

Challenging the Language of the Culture of Death **William Brennan, Ph.D.**



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“Those whom we want out of the way must be aborted in words before it becomes permissible to abort them in deed.”

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In his latest encyclical, Pope John Paul II makes an eloquent plea for the creation of a culture of life to displace the ever-encroaching culture of death.¹ The language of the culture of death is an all-encompassing vocabulary of dehumanization directed against society's most vulnerable individuals, both before and after birth. It includes the language of contemporary society as well as past societies. The culture of death consists of two wars: a physical war and a verbal war. When applied to abortion, the war of words against the unborn took place in the minds and hearts of the perpetrators long before it was implemented in hospitals and abortion chambers. A perceptive way of putting this is described by Pulitzer Prize winning editorial page director Paul Greenberg of the *Arkansas Democrat Gazette* who said, “Those whom we want out of the way, must first be dehumanized... The least of these must be aborted in words before it becomes permissible to abort them in deed.”²

One way of analyzing the language that powers the culture of death is through the following, comprehensive set of dehumanizing classifications:

- Deficient Humans
- Subhuman/Nonhuman Entities
- Animal Metaphors
- Parasitic Creatures
- Diseases
- Inanimate Objects

- Waste Matter
- Nonpersons

Such degrading classifications furnish a framework for exposing the dark underbelly of name-calling spawned by the culture of death in two ways:

1. They highlight how extensively this dehumanizing rhetoric has taken over in contemporary society.
2. They reveal the alarming kinship between the words directed against today's most vulnerable victims and the words invoked to revile some of history's most oppressed groups.

The contemporary scene provides some idea of the widespread nature of this name-calling.

Deficient Human

In 1973 the U.S. Supreme Court declared that the unborn, at most, represented only the “potentiality of life.”³ In a 1977 court battle over the fate of Phillip Becker, a child with Downs Syndrome, Dr. Harry Hartzell testified that Phillip leads a life “I consider devoid of those qualities which give it human dignity.”⁴

Non-human

Amitai Etzioni, a leading sociologist, contends that “the fetus is subhuman and relatively close to a piece of tissue.”⁵ Joseph Fletcher, the founder of situation ethics, maintains that the child with Down's Syndrome is “a sadly non- or un- or subhuman creature.”⁶ Philosopher John Lachs called the hydrocephalic child not a human being but only “human forms” or “human-looking shapes.”⁷

Animals

An attending physician in a New York hospital characterized the movement by an aborted baby born alive as just “a reflexive response of a spinal animal.”⁸ Astronomer Carl Sagan compares the various phases of prenatal development to a worm, a reptile, and a pig.⁹ Biblical studies professor George Ball labels the newborn and those who are on respirators “animals” because they cannot engage in conscious management of life or its direction.¹⁰ Peter Singer reduces children with severe defects to a level lower than animals.¹¹

Parasitic Creature

Feminist Professor Rosalind Pollack Petchesky asserts that the “fetus is a parasite.”¹² Dr. Warren Hern compares the fetal placental unit to the “local invasion of a parasite.”¹³ A nurse in a hospital in the Midwest referred to a debilitated patient as “this parasite [that] is draining me and everyone else.”¹⁴

Disease

As early as 1967, Dr. Kenneth J. Ryan, who was on the most recent panel which gave sanction to experimenting on human embryos, said that unwanted pregnancy is a “disease with far reaching effects.”¹⁵ Planned Parenthood repeatedly refers to the “epidemic” of unwanted pregnancies.¹⁶ They never refer to the epidemic of promiscuous sex. In 1976, Dr. Willard Cates and colleagues presented a paper before the Planned Parenthood Physicians of America entitled, “Abortion as A Treatment for Unwanted Pregnancy: The Number

Two Sexually Transmitted Disease.” Dr. Cates identified gonorrhea as the number one venereal disease, with unwanted pregnancy in second place. Dr. Cates reassured his audience that abortion was 10 times more effective for treating the venereal “disease” of unwanted pregnancy than was penicillin for treating gonorrhea.¹⁷

Inanimate Object

A typical report on abortion in the medical literature never describes what is aborted as the mangled remains of a human being, but instead uses such terms as “material”, “abortion material”, “suction material”, “cellular material”, or “pregnancy products.” Feminist Rachael Wahlberg views the fetus as “a possession of the woman.”¹⁸ Patients in nursing homes are physically manipulated as if they are furniture and work objects.¹⁹⁸

Waste Matter

Reducing human beings to waste products places them at the very bottom of the subhuman scrap pile. In 1982, 16,500 aborted babies were found in a storage container outside of Los Angeles. The coroner assured the press that this was not evidence of foul play but merely the possibility of “health code” violations regarding the “disposal of medical waste.”²⁰ In 1980, Dr. Martti Kekomaki, a Finnish researcher declared, “An aborted baby is just garbage and that’s where it ends up. Why not make use of it for society?”²¹ At a forum on genetic engineering in 1987, Harper’s editor Lewis Lapham stated, the fetus is “a waste product: thousands of fetuses are discarded every day.”²² It is common practice in some hospitals to refer to debilitated patients as P.O.G.’s, an acronym for “pieces of garbage.”²³

Non-Person

Portraying unwanted humans as “nonpersons” constitutes the most devastating epithet of all because it alone has been enshrined into the law and a legal nonperson is an entity without basic rights. It is fast becoming the designation of choice for devaluing human beings both before and after birth. It has inaugurated a new litmus test for survival: no longer is one’s humanity sufficient to merit the right to life, one must also be a person. And the definition of personhood qualifying for survival is an increasingly elitist one where more and more individuals are relegated to the state of legal nonpersons without any rights. Roe v. Wade ushered in the modern era of nonpersonhood by defining preborn humans as legal nonpersons.²⁴

The Semantics of Oppression

Extensive documentation demonstrates that the degrading terminology of today ranks with the most extreme forms of the name-calling in the annals of inhumanity.

Furthermore, the framework of degrading categories provides a valuable perspective for comparing the language concocted today against both the born and unborn persons with the language fabricated against history’s most reviled groups. The groups chosen for comparison with today’s victims are some of the most oppressed on record: Women throughout history; Jews, Gypsies, asocials and the handicapped in the Third Reich; the victims of Soviet tyranny; African Americans before and after the Civil War; Native Americans on the frontier.

Those today who relegate the unborn to only potential life and the handicapped to lives not worth living, need to be informed that down through the ages women were consigned to the status of a defective and inferior

sex.²⁵ Jews and others in the Third Reich were portrayed as defective inferior lives, not worth living.²⁶ Peasants in the Soviet Union were depicted as backward, stupid individuals who were doomed to extinction.²⁷ Black people in the pre-Civil War American South were regarded as a subordinate and inferior class of beings incapable of self-government.²⁸ Native Americans were viewed as an inferior breed destined to disappear with the coming of white civilization.²⁹

When today's purveyors of degrading language define the unborn as fetal material and female property, and nursing home patients as work objects, they should be made aware that for centuries, women were considered to be merely property. Rape was defined in the law not as violence against the woman, but as trespass against another man's property.³⁰ The victims of Nazi genocide were handled as merchandise and material for shipment to death camps.³¹ Prisoners in the Soviet Gulag were processed as expendable raw material for death-inducing work projects.³² Slave owners regarded blacks as articles of property and merchandise for slave labor and public auction.³³ Native Americans have often been defined as anthropological specimens whose way of life belongs with that of other museum pieces.³⁴

The degrading terminology of today ranks with the most extreme forms of name-calling in the annals of inhumanity. These linguistic parallels are so alarming and so devastating to the contemporary anti-life mindset, that they are likely to be met with silence, disbelief, or dismissed as the gross fabrications of so-called anti-choice fanatics. Extensive documentation demonstrates that such degrading expressions are not manufactured by pro-life proponents, but comprise main stays in the lexicon of anti-life advocates.

The pervasive scope and remarkable similarities among the disparaging terms, both past and present, are strikingly evident in [the accompanying Table](#). The Table and supporting documentation can be found in my recently published book *Dehumanizing the Vulnerable: When Word Games Take Lives*.³⁵

Utilizing quotations from the Table, a compelling case can be made for challenging the demeaning language employed against today's most defenseless individuals. This language closely resembles the terminology directed against history's most reviled groups. For example, the designation "nonperson" indicates how this particular corruption of language leads to a profound perversion of law - the legalization of massive oppression. A Virginia Supreme Court decision in 1858 stated that "In the eyes of the law... the slave is not a person."³⁶ In 1881 George Canfield concluded in *The American Law Review* that "an Indian is not a person within the meaning of the Constitution."³⁷ A 1936 German Supreme Court decision "refused to recognize Jews... as persons in the legal sense."³⁸ A British voting rights case, decided in 1909, declared that "the statutory word 'person' did not in these circumstances include women."³⁹ The U.S. Supreme Court in *Roe vs. Wade*, ruled that "the word 'person', as used in the 14th Amendment, does not include the unborn"⁴⁰

In addition to the startling quotations included in the Table of demeaning classifications, the menacing image of degraded human beings as blood-sucking parasites needs to be highlighted. Writing in a 1990 issue of *Parade Magazine*, astronomer Carl Sagan maintained that "the fetus is a kind of parasite that destroys tissue and sucks blood from capillaries."⁴¹ In *Mein Kampf*, Adolf Hitler characterized Jews as "the typical parasite" that "squeezed and sucked... blood again and again from the masses."⁴² According to Lenin, parasitic kulaks "sucked the blood of the working people."⁴³

Several aspects of this disparaging language need to be repeatedly underscored. The draconian nature of the ideology beneath the dehumanizing terminology must be brought to public awareness. The ideology powering today's culture of death is best described as an elitist quality of life ethic which, in the practical order, translates to mean the quality of life for some at the expense of life for others.

A most revealing vision of this ideology appeared in an editorial entitled "A New Ethic for Medicine and

Society” in the September, 1970 issue of California Medicine.⁴⁴ The editorial proposes that in order to gain public acceptance of abortion, it is necessary to erode and destroy the Judeo-Christian ethic of equal and intrinsic value for all human beings and replace it with a quality of life ethic, where a relative value is placed upon human life.

The flagrant lies undergirding the degrading stereotypes need to be confronted. Massive oppression is founded on a reckless game of playing fast and loose with words resulting in the extreme corruption of language and thought. The California Medicine editorial acknowledged that a linguistic strategy of ‘semantic gymnastics’ (it’s their term, not mine) is necessary in order to obtain widespread recognition of abortion. One of the major principles underlying semantic gymnastics is “avoidance of the scientific fact, which everyone really knows, that human life begins at conception and is continuous whether intrauterine or extrauterine until death.” Furthermore, the editorial admits that extent of semantic gymnastics, required to rationalize abortion as something other than the taking of human life, is so extreme that it constitutes “a schizophrenic sort of subterfuge.” But it concludes that this schizophrenic sort of subterfuge is necessary because “while a new ethic is being accepted, the old one has not yet been rejected.”⁴⁵

Prestigious individuals should be challenged to renounce their unconscionable role in disseminating the dehumanizing rhetoric to a vast audience. The lies and deceptions spawned by this deadly game of verbal manipulation take on enhanced credibility when its most influential players are highly respected individuals. The California Medicine editorial supporting a policy of semantic gymnastics to justify dehumanizing and destroying preborn humans put it this way: “The very considerable semantic gymnastics, required to rationalize abortion as anything but taking a human life, would be ludicrous if they were not often put forth under *socially impeccable auspices*.”⁴⁶

Not too long ago anyone who went around calling human beings, either before or after birth, nonhumans, animals, parasites, diseases, objects, waste products, or nonpersons, would have been deemed deranged, to say the least. Now, however, when these same ludicrous expressions of semantic gymnastics are put forth under the socially impeccable auspices of organized medicine, academia, or the law, they suddenly are transformed into the new truth. The weakest and the most defenseless individuals have much more to fear from the relentless name-calling, issuing from society’s so-called “best and brightest”, than they ever have had from the occasional outbursts of epithets produced by mobs in the streets.

The disparaging rhetoric must be exposed as an insidious form of hate speech which breeds either outright revulsion toward the victims, or an alarming indifference regarding their plight. Ironically, when pro-lifers call abortion what it is - the destruction of human life before birth -, they are likely to be accused of resorting to hate speech which allegedly leads to the killing of the “abortion providers”. However, it is the abortion proponents’ resort to vilification of the unborn that has led to today’s massive war on human life before birth, and the escalating assaults on newborn infants, who are treated as postnatal discards. Today’s anti-life advocates cannot be allowed to continue getting away with this severe corruption of language and thought. They must be challenged on every possible occasion. In his essay, “Politics and the English Language”, George Orwell warned that we need to be constantly on guard against the invasion of our minds by ready-made phrases and slogans.⁴⁷ The tyrannical, thought-stifling world depicted in Orwell’s classic novel 1984 was a place where the heresy of heresies was common sense.⁴⁸ The first and most basic defense against today’s unrelenting totalitarian gibberish is likewise common sense. Orwell recommended sending the semantics of duplicity and other lumps of verbal refuse “into the dust bin” where they belong.⁴⁹ It is up to us to make sure that the same fate befalls the verbal trash produced by today’s anti-life semanticists.

It is instructive to recall Hans Christian Andersen’s fable about the Emperor’s New Clothes.⁵⁰ As the naked emperor gazed into the mirror, two dishonest tailors told him he was dressed in the finest robes. The entire

town turned out to see the emperor's new clothes. Even though he had nothing on at all, the crowd talked excitedly about the magnificence of his splendid garments. Everyone accepted the image, transmitted by words, over the images perceived by their very eyes. However, there stood in the crowd one young child untainted by the rhetoric. He shouted: "But he has nothing on!" Today's anti-life semanticists, like the deceitful tailors, have perpetuated the monumental hoax that growing segments of the population comprise lives devoid of humanity and value, even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. And the courts, the legal establishment, the medical elite, the megamedia and a significant portion of the public, like the emperor and the townspeople, accept this hoax at face value. Those in the pro-life movement are in much the same position as that child who put an end to all of the pretenses by announcing that the emperor has no clothes. Despite the eminence of those who disseminate the deceptive semantics, no matter how many people have been taken in by it, pro-lifers, like the young child, must proclaim clearly and repeatedly the naked truth that abortion, euthanasia, fetal research and other assaults are nothing less than atrocities directed against the most defenseless members of the human family and must be repudiated as totally unacceptable responses to the problems that plague contemporary society.

The purpose of studying history is not merely to learn about the past, but it is also to learn about the present from the past. The framework of degrading classifications furnishes an indispensable tool for better understanding of what happened then, and how it relates to what is happening now. Heightened awareness of these past and present linguistic parallels provides an essential perspective for recognizing and challenging today's assaults on human life before and after birth, as constituting an unconscionable repetition of some of history's most horrendous atrocities. As so aptly put by one philosopher, only when we draw conclusions from the past and apply them to the present, can there be hope for the future.

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