjectivity as the sole locus of personhood denies the relevance of the body and *a fortiori* of human nature.

Although John Paul II did not use the label “Gnosticism” with regard to the latter view, its Gnostic overtones are striking. The Gnostics were generally antinomian insofar as they regarded matter as the source of all chaos and evil. Physical nature was accordingly to be overcome, and no principles for ethical conduct could be derived from it.⁷³ Subjectivity carried to the extreme of being the determinant of truth and right action, coupled with the rejection of the body as a source of moral standards, parallels the Gnostic belief that the individual soul itself was the person and the body intrinsically chaotic. There are, to be sure, important differences between the contemporary devaluation of the body and classic Gnosticism. For example, Plato’s rejection of physical nature as chaotic did not leave him bereft of objective standards of truth and virtue, since the rejection was accompanied by a trust in the immutable perfection of the immaterial Forms—which, he argued, were the absolute, universal

70. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 69, 70. Practical reason, as used here, differs from Kant’s understanding of practical and theoretical reason as dichotomized; instead it forms a continuum with speculative reason.

72. The application of the correct ethical principle in the concrete situation requires a special virtue, *phronesis*, as Aristotle argued in book 6 of *Nicomachean Ethics*. *Phronesis* is variously interpreted in English as “practical intelligence” or “practical understanding.” The modern understanding of *prudence* has connotations that render it quite an unsuitable translation. For an insightful explication of ethical decision in the concrete situation, see Yves R. Simon, *A Critique of Moral Knowledge*, trans. Ralph McInerny (New York: Fordham UP, 2002).

73. Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), pp. 46–47.

standards of all truth, beauty, and goodness.⁷⁴ In contrast, the contemporary skepticism about the capacity of material nature to supply such standards leaves no alternative but utilitarianism and majority rule. Nevertheless, Gnosticism casts a shadow long enough to cover a view that points to self-awareness as the standard of personhood and rejects the body as a source of moral standards. If that is not Gnosticism *de jure*, it is arguably Gnosticism *de facto*.

John Paul II pointed to the change in the conception of nature as a principal cause for the perceived tension between freedom and nature.⁷⁵ Some moralists accordingly see material and biological nature as an obstruction that must be overcome in the name of freedom. One response is to view nature as material to be transformed and dominated by freedom because it is perceived as a limitation and denial of freedom. Others see nature as the object of the ceaseless exercise of human power, as the way to establish economic, cultural, social, and moral values: “Nature would thus come to mean everything found in man and the world apart from freedom.” That would be a construal of nature that included the human body, its constituent parts, and its functions. Opposed to all this would be whatever is constructed: “culture,” seen as the product of freedom: “Human nature, understood in this way, could be reduced to and treated as a readily available biological or social material. This ultimately means making freedom self-defining and a phenomenon creative of itself and its values. Indeed, when all is said and done man would not even have a nature; he would be his own personal life-project. Man would be nothing more than his own freedom!”⁷⁶ The most common philosophical expression of this disconnect between nature and the self is doubtless the *Is/Ought* problem: how to derive an *ought* from an *is*, or how to derive *prescriptive* statements (e.g., “You ought always to tell the truth”) from *descriptive* statements (e.g., “The human person is a being that seeks meaning” or “Fire is hot”).

All of which returns the discussion to the distinction drawn earlier between the *facts* and the *interpretation of the facts* and to the question raised alongside this distinction: By what criterion does one determine whether “killing the hemophiliac has no adverse effect on others?” The answer is to be found in John Paul II’s gloss on the commandment “You shall not kill.”

74. See Plato *Phaedo* 65c–66e; Plato *Symposium* 208d–212a.

75. John Paul II, *Splendor of Truth*, p. 62.

76. *Ibid.*, pp. 63–64.

The integral unity formed by body and soul in John Paul II's theology of the body calls attention to a reciprocal causality between abortion and euthanasia, on the one hand, and the other injustices afflicting mankind, on the other. Without respect for human life as a whole, it becomes ever more difficult to respect the commandment "You shall not kill." Failure to appreciate the broader conditions for human flourishing—that is, a lack of commitment to the demands of social justice—erases the rationale for the commandment, giving it the guise of an externally imposed law. The inevitable next step is to look for its limits and to find ways to circumvent it. The remedy demands an integral view of human life: "Only when people are open to the fullness of the truth about God, man, and history will the words, 'You shall not kill,' shine forth once more as a good for man in himself and in his relations with others."⁷⁷ The strongly negative formulation, "You shall not kill," sets the extreme limit beyond which human action may not go. Implicit in this negativity, however, lies the encouragement for "a positive attitude of respect for life," and impulsion to promote life and, increasingly, to live by a love that both gives and serves. The unfolding of this in the Old Testament prepared for the proclamations of Jesus that "the commandment to love one's neighbor is like the commandment to love God; 'on these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.'"⁷⁸

Nevertheless, the negative formulation, "You shall not kill," must not be violated since it makes clear that the right of the innocent to life is the bedrock of all social justice.⁷⁹ All of which explains why John Paul II so vigorously, unqualifiedly, and unapologetically zeroed in on induced abortion and euthanasia in his critique of liberal democracy. By exceeding the limits set down in the commandment "You shall not kill," the direct killing of innocent human beings robs the claims of social justice for all men and women of their rationale. The importance of coining the term "culture of death" could not be any clearer: with the approval of public opinion, the courts and the legislators for abortion and euthanasia, common opinion, law, and medical practice aid and abet policies and procedures inimical to a "culture of life" and hence to human progress.

Within the context of democratic society, John Paul II connects the significance of the negative commandment "You shall not kill" with freedom. "You shall not kill" sets the boundary line beneath which a

77. John Paul II, *Gospel of Life*, p. 85.

78. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

79. *Ibid.*, pp. 96–97.

human must not exercise his freedom. By citing Augustine's statement that the beginning of freedom is to be free from crimes like murder and adultery, the late pope tells the reader once more that he subscribes to the positive conception of freedom as choosing to do what one ought to do.⁸⁰ The boundaries set by the negative commandment direct our sights and energies to the positive principle implied in it, which is the start of true freedom: "In this way we exercise our responsibility towards the persons entrusted to us, and we show, in deeds and in truth, our gratitude to God for the great gift of life."⁸¹ Everyone is responsible for observing and implementing God's command that all human life be respected, protected, and enriched.

The commandment "You shall not kill," along with its positive implications, shows the integral nature of the human person and thus the correct meaning of "life" for a human being. This is the ontological connection between "You shall not kill," on the one hand, and social justice and the human community, on the other. Callousness and even indifference toward the plight of one's fellow humans diminishes the perceived value of human life, gradually masking the horror and moral outrage of willfully killing innocent people. As the late pope observed, it can even seem like the humane and compassionate thing to do. Peter Singer's claim that deliberately killing a hemophiliac baby need not adversely affect society is consistent with his materialist ontology, which acknowledges nothing sacred about life, including human life.⁸² But, as far as John Paul II was concerned, the deliberate killing of an innocent human being is *in itself* an adverse effect, for its justification by the democratic State contradicts its commitment to protect human life. Conversely, the ontology that accompanies the "culture of death" means that if society can deliberately kill innocent human beings, then surely it can, with the same moral impunity, exploit the poor and ignore the plight of the indigent ill. And given the dissociation of the person and his body implied in contemporary truncated Gnosticism, physical death must lose its full horror, since it is no longer viewed as part of the person.

As John Paul II pointed out, when freedom is identified solely with the fulfillment of subjective desire, it is only the practical necessities of living in society that lead the individual to respect the rights of others by

80. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

81. *Ibid.*, pp. 138–39.

82. Peter Singer, *Unsanctifying Human Life: Essays on Ethics*, ed. Helga Kuhse, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002).

curbing his own desires for freedom. Areas of individual assertion are accordingly demarcated by consensus. One must always be ginger about acting in ways that interfere, or threaten to interfere, with the desires of others, for they can be expected to repay in kind. Because the unborn, the newborn, the infirm, and the elderly do not pose any threats of retaliation, they have thus become fair game for individual self-assertion, victims in what the pope called “the war of the strong against the weak.” But in a Godless universe where material things have no other meaning and purpose than what man imposes on them, abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia offer the appearance of benefits to society. To reiterate the words of Peter Singer, “[I]f killing the hemophiliac infant has no adverse effect on others, it would, according to the total view, be right to kill him.”⁸³ But equally, according to the total view, the logic of tit-for-tat must be paid its due. Killing an innocent human being for the good of the many allows for variations. In the “Iron Curtain” countries, individuals who entertained opinions judged harmful to the nation were executed. And just as the surgeon removes a diseased organ from the individual’s body for the good of the entire organism, so the execution of a dissident was called “a social surgery” since it was beneficial according to the total view.

The Interpretation of the Facts

As noted in this essay’s introduction, the evidence that the late pope cites to support the claim that there is a “culture of death”—abortion, euthanasia, and in vitro fertilization—are in themselves facts that nobody would deny. But whereas John Paul II interprets them as destructive of human dignity, rights, and democracy, others deny that they are destructive in principle, arguing instead that allowing women reproductive freedom, legalizing the infanticide of badly deformed or retarded infants, and permitting both men and women the freedom to decide when to end their own lives, promotes respect for human dignity and rights as well as enhances democratic values. There is no denial that these are acts of deliberate killing. Can the deliberate killing of the innocent be justified? Can it enhance human dignity and promote democratic values?

The literature on the morality of induced abortion is vast, but to establish the claim that the liberalization of abortion laws and its subsequent widespread practice show that the promotion of abortion betrays the

83. Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), p. 186.

willingness to kill innocent human beings, it is enough to take an aerial view. The basic consideration in the abortion debate concerns the ontological status of the fetus: Is it a human being or not? Is it a person or not? For some advocates of abortion-on-request, however, such questions are not decisive because they either maintain that other values, such as a woman's right over her own body, trump the right to life of the unborn, or that homicide is not in itself a moral category.⁸⁴ The latter reason is advanced by utilitarians, for whom the morality of any act is determined by the extent to which it adds to the overall good of society. If one is a consistent act utilitarian—and few have the stomach for it—then one will agree that lynching an innocent man to prevent a town riot in which lives may be lost is justifiable.⁸⁵

To establish that there is a “culture of death” in our democracies, including the United States, it is sufficient to dwell on the following.

First, the science of embryology states that from the moment of conception, a new individual human being comes into existence. There is no known instance where two members of the same species procreate a member of another species. If the product of a human father and a human mother is not a human being, then what is it? What about the developmentalist argument? It holds that the conceived being becomes a human being only after the first few weeks of gestation, either when God imbues it with a human soul or when it naturally reaches a specific stage of development. On the contrary, since no constituent element is added to a fetus after conception, if it is not a human being at t_1 , how can it be a human being at t_2 ? When God imbues it with a soul? Granting, for the sake of argument, that ensoulment requires divine intervention, how does one tell when this occurs? The conclusion here is that it is at least solidly probable that an individual human being exists from the moment of conception. But to deliberately kill an embryo or fetus on the premise that it is *probably not* a human being or that one *cannot be sure* that it is a human being implies a willingness to kill an innocent human being. But one does not

84. For a pro-abortion argument that claims no dependence for its validity on whether the fetus is a human being, see Judith Jarvis Thomson, “A Defense of Abortion,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1971): 47–66; for pro-abortion arguments that admit that the fetus is a human being, see Sally Markowitz, “A Feminist Defense of Abortion,” *Social Theory and Practice*, 16 (1990): 1–17; Naomi Wolf, “Our Bodies, Our Souls,” *The New Republic*, October 16, 1995, pp. 26–35.

85. For an example of a consistent act utilitarian, see J. J. Smart, “Utilitarianism,” in *Ethics for Modern Life*, 5th ed., ed. Raziel Abelson and Marie-Louise Friquegnon (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), pp. 60–70.

play lightly with the things one prizes. Any hunter who fired his rifle into a clump of bushes on the assumption that a deer caused its branches to shake, only to find that he had killed another hunter, would be held liable under the law. If he could not be sure of what caused the branches to shake, why did he shoot into the clump of bushes when it was probable, especially during deer-hunting season, that he was shooting another hunter? What are the odds that the conceptus of a human father and a human mother is a human being? A variation of the argument that the fetus only *develops* into a human being is that although it may be a *human being* from conception, it only becomes a *person* when it is able to function as such; it must be aware of its own existence and desire to remain in existence. There is no evidence that it exercises those functions until some time during infancy. But since only persons are moral entities, only persons can claim a right to life. Therefore, killing a fetus or an early-stage infant violates no right to life, does not frustrate any desire to remain in existence, and is accordingly morally justifiable.

This argument goes beyond the evidence by confusing the order of discovery with the order of reality. In the order of discovery, it is the way a being functions that allows us to infer what it is: *operatio sequitur esse*. But in the order of reality, substance is prior to function. To be sure, self-awareness, the desire to remain in existence, along with rational activity, indicate the existence of a person. Since, however, these are functions *of a person*, it does not follow that the absence of the functions implies the absence of the substance. It is reasonable to assume that a person is present from the moment of conception and that the aforementioned functions of a person have yet to unfold; it is reasonable that, in the early stages of life, it is natural for human persons have the appearance and stage of development that they in fact have.

Thus, any claim that it is probable that the fetus is not a human being or not a person must face the complement that, by definition of “probable,” it is also probable that from conception on, a human person is present. That means that the defense of induced abortion implies the willingness deliberately to kill an innocent human being. The legalization of abortion, especially abortion on request, bespeaks the devaluation of the dignity of the human person, for again, we do not play lightly with the things we prize.

Second, abortion when the pregnancy is caused by rape comes under the heading of “hard cases” and calls upon our humanitarian impulses. We

are asked to reflect on the anguish suffered by a woman who must carry to term a child produced by rape. What is to be considered here is the victim's response to her circumstances for the next nine months and beyond. Now there are some women who choose to carry the child of a rapist to term, some of whom put the child up for adoption while others choose to keep it. Even if they represent a miniscule number of women impregnated by rape, their choice of carrying the baby to term shows that the issue is the woman's response to the pregnancy. That being so, it follows that any woman pregnant by consensual sex who suffers the same level of anguish at the prospect of an unwanted child has the same moral entitlement to abortion. One might object that she shouldn't feel such anguish; after all she freely entered into the sexual act and should therefore accept responsibility for the pregnancy. But if a woman feels anguish over her pregnancy, she feels anguish whether or not she *should* feel that degree of anguish. In other words, the argument of abortion for a raped woman is the argument for all abortion.

Third, the humanitarian argument for abortion: the child will be unhappy because it is unwanted, because it will be raised in poverty, or because it will be sickly. This argument is an example of what John Paul II meant by the phrase "the freedom of the strong against the weak who have no choice but to submit." Its putative humanitarianism masks "an enormous intellectual arrogance" in that it justifies the deliberate killing of an innocent human being on the mere possibility that it will have an unhappy life.⁸⁶ Ludwig van Beethoven was the fifth child born to a syphilitic mother and an alcoholic father. While it is obvious that he was unhappy throughout his life, his contributions to the world of music are equally obvious. The Rev. Jesse Jackson was illegitimate, and his mother was urged to abort him. Even those who deplore his politics cannot deny the good he accomplished for the poor through his organization, "Operation PUSH."

Objectors to this line of argument will be quick to point out that these are only two examples when there is no telling how many of the fetuses aborted would have otherwise lived in misery. But what may seem to be the objection's strength is its weakness. There is, indeed, no way of telling, because induced abortion is killing and killing destroys *all* possi-

86. I am indebted to Jill Knight, then member of British Parliament, for this phrase, which she used in a lecture at the University of San Francisco in 1970, thereby calling my attention to the arrogance behind what I until then assumed was misplaced compassion.

bilities, both good and bad.⁸⁷ Life is the biological presupposition of all choice and endeavor, whether good or evil. To get an idea of the “enormous intellectual arrogance” that drives this pro-abortion argument, one has only to consider that the *liberal* approach would be to allow the child to be born—and if, as the years pass, he or she finds life too miserable to bear, suicide is always an option. The *illiberal* approach is to insist on deciding for the unborn that he or she would be better off never to have been born.

Degradation by valorization: “I could never support criminalizing abortion. When my mother was a college student, she had an abortion. If she had had the baby, she would have had to drop out of college and wouldn’t have been able to get a good job and be able to give me the good life she’s been able to give me, like this college education.” This proposed justification for abortion is common. The young student who presented it seems not to have realized that if he had been the fetus that the mother was not ready to bear, she would have aborted him on grounds that *he* was not wanted. She allowed him to be born because by then she was ready to have a child. He came at the right time. He was wanted. But this is to assign value to a human being by valorization. Valorization is the term used by economists to indicate how commodities acquire value. Things have no value in themselves. A commodity on the market acquires value as the number of customers desiring to buy it increases; it loses value as that number decreases. Unlike mere things, the dignity of the human person is based on intrinsic worth. He or she possesses dignity whether anyone loves or hates, wants or does not want, him or her. That is the basis of natural rights. Rights are not due a human being because the State sees fit to confer them; rather they are due because of what he or she is by nature.

The social, legal, and political acceptance of induced abortion proclaims the eclipse of the dignity of the human person with the attendant rejection of the right to life of the innocent. This devaluation gains further evidence from the willingness of some apologists for abortion to admit that the fetus is a human being or that the argument justifying abortion does not depend on the ontological status of the fetus and the support for infanticide.

87. Don Marquis has argued, in a widely anthologized essay, that the immorality of abortion consists in its taking away the future of the fetus. Don Marquis, “Why Abortion is Immoral,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, 86 (1989): 183–202.

The practice of legal euthanasia reveals the same devaluation of human life. No better window through which to observe the practice can be found than in Holland. Active voluntary euthanasia has been allowed in that country at least since 1980, although it was not formally legalized until spring of 2002. In 1981 the Rotterdam Court set forth guidelines for the procedure, among them that “The patient must be conscious” and “The death request must be voluntary.”⁸⁸ The fact that physicians frequently failed to adhere to them exposes the dynamic that drives the movement from voluntary to involuntary euthanasia. In 1990, the Dutch government established a commission, headed by Attorney General Remmelink, to study euthanasia in Holland. The aim of the project was to gather data for a discussion about the feasibility of legalizing euthanasia. On September 10, 1991, the government published in two volumes the results of the official study, commonly known as the *Remmelink Report*. The report revealed that in 1990, 2,300 people were killed at their own request by active euthanasia.⁸⁹ But 1,040 people died from non-voluntary euthanasia—the physicians killed them without their consent.⁹⁰ In forty-five percent of the cases when hospitalized patients were involuntarily euthanized, the patients’ families were not informed that the physicians had deliberately killed them.⁹¹

In 1996, a second official report on euthanasia in Holland appeared, covering the period from 1991 to 1995. It revealed that since the time of the first report, the number of times that physicians had intentionally hastened death without the patient’s expressed desire had climbed from fifteen to almost twenty percent. During that same period, the incidence of voluntary euthanasia increased from 2,300 to more than 3,000, amounting to a thirty percent increase in five years. In 2003, a third report was published. Whereas the *Remmelink Report* indicated that in 1991 there were 1,040 cases of involuntary euthanasia, the third report indicated 900 cases, the same as indicated in the 1995 report. The problem, however, is that this number does not justify the inference that the rate of involuntary euthanasia has stabilized. Since only forty-one percent of the

88. Alexander Morgan Capron, “Euthanasia in the Netherlands: American Observations,” *Hastings Center Report*, 22, no. 2 (1992): 30–33.

89. P. J. van der Maas et al., *Euthanasia and Other Decisions Concerning the End of Life* (Amsterdam: Elsevier Science Publishers, 1992), 1:13.

90. Jan Remmelink et al., *Medical Decisions about the End of Life: Report of the Committee to Study the Medical Practice Concerning Euthanasia* (The Hague: SdU, 1991), 1:13 (referred to hereafter as the *Remmelink Report*).

91. *Remmelink Report*, 2:68.

physicians—less than half—reported their involvement with euthanasia, it is clear that there remains a large number of physicians practicing euthanasia about whose activities nothing is known.⁹²

The Dutch legalization of both euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide permits euthanasia for incompetent adults, which is by definition non-voluntary euthanasia. It also allows persons who are at least sixteen years of age to execute an advance “written statement containing a request for termination of life,” with which the physician may comply.⁹³ The document need not be based on any existing medical condition and may be written years before any condition is present. Teenagers between sixteen and eighteen years of age may request euthanasia or assisted suicide, in which case a parent or guardian must “have been involved in the decision process” but need not agree or approve. Children between twelve and sixteen may request and receive euthanasia or assisted suicide, in which case a parent or guardian must “agree with the termination of life or the assisted suicide.”⁹⁴ Recently, the Dutch parliament began deliberations on the legalization of infant euthanasia. Two leading advocates for legalization would include among the candidates for euthanasia infants who are not dependent on intensive medical treatment but for whom a very poor quality of life, associated with sustained suffering, is predicted. For example, a child with the most serious form of spina bifida will have an extremely poor quality of life, even after many operations. This group also includes infants who have survived thanks to intensive care but for whom it becomes clear, after intensive treatment has been completed, that the quality of life will be very poor and there is no hope of improvement.⁹⁵

The ongoing Dutch euthanasia program is a singular irony when one reflects on the attitude of the Dutch medical profession during the Nazi occupation. On September 19, 1941, Seiss-Inquart, the Reich Commissar for the Occupied Netherlands Territories, issued an order that required them to engage in euthanasia. The aim of this order was to align the Dutch physicians with the German medical program. When the physicians

92. Gerrit van der Wal, “Evaluation of the Notification Procedure for Physician-assisted Death in the Netherlands,” *New England Journal of Medicine*, 335 (1996): 1706–11.

93. Upper House of the States General, Holland, *Termination of Life on Request and Assisted Suicide (Review Procedures) Act*, Parliamentary Year 2000–2001, 26 691, no. 137, Amended legislative proposal, November 28, 2000.

94. Raymond Dennehy, “Physician-Assisted Suicide and Democracy,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 15 (2003): 105.

95. Eduard Verhagen and Peter Sauer, “The Groningen Protocol: Euthanasia in Severely Ill Newborns,” *New England Journal of Medicine*, 352 (2005): 960.

expressed their refusal to comply, the Reich Commissar threatened to revoke their licenses to practice medicine. The Dutch physicians responded by turning in their licenses, which forced the commissar to rescind his order.⁹⁶

John Paul II's rhetorical question could not be more trenchant: "Everyone's conscience rightly rejects those crimes against humanity of which our century has had such sad experience. But would these crimes cease to be crimes if, instead of being committed by unscrupulous tyrants, they were legitimated by popular consensus?"

96. Leo Alexander, "Medicine Under a Dictatorship," *Ethics and Medicine*, 3, no. 2 (1987): 26–33.