A Serious Christian Journal of Life and its Significance

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Verba Vitae

A Serious Christian Journal of Life and its Significance

Verba Vitae is committed to bringing the classical Christian tradition into conversation with life issues now confronting us. Modeling the reasoned *logos* of the theological tradition, *Verba Vitae* explores the truth-claims made by thinkers and examines the grounds upon which these assertions are made.

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Introducing *Verba Vitae* –
Life: Its Abundance and Scarcity

I

For all we know, life is unimaginably rare in the universe. We believe, in fact, that life likely only occurs on exoplanets, i.e., planets orbiting stars like the earth orbits the sun, and as I write today, we can confirm only 5,535 exoplanets.[1] Since we estimate that there are about two trillion ($2x10^{12}$) galaxies in the universe,[2] totaling perhaps two billion trillion ($2x10^{21}$) stars or so,[3] the ratio of confirmed exoplanets to stars is exceedingly small. It is worth remembering that while there could be billions of such planets, with some having life, we only know for certain that life exists on earth.

But what do we mean by life? Perhaps this definition is as good as any: "Life is a quality that distinguishes matter that has biological processes, such as signaling and self-sustaining processes, from matter that does not, and is defined descriptively by the capacity for homeostasis, organization, metabolism, growth, adaptation, response to stimuli and reproduction."[4] Notice that this definition only addresses the *floor* conditions for life. Human life is very much more complex than this, carrying with it, *inter alia*, intelligence, the capacity to create, consciousness, and self-consciousness. Furthermore, human life is characterized by such higher-level intentionalities as John believing that Patti knew of his intentions towards Molly. Clearly, humans have life in a very different way than amoebas.

While generations of science fiction writers have accustomed us to believe that the universe is teaming with life having intelligence, creativity, and self-consciousness, we have no evidence that such life exists, for despite decades of observations, we have never observed any intelligent signals coming from beyond our universe.[5] This result has been disappointing to many and wholly inexplicable to some.

In the summer of 1950, a casual conversation on the way to lunch between physicists Enrico Fermi, Edward Teller, Herbert York, and Emil Konopinski on the possibility of alien life produced a response from Fermi to the effect, "But where is everybody?" If the evolution to intelligent life on earth can be facilely explained and predicted, then there has surely been more than enough time for alien intelligent life to develop and populate not only our galaxy, but the entire universe. But there is no evidence of this. The discrepancy between what might be expected and what is observed has been dubbed the *Fermi Paradox*.[6]

Moreover, even if there were intelligent life in the universe, most of it would likely fall outside of our cosmic horizon and thus be causally isolated from us. While some might rejoice in the metaphysical presence of life that is wholly causally isolated from us, such celebration would surely go against the spirit of our times, for if any claim was ever in principle not falsifiable, it would be the claim that there is life that is forever causally cut off from us and *in principle* not amenable to empirical verification or falsification. Such a claim would be consistent with any way that the world might go.[7]

Howard Smith calls a thing for what it likely is: "Despite fervent imaginings and enthusiastic reassurances about ETI [extraterrestrial life], the indications are still that we are likely to be alone, presiding over our volume of the galaxy like inhabitants of a magnificent but remote island. Even after 100 generations, humanity might not have received a cosmic greeting or know whether one will ever arrive."[8] Playing on the notion of the *anthropic principle,* Smith writes:

> My feeling is that a *misanthropic principle* could also be applicable. I use this term to express the idea that the possible environments and biological opportunities in this apposite cosmos are so vast, varied and uncooperative (or hostile), either always or at some time during the roughly 3-to-4 billion years intelligent life requires to emerge, that it is unlikely for intelligence to form, thrive and survive easily. To recognize this conclusion is to have a renewed appreciation for our good fortune, and to acknowledge that life on Earth is precious and deserves supreme respect.[9]

While the "good fortune"—I would say blessedness—of intelligent life existing in the universe clearly is the case synchronically, its preciousness is even more pronounced when we consider the matter diachronically.

According to current cosmological theory, we are living at a very early stage of our universe, only 13.8 billion years after the Big Bang.[10] About three billion years from now, our galaxy could be swallowed up violently by the Andromeda galaxy,[11] and if life should survive this event, it likely won't survive the death of the stars themselves by the end of the Stellar Era one hundred trillion ($1x10^{14}$) years from T_0.

After the Stellar Era follows the Degenerate Era extending to ten trillion trillion trillion ($10x10^{36}$) years after the Big Bang. By then the stuff of stars will be collapsing back into black holes. The Black Hole Era will then extend ten thousand trillion trillion trillion trillion trillion trillion trillion trillion trillion ($10x10^{99}$) years after the Big Bang, a time where only black holes of widely varying masses will exist. Finally, the Dark Era shall dawn in which the denizens of the universe will be only the byproducts of black holes and protons. This will take us to well beyond $10x10^{101}$ years from the origin. If life should somehow exist until the end of the stars 10^{14}

years from now—this is highly unlikely, in my opinion—this means that the time of life in the universe compared to the total life of the universe will be 1/10.[87] Simply put, were the universe to exist only for a day, life would be inexorably extinguished in the first nanoseconds of that day.[12]

The seeming abundance of life on the earth tends to occlude the cosmic fact of its overwhelming scarcity. If there were intelligent life on the exoplanets, its existence would still be inconceivably rare, for it would last for only a fleeting instant in the life of the universe. Since we routinely assume the material equivalence of scarcity and preciousness from a cosmological point of view, we are forced to conclude that life is unimaginably *precious*.

It is fitting, I think, to highlight the cosmic preciousness of life in this first issue of *Verba Vitae*, an academic journal dedicated to exploring deeply the issues of life. We must understand the cosmic scarcity of that upon which we shall be reflecting, even while recognizing the seeming surfeit of intelligent life teaming around us.

This journal's articles will mainly deal with issues of life in the immediate context of human *life* on earth. There is a great deal here to discuss, particularly as we engage the fundamental issue of the *ontology* of life itself. What are the basic properties by virtue of which life is life and human life is human life? Does human life admit of degrees and, if so, is there an upper bound to life's total flourishing or abundance? How do and ought we *value* human life, particularly when the instantiation of human life conflicts with maximizing other supposed goods?

Articles in the journal, however, will stretch us to think clearly about other types of life as well, e.g., animal and machine life. As we reflect upon these matters, we will be seeking clarity on the nature and existence of intelligence-making properties, e.g., agency, action, intentionality and freedom.

It is important, I think, to state the presuppositions of this journal up front. "*Verba Vitae*" means "words of life," a phrase used by Peter in response to Jesus' question in John 6:69-70: "*Respondit ergo ei Simon Petrus Domine ad quem ibimus verba vitae aeternae habes et nos credidimus et cognovimus qui tu es Christus Filius Dei*"[13] ("Simon Peter answered Him: Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life and we have believed and known that you are the Christ, the Son of God.")

Many writing in our journal will share the general presupposition that Christian Scriptures and tradition have much to teach us about the nature of life and living it abundantly. Accordingly, we shall regularly in our reflections avert to Genesis 1:27: "*et creavit Deus hominem ad imaginem suam ad imaginem Dei creavit illum masculum et feminam creavit eos*" ("*and God created human beings to his own image and created them to the image of God male and female*").

This Genesis text proclaims that human beings are made in the image of God. We at *Verba Vitae* take this claim very seriously because it suggests a deep *discontinuity* between the intelligent life of human beings and other kinds of life. It suggests that human beings have life to such a greater degree, *or in so much more abundance,* than do other life forms, that human life is *sui generis*; it is, in fact, ontically *unique*.

Accordingly, we must ask what the *imago Dei* means for us today. What does Genesis 1:27 have to say to us in these days when we measure the time of creation in billions of years and the probable existence of the universe at over 10^{100} years? Finally, we might ask: If the *abundance* of human life is constituted in it being *in imago Dei*, then why is such abundance so overwhelmingly scarce in the universe in which we reside? *Why* should the pinnacle of creation be sidelined in our modest Milky Way galaxy, causally disconnected from most of what we assume there is?

While questions like these are the background for our investigations in *Verba Vitae,* they are meant merely to situate the journal's discussions within a larger context. The articles of *Verba Vitae,* we promise, will be both graspable and relevant to our lives today, dealing with issues about which we denizens of the early 21st century are likely concerned and about which we are seeking clarity.

II

Everywhere we look today, we see conversations politicized. Reasoned argument is skipped in the effort to discern what an author's political opinions *really* are, and whether they accord with what they *should* be. The Left and Right collide, hurling slogans at each other, often baiting and belittling the other to advance their own agendas. Throughout vast regions of academia, power has seemingly replaced reason, with all thinking now being understood ideologically.

But as people on opposite ends of the political spectrum organize to persuade, they regularly eschew the less glamorous task of *analysis*. However, for conversation to proceed rationally, presuppositions from each side must be examined calmly, and words must be understood properly. Analysis can allow disputants to become conversation partners, for common ground can often be found where none seemed possible before.

Verba Vitae is committed to bringing the classical Christian tradition into conversation with life issues now confronting us. Modeling the reasoned *logos* of the theological tradition, it explores the truth-claims made by thinkers and examines the grounds upon which these claims are made. It is interested in what is being referred to when thinkers employ the language of rights and goods or when they speak of God. It is accordingly interested in fostering and modeling *informed* conversation that is based upon common presuppositions.

In modeling informed discussion, however, it does not shy away from dealing with the deepest and most controversial questions of our time. While acknowledging differing systems of *value*, it is most interested in *truth*, in what can be rationally claimed based on what seems most innately *reasonable*. It follows with deep interest questions of entailment and commitment: Given that x believes Y, what other beliefs must x properly have? Furthermore, how ought x live believing Y and all Y entails?

Issues of life are basic to human experience, and have often been discussed by the Christian thinkers, even if that discussion has often been unsystematic and incomplete. Given expanding discussions within the philosophy of mind, philosophy of biology, cosmology, theology, and artificial intelligence generally, life issues today might include the following:

- What is it to be living, and is being alive somehow different *ontologically* from not being alive?
- What is it to die? What is the ontology of life and death generally?
- Does the proper ontology of life preclude the ascription of life to computational (syntactic) machines?
- What would it mean for a machine to have life, and is the Turing Test properly also a test for life?
- Given the properties of human intelligent life and its valuation, what are the properties of non-human intelligent life, and how ought they be valued?
- How are issues of life and death related to the following deep societal questions? 1) Under what conditions, if any, is it morally permissible to abort pregnancies? 2) Under what conditions, if any, is it morally permissible to voluntarily end one's own life? 3) Under what conditions, if any, is it permissible to end the life of another? 4) Under what conditions, if any, is it morally permissible to go to war, knowing that such war will likely eventuate in deep suffering among the combatants?
- Is limiting the expansion of life an elimination of life?
- Are issues of life primarily issues confronting the individual in his or her individual moral experience, or are such issues primarily related to the proper functioning of the community as such?
- What is the proper relationship between considerations of the quality of existence with respect to considerations of the fact of existence itself? How do these considerations differ with respect to issues of abortion, euthanasia, or just war theory?
- What difference does it make to the rectitude of act should it be considered by different individuals?
- What is the relationship between consciousness and life, at least in the sense of the German *Leben*?

- If consciousness is essential to intelligent life, can it be accounted for on the basis of some other metaphysical primitive, e.g., matter?
- What is the relationship between meaning and life, between semantics and or intentionality and life (*Leben*)?
- Is it in principle possible for an AI machine to *live*?
- Under what conditions can considerations of the *what* of life issue in true normative judgments about the *that* of life? In other words, under what conditions can quiddity qua quiddity entail haeccity?
- What relevance does the possibility of a future like ours have for the question of fetal rights?
- What connection, if any, does the German notion of *Dasein ohne Leben* have for the current practice of aborting fetuses that will otherwise be born with physical or mental issues?
- How do issues identified in German *Lebensphilosophie* connect to the issues of life we face today?
- What ought be the proper relationship between legal and natural rights pertaining to issues of life we encounter today?
- What is God's relationship to life? How is life properly understood within the order of creation?
- What does it mean to *be* and *live* in the image of God? How does the *imago Dei* connect to issues of consciousness, intelligence, syntax, and semantics?
- What are the effects of the Fall on life within the order of creation?
- What difference does the question of God make to the question of under what conditions it is morally justified to end a pregnancy, engage in fetal tissue research, take one's own life, take the life of another, or enter into war?
- What theological relevance do the intended (or unintended) consequences of doing act A have for evaluating the rectitude of act A?
- How does talk of God's creation properly relate to the emergence of novelty in the universe, e.g., with respect to the fertilized egg or the developing cancer cell?
- What relevance *ought* the Christian tradition have for evaluating issues of life in the post-Christian, post-industrialized, and post-secular culture in which we now find ourselves?
- What types of Christian ethical argument deliver different evaluations of the propriety of an act? In other words, how do we deal with issues of Y, when arguing from the First Article seemingly delivers a different answer than arguing from the Second Article or the Third Article?

- How does the notion of the sacred, and considerations of sacramentality, impact issues of abortion, euthanasia, and just war?
- What relevance do the moral strictures of Scripture have for justifying positions on issues of abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia, and just war theory?
- What is the significance of the theology of the cross for the abortion, just war, and euthanasia questions?
- How ought a *theologian of the cross* approach issues of abortion, fetal tissue research, euthanasia, capital punishment, etc.?

This list is not exhaustive but does take us into some very deep issues. We hope in *Verba Vitae* to model reasoned discussion from all quarters on these and related questions. As a journal of the Institute of Lutheran Theology, and supported by Lutherans for Life, we invite thought-provoking articles from those both within and outside the Christian tradition.

III

In his magisterial text, *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor famously asks how we could "move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed unproblematic to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace?"[14] More to the point, how could we go "from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others"?[15]

Taylor speaks of the "cross-pressuring" of our age between social perspectives haunted by echoes of transcendence and those driving towards *immanentization*, towards a view of things whereby meaning and "fullness" are sought wholly within the self-sufficient, naturalistic universe that excludes transcendence and any ends and purposes beyond this life. Many live within this *immanent frame*, within this "natural order" that exists over and against any supernatural or transcendent one. When the immanent frame becomes completely "closed," it becomes seemingly absurd for insiders to think another way possible. Taylor believes that this "closed spin" is hegemonic in the Academy.[16]

While one can be either *open* to transcendence or *closed* to its possibility, the *ways* in which one might be open or closed differ profoundly. There is, after all, a fundamental difference between a spin and a take. A closed take is one in which a person sees the universe immanently but can nonetheless entertain the possibility that other rational people might interpret things differently. In a closed spin, however, the spinner assumes that it is not possible for a properly motivated rational person to view things differently. From the perspective of the closed spin, one who is open

to transcendence is either irrational or mendacious. Thus, while either closed or open takes are supported rationally, spins are a different matter entirely. They are commitments precluding the possibility of rational disagreement.

Taylor finds superficial the closed spinning of his peers. He argues, in fact, that "those who think the closed reading of immanence is natural and obvious are suffering from ... [a] disability ... [where] thinking is clouded or cramped by a powerful picture which prevents one seeing important aspects of reality."[17] Simply put, "closed world spins" (CWS) are unsupported by reasons, even though it may be the case that there is no transcendence beyond the immanent. Taylor writes, "the sense of the world as God-forsaken (or meaning-forsaken) doesn't necessarily transmute either logically or psychologically into the closed take on immanence, the belief that there is nothing beyond the natural order."[18] Just because the skies may be dark does not entail that they are obviously so. Accordingly, Taylor believes that by highlighting certain facets of our human experience, certain people might be persuaded to move from a closed spin to a closed take, and thus might be made open to experiences and positions of transcendence that they might otherwise immediately reject. Moving from a spin to a take makes possible again rational dispute and discussion.

It is our hope at *Verba Vitae* that readers come to us with either closed or open takes on the universe, for when such openness is present, there is the immediate possibility of fruitful dialogue. For readers who may have closed spins rather than closed takes, however, we value and understand you, though we do hope to disquiet and maybe open you to the possibility that things may not be as simple as they might appear.

Undoubtedly, there is something paradoxical about emergent intelligent life passionately denying and routinely regarding as unreasonable the claim that the universe at its most fundamental state is intelligent. Perhaps the sense of abundance suggested by intelligent life does not fit well within an immanent universe just beginning to comprehend the inexplicability of life's scarcity.

Dennis Bielfeldt, General Editor

Notes

1. See NASA Exoplanet Exploration: Planets Beyond our Solar System, last modified November 16, 2023. https://exoplanets.nasa.gov/. Accessed November 18, 2023.
2. Tony Saunder, "How Many Galaxies Are in the Universe? A Lot More Than You Think," *PBC Science Focus*, July 25, 2023 at 2:35 am. https://www.sciencefocus.com/blog/space/how-many-galaxies-are-in-the-universe. Accessed October 14, 2023.
3. "How Many Stars Are In The Universe?" *Little Passports*. https://www.littlepassports.com/blog/space/how-many-stars-are-in-the-universe/#:~:text=If%20you%20were%20

to%20look,stars%20in%20our%20observable%20universe. Accessed October 14, 2023. The number may be much higher: perhaps 10^{22} and 10^{24}. See Alisa Harvey and Elizabeth Howell, "How Many Stars are in the Universe? See Website: Space.com, Alisa Harvey and Elizabeth Howell, "How Many Stars are in the Universe?" February 11, 2022. https://www.space.com/26078-how-many-stars-are-there.html. Accessed October 22, 2023.

4. Wikipedia, "Life," last modified November 6, 2023, 8:53 am. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life. Accessed November 8, 2023.
5. In 1961, Frank Drake offered us a mathematical equation to predict the number of intelligent alien civilizations in our galaxy. Multiply R* (stars made in the galaxy in one year) by Fp (the fraction of stars with planets) by Ne (the fraction of planets where life might exist) by FL (the fraction of those planets having life) by FI (the fraction of those planets having intelligent life) by FC (the fraction of intelligent aliens developing technology able to communicate outside their planet) by L (the numbers of years a communicating civilization lasts) and one easily calculates to over 1,000 alien civilizations. So began the search for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI) by monitoring signals from space. See Elizabeth Howell, "Drake Equation: Estimating the Odds of Finding ET," Space.com, last updated October 27, 2020. https://www.space.com/25219-drake-equation.html. Accessed November 4, 2023.
6. For more information, see SETI Institute, "The Fermi Paradox" at https://www.seti.org/fermi-paradox-0. Accessed November 3, 2023.
7. I am assuming, of course, that the "world" that could go a particular way would be a world in principle causally accessible to us. If we allowed causally inaccessible possible worlds to be referred to by "world," we would be back to doing old-style metaphysics under a scientific naturalist guise. What precisely is the salient difference between speculating about the structure of non-natural reality and about putative features of natural reality whose existence is causally unconnectable to us? Why exactly do we ascribe "metaphysical position" to the first and not to the second?
8. Howard A. Smith, "Alone in the Universe," *American Scientist*, https://www.americanscientist.org/article/alone-in-the-universe. Accessed November 10, 2023.
9. Ibid.
10. I am simply using current cosmological theory to illustrate a point. In employing it, I am not committing myself to the ultimate truth of that theory.
11. "Runaway Universe," *Universe Timeline*, last modified November 2000. https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/universe/historysans.html. Accessed November 3, 2023.
12. If the entire life of the universe were one day, life will be gone by the first ten thousandth, billionth, billionth, billionth of a second.
13. The *Vulgate* is the normative Latin text of the Bible in the West that St. Jerome translated from 383-405. Realize that ancient texts do not utilize the punctuation marks we are accustomed to.
14. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 549.
17. Ibid., 551.
18. Ibid., 553.

Lutherans For Life is proud and honored to launch the ***Verba Vitae*** project in fellowship and collaboration with the **Institute of Lutheran Theology**. We are especially delighted to bring the Church and the world this inaugural issue and the fine scholarship its contributors and their reflections represent.

The Lutheran communion embodies a long and illustrious legacy of rigorous and responsible intellectual inquiry. We continue to take seriously our roots in the Judeo-Christian philosophical tradition, culminating in the person of Jesus Christ and the words of the Holy Scriptures. Our forebears have consciously drawn on the influence of Apostolic thought as well as the Western philosophical tradition as early as Augustine. The Lutheran Reformation began in a university setting and has delivered to us a culture of educated clergy and well-catechized laity. Lutherans continue to pursue theology as both a devotion and an academic discipline.

The sanctity of life is also coming of age. Over the course of the 20th and early 21st centuries, this outlook has developed the rational and scientific underpinnings to engage competing perspectives. Certain learned voices in our time have sadly taken up advocacy of death as a solution to suffering. Cultural conversation and practice are regrettably following their lead, even as a system supporting this thinking forms student minds, citizen consciences, and public expectations. We need not fear dialogue and even debate about these matters. Universal human dignity – no matter what size, skills, or circumstances – remains essential to our civilization and our witness. Contrary opinions provide us opportunities to discover and celebrate the blessings of being human together.

For 45 years, Lutherans For Life has been receiving each neighbor as a gift and privilege. Our board, staff, and nationwide network of volunteer communities have occupied ourselves with speaking the courage of God's truth and showing the compassion of Christ's love. This includes a range of professionals and experts in law and philosophy, medicine and policy, research and theology, economics, and activism. Our Scriptural convictions lend themselves admirably and amicably to all these enterprises. Now the time has come to amplify and advance an informed voice about the sanctity of every human life. We cannot rest content, allowing others to assert monopoly in the marketplace of ideas.

We believe that *Verba Vitae* is going to broaden the reach and deepen the case for human life. We hope this journal will also facilitate listening to counterparts, identifying common grounds, and building bridges toward convincing and cooperating. And we pray that the Lord our God, who has incarnated Himself human among us as the Truth and the Life, will bless its reception.

Michael W. Salemink
Executive Director, Lutherans For Life

Death in the History of Redemption

Gilbert Meilaender

In Felix Salten's *Bambi*, a book that happens to be a favorite of mine, there is a chapter which consists entirely of a conversation between two leaves that are clinging precariously to a tree. Here is a part of their exchange.

> They were silent for a while. Then the first leaf said quietly to herself,
>
> "Why must we fall…?"
>
> The second leaf asked,
>
> "What happens to us when we have fallen?"
>
> "We sink down…."
>
> "What is under us?"
>
> The first leaf answered,
>
> "I don't know, some say one thing, some another, but nobody knows."
>
> The second leaf asked,
>
> "Do we feel anything, do we know anything about ourselves when we're down there?"
>
> The first leaf answered,
>
> "Who knows? Not one of all those down there has ever come back to tell us about it…. Let's remember how beautiful it was, how wonderful, when the sun came out and shone so warmly that we thought we'd burst with life. Do you remember? And the morning dew, and the mild and splendid nights...."
>
> A moist wind blew, cold and hostile, through the tree-tops.
>
> "Ah, now," said the second leaf, "I…." Then her voice broke off.
>
> She was torn from her place and spun down.
>
> Winter had come.[1]

If that is where we human beings also find ourselves when thinking about death —as a mystery beyond our ken—it should be no surprise that many in our

culture have concluded that we should try to master it. And so, we want to live for as long as we can, with as much health and vigor as we can—enjoying that warm sunshine, morning dew, and splendid nights. To be healthy octogenarians (or better!) is fine with us. What we do not want is decline and frailty; we do not want to find ourselves clinging weakly to the tree of life. Our ideal is to live with health and strength for as long as we can—and then one day just fall off the cliff.

Since, however, our future may be more like one of those leaves clinging to the tree, blown by a cold and hostile wind, many among us seek a way to control our ending. We begin to think that perhaps we should propel ourselves over the cliff or find a friend who will give us a gentle push. And so, our culture—and, indeed, much of Western culture more generally—has begun to look with favor on suicide, assisted suicide, and euthanasia as choice-worthy ways to meet our end. And if not one of those down there has ever come back to tell us about it, there may be nothing foolish about such an attitude.

But there are also some of us who believe that one has come back to tell us about death and that in Jesus we see the true master of death. To enter into his story is to begin to see our life and death differently—to see it within the history of redemption. All things were made through him, John's Gospel says. The long, slow story of God's election of Israel moves toward him, the faithful and obedient Israelite. And he promises to be with us—in all his mastery of death—even to the end of the age. To come to terms with dying, therefore, to think about what holy dying might mean, we must, as Karl Barth put it, "accompany this history of God and man from creation to reconciliation and redemption, indicating the mystery of the encounter at each point on the path according to its own distinctive character."[2]

We have, then, three angles of vision from which to ponder the meaning of our dying. Because we are God's creatures, there must be some account of life that accepts, honors, and celebrates the limits of our finitude and the time we are allotted. Because we are sinners whom God has in Jesus acted to reconcile, our life moves toward death and is disordered in countless ways that come under God's judgment. And because we are heirs of the redeemed future God has promised in the risen Jesus, because he knows us by name, we are promised that one day we will come to share in the life eternal that Father, Son, and Spirit live. I want to think about our dying within these three angles of vision afforded us by the history of redemption, prefacing each of the three with a stanza from a hymn by a 19th century Norwegian pastor, Magnus Landstad —the hymn "I Know of a Sleep in Jesus' Name."[3]

Created Life

I know of a peaceful eventide;
And when I am faint and weary,
At times with the journey sorely tried,
Thro' hours that are long and dreary.
Then often I yearn to lay me down
And sink into blissful slumber.

We are not meant to live this created life forever—and that for two reasons. The first has to do with understanding and honoring the finite character of our life.

Even when things go well for us, the life we live has a natural trajectory that begins in growth and development but moves, eventually, toward decline and death. No doubt this saddens us, but, when death does not come prematurely due to illness or injury, it is not simply an evil. For, after all, it is the nature of finite, organic life. Generally—and quite properly—we refer to created life as a gift from God. But it is also a task. Staying alive is work, the work we call metabolism. In a complicated chemical process, our bodies take in nutrients and convert them into the energy we need to live and function. And this task will finally defeat each of us.

A living human being is not just a thing, not an inanimate object. We are living organisms, bodies animated by soul. We do not exist the way a rock does, "simply and fixedly what it is, identical with itself over time, and with no need to maintain that identity by anything else it does."[4] Rather, constantly hovering between being and non-being, we experience life as a fragile gift, difficult to sustain, filled with beauties that do not last. And when a day comes that we can no longer carry out the work metabolism involves, we become things—the inanimate objects we call corpses. It seems right to me, therefore, that the last words of my paternal grandfather were simply, "*Ich kann nicht mehr.*" "I can't any longer."

This does not make our allotted time any less a gift; it simply characterizes the kind of gift it is. Not God's timeless eternity, but a life fit for one who is creature, not Creator. This explains why we can hardly help but approve when Odysseus, offered the choice between an immortal life with the nymph Calypso and a return home to his wife Penelope, chooses to return. He chooses, that is, to be not a god but a man, accepting a life that is strictly on loan, always fragile, and moving inevitably toward death. That is the nature of our allotted time in which sooner or later we grow, as the hymn says, "faint and weary."

But there is also a second reason we are not meant to live this created life forever. The very same metabolic exchanges that mark our finitude point to something else—to a freedom that transcends earthly life. For we do not simply persist unchangingly over

time the way an inanimate rock does. On the contrary, it is by undergoing constant change that we persist over time, and we somehow both are and are not the same person through all those changes. Drop me from the top of a fifty-story building, and something happens in my fall that is different from the fall of a rock. For I know myself as a falling object, which means that I can in some way distance myself from that object. I am that falling object, but I am also not simply equated with it.

Our being is ecstatic. That is to say, we have a kind of inner freedom from our own substance. In that freedom we reach out for something more, longing for what Augustine called "beauty so ancient and so new."[5] It is, of course, possible to stifle—or try to stifle—this longing, as Augustine also well knew. Both Epicureans and Stoics, in their different ways, held that we need not fear death. For, as they said, if what awaits us is oblivion, there will be neither sensation nor misery to experience. But their argument ignores one thing: in oblivion the thirst Augustine believed characterizes our created life will never have been quenched; we will not have found that "beauty so ancient and so new." This created life will turn out to have been a futile absurdity—marked by a longing that is never to be answered or satisfied.

The deepest desire of our hearts, a desire implanted in us at the creation, is not simply for quantitatively more of this life, lovely as it often is. Augustine had it right. We desire a beauty that is qualitatively different, not given in ordinary experience. To be sure, this created life is filled with sights and sounds of great beauty, and it is right that our hearts should be drawn to them. Desire for longer life and grief at the death of loved ones is surely not wrong—not even when we believe that the one whom we loved has arrived at a "peaceful eventide" and a "blissful slumber." Nevertheless, as a character in Wallace Stegner's novel, *The Spectator Bird*, says, "A reasonably endowed, reasonably well-intentioned man can walk through the world's great kitchen from end to end and arrive at the back door hungry."[6]

From two different angles, therefore, we might say that we are not meant to live this created life forever. As organisms, animated bodies, we discover that decline and death are built into the trajectory of our lives. As thirsty creatures, thirsting for God, we may come to see that more of this life could never satisfy our desire for something qualitatively different. Taking these two truths seriously can help us when we think about our dying. We have received this life as a gift; if we seek to master it by deliberately ending our life (with or without another's help), we fail to honor the gift, and we may miss the way in which it calls us out of ourselves to the Giver. And we have received this life as a task; to live worthily is to take up that task for as many years as God gives us.

Still, we do not have to do everything in our power to stay alive, as if the longest life possible were always the one required of us. That is why we can admire the kind of soldiers described by J. Glenn Gray in his classic work, *The Warriors*—soldiers

who "do not desire to live forever, for they feel that this would be a sacrifice of quality to gain quantity." In their willingness to lose their life in a good cause they are, he writes, "affirming human finiteness and limitation as a morally desirable fact."[7] Likewise, when each of us does battle with illness and suffering, we are not required to use whatever medical treatments offer the longest life. Sometimes for some of us, a life, which though shorter but is free of treatments that are of little benefit or are excessively burdensome, may well be the right choice. That is not an attempt at mastery; it is simply accepting the truth that the gift of this life, lovely as it can be, is not meant to satisfy the deepest desire of the human heart.

Eventually, therefore, unable to sustain the task earthly life sets before us, and reaching toward One whose beauty surpasses every created good, we will come "faint and weary" to "eventide," yearning to "sink into blissful slumber." That is the shape of our created life.

Reconciled Life

> O Jesus, draw near my dying bed
> And take me into Thy keeping
> And say when my spirit hence is fled,
> "This child is not dead, but sleeping."
> And leave me not, Savior, till I rise
> To praise Thee in life eternal.

Once we appreciate those two truths about created life, we might, of course, even while free of any Stoic desire for mastery, come to believe that death is no great evil for us. Certainly many sincere Christians have sometimes thought that way. Thus, for example, William Law, in his classic *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, places in the mouth of Penitens—an earnest believer near death—this sentiment: "For what is there miserable or dreadful in death, but the consequences of it? … If I am now going into the joys of God, could there be any reason to grieve?"[8] If however we are drawn to such a view, we will have to find a way to come to terms with St. Paul, who characterizes death as both the wages of sin and the last enemy.[9] What would it mean to take him seriously?

We can make a beginning by returning to the truth that our being is ecstatic, that as self-transcending beings we have a kind of freedom from our own substance. In describing created life, I found in that self-transcendence a hint that our desire was for a Beauty never fully experienced in this life—and hence that earthly life is not meant to last forever. But perhaps the ecstatic quality of human beings can teach us another truth as well—namely, that each person's death is not just an instance of the course of human life but is a unique occurrence.

For *my* death, or *your* death, is not only or merely a participation in something universal, something common to all created beings. My death is also unique, a one-time event—as is yours. There is no replacing us when we are gone. That is the point of one of Tolstoy's most quoted passages in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Moving toward death, Ivan ponders the existential strangeness of the common syllogism: All men are mortal, Caius is a man; therefore Caius is mortal. This he reflects, "had always seemed to him correct as applied to Caius, but by no means to himself. That man Caius represented man in the abstract, and so the reasoning was perfectly sound; but he was not Caius, not an abstract man."[10] Thus what Ivan, without batting an eye, can serenely say of Caius—that he is not meant to live this earthly life forever—has an altogether different ring when he says it of himself. His life is not just an instance of the general shape of human life. No, he had a particular mother and father, particular childhood experiences, particular loves, a particular vocation—and most of all self-awareness, awareness of himself as the absolutely unrepeatable and non-interchangeable person: Ivan Ilyich.

"The point of a proper name," Ralph McInerny once wrote

> is that it [is] not common to many, and yet many people do bear identical names.... But even when two persons have the same proper name it does not become a common noun, like "man." All the John Smiths that have been, are, and will be have nothing in common but the name; it does not name something common to them all. There is an inescapable nominalism here. God calls us all by our proper name, and He is unlikely to confuse one John Smith with another.[11]

It is hard then to experience my death, that one-time event, as merely an instance of a natural occurrence toward which all human lives move. Indeed I am almost tempted to say that we deceive ourselves if we try to experience it only in that way.

From this perspective it is not so much that I move toward death as that it moves toward me. It comes as judgment. We may say that one who dies has "passed" or "passed away," but those perhaps comforting formulations do not uncover the full meaning of a person's dying. One who dies has been summoned—summoned for judgment. Jaroslav Pelikan noted that Cyprian—Bishop of Carthage in the mid-third century—seems to have been the first Latin writer to use the word *arcessitio* ("summons") to refer to death. "To Cyprian," Pelikan writes, "the idea of the summons connotes the authority of the Supreme Judge to order a man into his presence and to demand an account from him of all that he has been and done." This is no gentle "passing," the kind of event that could hardly be said to call our very being into question. No, death so understood moves toward us as encounter, as "the irresistible call of the Summoner."[12] If we have learned to hear in death the voice of the holy

God summoning us, might we not come to see the vanity of our attempts to master and control our dying?

Still more, must we not learn to pray, "O Jesus, draw near my dying bed, / And take me into thy keeping"? We can reconcile ourselves to the thought of being summoned for judgment only as we learn to look to the One whom Karl Barth so aptly characterized as "the judge judged in our place."[13] If, as Ivan Ilyich came to realize, each of us dies a death that is uniquely his own, then each of us is, as Ralph McInerny observed, a non-interchangeable child of God whom God knows by name. Recalling his own brush with death, Richard John Neuhaus called to mind the Potter's Field on Hart Island in New York City. In that field for roughly two centuries there have been buried, in simple numbered boxes, thousands of unclaimed corpses. And in the middle of the field stands a large stone inscribed with the words, "He Knows Them by Name."[14]

This is especially important for us to underscore when we think of those who have died or will die prematurely—as we say from the perspective of our finite created life. Although they have not lived what we are pleased to call a full life, we dare not make that the basis for any judgment about the worth and meaning of their lives. That judgment is not ours to make. For in fact in every moment of life, short or long, we are equidistant from God.

In Westwood Cemetery of Oberlin, Ohio, in an area of the cemetery known as Missionary Rest, a marker at the gravesite of one of the children of an Oberlin missionary reads:

> Dear Jesus
> You know that I love you
> Take me to yourself.

That gets it exactly right. The days or weeks of a child who dies soon after (or even before) birth are not only days of a life tragically cut short, though of course they are that from the perspective of the normal trajectory of created life. They are also the days or weeks of a God-aimed spirit, whose every moment is lived before One for whom a thousand years are but as yesterday when it is past. Surely Jesus, the Child of Mary, will draw near their dying bed as he will ours.

The One who summons each of us as death moves toward us, the One who summons us for judgment, is the One with the power and authority to say, "This child is not dead, but sleeping." To be sure, as the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us, it is "a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."[15] But when that living God is the judge judged in our place, then as Barth says, we "fall into *His* hands and not the hands of another."[16]

Redeemed Life

> I know of a morning bright and fair
> When tidings of joy shall wake us,
> When songs from on high shall fill the air
> And God to his glory take us.
> When Jesus shall bid us rise from sleep,
> How joyous that hour of waking.

When we turn now to think about the meaning of our dying in relation to the redeemed life we are promised, we are of course pretty much on our own. As C.S. Lewis once put it in a passage often quoted, "Our present outlook might be like that of a small boy who, on being told that the sexual act was the highest bodily pleasure, should immediately ask whether you ate chocolates at the same time.... The boy knows chocolate: he does not know the positive thing that excludes it."[17]

One thing we can say with some assurance is that the promised life of the redeemed creation begins to mark us even now, as we live toward our death. "If any one is in Christ, he is [present tense] a new creation," St. Paul writes, enunciating in his own idiom the Johannine teaching that to know Jesus is life eternal.[18] Therefore in his *Small Catechism* Luther describes baptism as signifying "that the old Adam in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily contrition and repentance, and on the other hand that daily a new man is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever."[19] Hence, the death toward which we move—or which moves toward us—is the last gasp of a life the Holy Spirit has been putting to death in us since our baptism, and the redeemed life that will one day be fully realized in us is already present in our life here and now.

When that last dying gasp comes, it will not come as a fulfillment or even just as a natural development of the life that has preceded it. It will come as the advent of God's promised future. As Moltmann observed, it will arrive not as *futurum*, a development that draws out potential already present, but as *adventus*, which comes to us as something new.[20] Moltmann makes the point nicely with reference to Revelation 1:4, which reads: "Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come." We might, Moltmann notes, expect a slightly different formula: "him who is and who was and who will be." But the verse speaks not of the one who "will be" as he has been in the past but of the one who "is to come."[21] And if that is the right way to think about the coming of the promised redeemed creation, we see from yet another angle what folly it would be to suppose that we should try to control or master our dying. Instead, we want to learn to live in hope, a virtue that specifically excludes mastery.

To be sure, if the creation is to be redeemed, the promised future for which we hope must in some way be a restoration of the world we have corrupted. So when that promised future breaks into our world at Easter, we are on the one hand helped to honor "the beauty and order of the life that was the creator's gift to his creation and is restored there." But on the other hand, we are also turned "from the empty tomb" to live toward "a new moment of participation in God's work and being."[22]

For what exactly then do we hope? This is by no means an easy question to answer. Surely, we hope to rest in the peace of Jesus, to be taken into an ever-deepening participation in the life of love that is the Triune God. But what can that mean? I have already said that we are pretty much on our own when it comes to being more precise here. Pretty much, but not entirely. For after all, one *has* come back to tell us about it. This must at least mean that we hope not for an escape from the body, but for a renewed and transformed life in the body.

To be sure, it comes rather naturally to us to think simply in terms of a continued existence of the soul apart from the body. Contrasting an inner and outer self does capture something true to our lived experience. For as surely as I know that the component parts of my body are being constantly replaced throughout life, I also have a sense that in, with, and under that constant change *I* somehow persist. Nevertheless, if a human person is the *union* of soul and body, the prospect of a dissolution of the body while the soul lives on untouched could hardly be comforting. For that would mean that our death was essentially "the *threat* of a bodiless life," and it would make almost inexplicable Christian hope for the resurrection of the body.[23] What we can and should say, however, is that although those who have died in Christ may be "away from the body," as St. Paul says, they are "at home with the Lord."[24] And because the Lord with whom they are at home is the resurrected Christ, the Living One, they too must somehow live in him. Quite rightly therefore, even now as we live in hope, we offer our praise week after week in the Eucharist "with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven."

As we live toward our dying, or await its summons to claim us, we must therefore honor with Christian burial the bodies of those who have died in the faith. Unless we are among those still living when the risen Lord returns in glory, we must all make our way to that day through death. And it is in the funeral service, the rite of Christian burial, that we honor to the end the gift of created life, a life the incarnate Son of God has shared with us and has promised to redeem. The meaning of that service is, however, increasingly obscured in our world. Simply put, Christians should do what the title of Thomas Long's book-length discussion of the Christian funeral urges: *Accompany Them with Singing*.[25]

A Christian funeral is not a memorial service, not a celebration of life, not an occasion for eulogizing the deceased—any and all of which can be and often are done without the presence of a dead body. In the words of Thomas Lynch, the mortician-essayist: "A good funeral transports the newly deceased and the newly bereaved to the borders of a changed reality. The dead are disposed of in a way that says they mattered to us, and the living are brought to the edge of a life they will lead without the one who has died. We deal with death by dealing with the dead, not just the idea but also the sad and actual fact of the matter—the dead body."[26] After all, the entire Christian life is a pilgrimage, a journey that begins in baptism and moves toward the new creation which the risen Christ now lives and promises will be ours. We who have accompanied a newly deceased person along this way, and certainly those of us who have been loved ones and fellow believers, ought not cut the journey short. The funeral gives expression not to our mastery of death but to our hope for the promised redemption.

There are, moreover, reasons to think that although cremation of the dead body is not in itself wrong, burial in the ground is likely to capture better the Christian significance of death. The absence of a corpse may easily suggest that the body is not the place of the person's presence—not the kernel, but simply a dispensable husk. Yet as St. Paul writes, the dead body "is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body."[27] And so we place the bodies of our dead in the ground in the hope that God in his own time will give them new life.

For now then we need not try to master death, for we know that it has been mastered. Until the day comes when others must lay us in the ground, we give thanks for the beauties of created life, we try to prepare ourselves for the summons that must one day come, and we wait in hope for the promised day of resurrection. If we, like so many before us, die before that day comes, we will rest in the peace of Jesus, trusting that on "a morning bright and fair" he will "bid us rise from sleep" to share with all who hope in him that joyous "hour of waking."

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Notes

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8. William Law, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life: The Spirit of Love*. The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York and Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1978), 70.
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12. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Shape of Death: Life, Death, and Immortality in the Early Fathers* (New York: Abingdon, 1961), 69.
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14. Richard John Neuhaus, *As I Lay Dying: Meditations upon Returning* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 60.
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20. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 25.
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23. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/2, 352. Emphasis added.
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27. I Corinthians 15:43-44.

Vocation and Abortion

Gene Edward Veith

In common usage, the word "vocation" means "job," "occupation," or "profession." It is, however, a theological term that derives from the Latin word for "calling." The idea is that God *calls* us to different tasks, offices, and relationships. Thus St. Paul says,

> Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. (1 Corinthians 7:17)

Hence, God calls each person to a "life" that He has assigned. That calling is the person's "vocation." Though many theological discussions of vocation focus on the different ways Christians make a living and how they can express their faith in their work, the concept is clearly much more extensive than that. It comprehends "the life" of a Christian. The immediate context of the 1 Corinthians passage concerns marriage and singleness.

For Luther, the great theologian of vocation, the doctrine speaks to how God governs His creation, how He works through human beings, and how human beings are to love and serve their neighbors. As such, looking at issues through the lens of vocation can help us to understand them from a different perspective.

We will here briefly explain Luther's doctrine of vocation, then consider abortion in light of the four kinds of vocations to which Christians are called and non-Christians are appointed: in the family, the economy, the church, and the state.

Luther's Doctrine of Vocation

Luther taught that God has ordained three "estates" for human life: the household, the church, and the state. We have multiple vocations within them all.[1]

The "household" refers, above all, to the family. Some people are called to marriage so that being a husband and being a wife are vocations. A married couple might also be called to parenthood, to the vocations of father and mother. Being a son or daughter is also a vocation, as are the other ties of kinship.

The "household" also includes how the family makes a living. In Luther's day, most livelihoods were closely tied to the family. Whether you were a peasant farmer, a craftsman, or a king, your whole family was involved, though some people had special professions in the church or the state. With the Industrial Revolution and urbanization, work moved outside the home. So, for our purposes, we can split "household" into "family vocations" and "economic vocations."[2]

In the estate of the church, all Christians are called by God's Word, beginning with their baptism. As the *Small Catechism* says, "the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel."[3] In addition, some are "called" into the Holy Ministry and other church offices.

The estate of the "state," can be thought of both as a formal political authority and as the broader community in which we find ourselves. We all have the vocation of "citizenship" where we live. In addition, some have vocations of rulers, magistrates, soldiers, etc.

Luther believed that God works through all of the estates to govern and preserve the human race. This means that He works through human beings, in their various vocations, to give His gifts. Thus He gives daily bread through the vocation of farmers, bakers, and everyone else through whom "He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life."[4] He protects us by means of the lawful magistrates. He gives His Word and Sacraments by means of pastors, whom He has "called and ordained." He heals by means of physicians. And He creates new life by means of mothers and fathers.

The purpose of all of our vocations is to love and serve our neighbors. Each vocation has its unique neighbors to love and serve. In the state, citizens are to love and serve each other, and rulers are to love and serve their subjects. In the church, pastors love and serve their congregations, and congregations love and serve their pastor and each other. In the economic vocations, our neighbors are colleagues and customers. In marriage, the husband's neighbor is his wife, and the wife's neighbor is her husband. In parenthood, the neighbor whom fathers and mothers are to love and serve is their child.

When we love and serve our neighbors, we become "channels" for the love of God. As Luther says in the *Large Catechism*, "Creatures are only the hands, channels, and means through which God bestows all blessings."[5] Thereby we become co-workers with God.

Luther opposed every kind of synergism when it comes to our salvation. There we do not co-operate with God. He accomplishes everything for us in Christ. But then He calls His redeemed children into the world, where in the struggles of life they grow in their faith, are sanctified, and do co-operate with

God, though they often resist Him. The Swedish theologian Gustaf Wingren explains it this way:

> Co-operation takes place in vocation, which belongs on earth, not heaven; it is pointed toward one's neighbor, not toward God. Man's deeds and work have a real function to fill in civil and social relationships, despite the fact that works done by man cannot lift from man the condemnation that rests on him before God.[6]

But we can also refuse to co-operate with God. Instead of serving, we want to be served. Instead of loving our neighbor, we can use our vocations to harm our neighbor, as in abusive relationships, dishonest business dealings, and toxic leadership. Wingren summarizes the problem:

> Wanting to be exalted instead of serving, regarding office as a possibility for selfish power instead of for service, is offense against vocation. Through this offense man falls away from co-operation with God, and comes, on the contrary, to work against God. Then one becomes a hindrance and an enemy in the path of the Creator's self-giving love.[7]

Abortion in the Family Vocations

Abortion is a repudiation of the vocation of parenthood. The woman rejects the calling of motherhood, given to her when she conceives, and instead of loving and serving her neighbor—the developing child in her womb—she has the child killed and removed. Fathers too are often complicit in abortion, pressuring the woman to abort their child and with false generosity offering to pay for the procedure to "get rid of the problem." Fathers are to love and serve their children by providing for them and protecting them, not by arranging to have them killed.

This "offense against vocation" is obvious, but it also reveals more about the nature of vocation. A woman desiring an abortion may say that she did not *choose* to be a mother. Indeed, advocates of abortion call themselves "pro-choice." In postmodern ethics, what determines right and wrong is the *will*. If a woman *chooses* to have the baby, that is right for her, but if she *chooses* not to have the baby, that too is right for her. But Christianity teaches that in our fallen condition, our will is often in conflict with the will of God. That we insist on our will and defy God's will is the definition of sin.

Strictly speaking, our vocations are not something we choose.[8] Rather, we are called to them from outside ourselves. We did not choose what family to be born in. We did not choose the society or the era in which we were born. While we make a host of decisions about what to major in, what job offer to

take, whether to get married, and the like, when we look back upon our lives—including our own interests and talents, the doors that open and the doors that slam shut, the people that God brings into our lives—we can see God's hand guiding us at every step.

You didn't choose to be a parent? Well, some couples do choose with all their hearts, and yet they cannot conceive. Some couples do not make such a choice—indeed, they choose *not* to have children—and yet they do. And usually when the baby comes, though against their will, they are glad. This is the human condition.

The choice to have an abortion is generally related to the great hardship the parents think a baby would cause. This is not the right time. This interferes with my career. We can't afford the expense. Having a baby would ruin my life.

But just as vocation is not self-chosen, it does not exist for the self, but for the neighbor. Though there is indeed nearly always a great sense of fulfillment and many great joys in carrying out one's vocations, fulfillment and joy do not determine the vocation, and their lack does not invalidate the calling.

Indeed, Luther stresses that vocation is where we bear our cross. Says Wingren, summarizing Luther:

> To understand what is meant by the cross of vocation, we need only remember that vocation is ordained by God to benefit, not him who fulfills the vocation, but the neighbor who, standing alongside, bears his own cross for the sake of others. Under this cross are included even the most trivial of difficulties, such as: in marriage, the care of babes, which interferes with sleep and enjoyment; in government, unruly subjects and promoters of revolt; in the ministry, the whole resistance to reformation; in heavy labor, shabbiness, uncleanness, and the contempt of the proud. All this is bracketed with the high and holy cross of Christ; but then that too was deep in humiliation when it was erected.[9]

Bearing such crosses drives us to prayer, as well as greater dependence on the cross of Christ. And so we grow in our faith and our sanctification.

Because vocation is a "given," it exists in the here and now. A college student, for example, may be preparing for a particular vocation. But he also has vocations now—as a member of his family, as a citizen and member of the college community, in any part-time work he is doing to pay his way through school, in his church, and—crucially—as a student.

Vocations can certainly change over time—a child grows into adulthood, marries, becomes a parent; a worker takes any number of jobs—but some vocations are

permanent. A married man cannot suddenly decide he isn't called to the married life and thus conclude that his marriage isn't valid so he can abandon his family. No. If you are married, that is your vocation. Luther says,

> If anyone lives in marriage, in a certain way of life, he has his vocation. When this is interfered with—by Satan, or neighbors, or family, or even by one's own weakness of mind—it ought not to yield or be broken in spirit. Rather, if any difficulty impedes, let one call on the Lord, and let both me and David be proved liars, if God in his own time does not bring help. For it is sure that here, in fidelity to vocation, God has insisted on hope and trust in his help.[10]

What Luther says about marriage would hold true for parenthood. Those who conceive a child have their vocation. But God will help them fulfill their vocation, which He himself shares with them.

Luther's reference to "David" is to the author of Psalm 127. The Psalm begins, "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain" (Psalm 127:1), and it moves to a promise for parenthood: "Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb, a reward" (Psalm 127:3). Vocation may have its crosses, but it remains God's gracious gift.

Abortion in the Economic Vocations

Not all ways of making a living are callings from God. Crime is not a vocation because stealing, extortion, fraud, drug dealing, and other illegal means of making money do not serve but rather *harm* one's neighbor. The same can be said of some legal ventures, such as those that manipulate or exploit the neighbor. Some occupations harm the neighbors by leading them to sin. God calls no one to be a pornographer, for instance. And He calls no one to be an abortionist.

The abortionist takes the life of the neighbor who defines the occupation: the developing child. The abortionist breaks God's commandment against murder and does so for profit. The abortion provider also sins against the mother by enabling her sin.

Abortion providers are also sinning against the vocation that they do have. Nearly all of them have medical vocations. They are physicians, nurses, pharmacists, and other health care professionals. God has given them special talents, education, and gifts. God works through those who have medical vocations as channels to heal the sick. They are to love and serve their patients by healing them. Instead, those who perform abortions use the gifts of their vocation against the purpose of their vocation: not to heal but to kill.

Abortion in the Church Vocations

Christian churches with any commitment to historical orthodoxy and a high view of Scripture teach against abortion. Some churches, though, are silent, and some even support abortion, not only as a right, but as a positive good. Some feminist theologians have even blasphemously called it a "sacrament" of female empowerment. Such inversions recall the condemnations of the Prophet Isaiah:

> Woe to those who call evil good
> and good evil,
> who put darkness for light
> and light for darkness. (Isaiah 5:20)

The ministers, teachers, theologians, and officials of these churches are serving the Spirit of the World instead of the Holy Spirit, and so are violating their vocations (1 Corinthians 2:12).

But even progressive Christianity is corrupted by abortion. Modernist theology seeks to go beyond traditional theology with a social gospel that champions the poor, the weak, and the marginalized, opposing the powers that oppress them and working for justice and inclusion.

And yet, in their support of abortion, they neglect the poorest, weakest, and most marginalized of all—the child in the womb. Who is more vulnerable to those who hold power over them? Who is in more need of justice? Why is the child in the womb the great exception to inclusion?

Pro-abortion Christians who speak eloquently against oppression suddenly change their tune and sound like right-wing libertarians when they defend abortion. This inconsistency discredits their whole message.

A different kind of hypocrisy can be seen in members of pro-life churches who defy their own confessional commitment by supporting abortion, even as they still claim allegiance to their church. This is especially apparent in politicians who publicly make much of their identity as Catholics, Baptists, Pentecostals, or confessional Lutherans. And yet they embrace abortion as part of their party's platform.

Even worse, some of these Catholic, Baptist, Pentecostal, or Lutheran politicians were once, in accord with their professed beliefs, pro-life. But they became pro-abortion when the political winds changed.

Abortion in the State Vocations

Human beings were not created to be alone. Not only did God establish families, He also established communities. These in turn have governments, which are in-

tended to curb external sin so as to make societies possible. The proper work of "governors," according to St. Peter, is "to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good" (1 Peter 2:14). They do so by enforcing the civil laws against criminal behavior, thereby protecting the innocent and providing a climate in which positive behavior can flourish.

Romans 13 is an important text for the doctrine of vocation. It explicitly states that God works through and by means of the governing authorities:

> Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. (Romans 13:1-4)

In the verses immediately preceding this chapter, St. Paul forbids personal revenge: "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord'" (Romans 12:19). But immediately afterwards, St. Paul states that the one who is in authority is "an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer" (13:4). The Lord will repay, at least in part, by means of the lawful authorities, whom St. Paul twice describes as God's "servant," indeed as "God's servant for your good."

This text, in the context of Roman rule, also makes clear that God works through non-believers, as well as Christians. We might reserve the word "vocation" for those who know God's *calling* through His Word, using other terms such as "stations" or "office" for the roles God gives to those who do not know Him. Non-Christians as well as Christians can hold public office and be citizens; the labors of both can contribute to the "daily bread" that God gives to both the just and the unjust; and both Christians and non-Christians can marry, forming new families, and be parents, bringing new life into the world. In God's governance of His temporal kingdom, even at its most "secular," He gives His gifts through the instrumentality of human beings.

Lawful authorities also "bear the sword." As Luther develops at length in his treatise *Whether Soldiers Too Can Be Saved*, private individuals may not take another person's life. But God can. And He can do so through "his servant," the lawful authority. Luther says that soldiers can indeed be saved, though they slay their enemies on the battlefield. As individual Christians, they should still love their enemies, but in their offices in the state, they are loving and serving their neighbors by defending them against those who would do them harm, even when that means taking lives. This would apply also to other

civil vocations, such as police officers, judges who may have to hand down a death penalty, executioners (Luther's "hangman"), and others who lawfully "bear the sword."

But authorities who bear the sword against someone who is no evildoer, who has committed no crime and has done no wrong, are clearly violating their vocations. God has not called them to do that. On the contrary, those who are innocent are precisely the ones that the governing vocations are called to protect.

To be sure, our governors are not currently mandating abortions—as the rulers of the People's Republic of China have done—but to pass civil laws allowing such violence on those who have violated no laws is outside of God's bounds for government.

A democratic republic such as ours brings with it another application of Romans 13. In our system of government, sovereignty is invested in "the People." Thus, our governors and lawmakers themselves come under the authority of the citizens who elect them. That means that in the United States and similar democracies, the individual citizen is not only a subject but also a ruler. An American citizen as a voter is obliged to form opinions about the issues the nation faces and about those who serve or want to serve in public office.

Thus, those who have a vocation as citizens of America must also be engaged in making sure their government is protecting the innocent, as opposed to allowing their destruction.

This means that the vocation of American citizen includes the proper work of political activity and voting. The church, as such, must not become involved in ruling over earthly realms—that would be a confusion of vocations and of the Two Kingdoms—but Christians are citizens of both Kingdoms and so they have duties to love and serve their neighbors in their civil callings. This would seem to preclude voting in such a way as to enable or facilitate abortion.

Abortion is not always a partisan issue. Progressives in thrall to a radical feminist ideology do support abortion, but it is hard to see what is so "liberal" about it. Again, progressives' claims to fight for the "little guy" ring hollow when they exclude babies in the womb. But many conservatives also support abortion—as shown in the "red states" that pass pro-abortion referenda—motivated largely by their libertarian ideology, which makes their claim to be for "conserving traditional values" ring hollow.

Abortion and the Gospel

Thus, the acceptability of abortion is a sign of the doctrine of vocation gone horribly wrong—ignored, repudiated, turned inside out—and the violation corrupts the whole range of our callings: in the family, the workplace, the church, and the state.

But this is not the whole story. Though, as Wingren says, when we resist the love of God operative in our vocations we become His enemy, it is also true that

"while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son." And "now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life" (Romans 5:10).

Jesus fit the profile of the unwanted child. And His mother—young, pregnant, and unmarried—fit the profile of a candidate for abortion (even more so, since having been betrothed, she also risked the death penalty for adultery).

But Mary responded in faith to the angel's promise and embraced her calling: "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). Soon after, she visited her relative Elizabeth, also miraculously pregnant, who told her, "behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy" (Luke 1:44). The baby John, who would be called the Baptist, responded to the baby Jesus, both of whom were in the womb, thus proving the personhood of unborn children.

Whereupon Mary exults, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46-47). Scattering the proud and exalting the lowly, God saves by the strength of His arm and by His mercy.

Her child would survive a slaughter of infants (Matthew 2:16-18) and would grow up to atone "for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2). This is because "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Peter 2:24). St. Paul puts it even more strongly: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus bore the sin of all the abortions ever committed and He died for the forgiveness of everyone who committed that sin.

If our sins are largely failures of vocation, as Luther suggests, our forgiveness for those sins also can be found through vocation. In the *Small Catechism*, in the explanation of "Confession," Luther responds to the question, "which sins should I confess?" by urging penitents to apply the Ten Commandments to their "place in life"; that is, to their vocations:

> Consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments: Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, or worker? Have you been disobedient, unfaithful, or lazy? Have you been hot-tempered, rude, or quarrelsome? Have you hurt someone by your words or deeds? Have you stolen, been negligent, wasted anything, or done any harm?[11]

After the penitent confesses the sins of vocation, the confessor asks, "Do you believe that my forgiveness is God's forgiveness?"

The right answer is "yes." In the words of Luther's explanation of the Office of the Keys,

> I believe that when the *called* ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, in particular when they exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation and absolve those who repent of their sins and

want to do better, this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.[12]

Because he is a "called minister," the pastor is a channel through whom Christ works, bringing the forgiveness of sins that He has won through His death and resurrection. Therefore, the pastor can say, in the words of the liturgy,

> Upon this your confession, I, *by virtue of my office, as a called and ordained servant of the Word,* announce the grace of God unto all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit.[13]

In all of our vocations, we should oppose abortion and work for the cause of life. But we are also called to love and serve our neighbor who has had an abortion, or who has purchased an abortion for someone he has gotten pregnant, or who works in an abortion center, or who agitates to make abortion more available. We can channel God's love for them not by pretending that there is nothing wrong in what they do, but by leading them to repentance and bringing them to the forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

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Notes

1. For Luther's doctrine of vocation, see Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (Evansville: Ballast Press, 1994). See also my book *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002).
2. The word "economy" derives from two Greek words meaning "house" and "managing." See *Online Etymological Dictionary*: https://www.etymonline.com/word/economy.
3. "The Third Article of the Creed," *Luther's Small Catechism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 17.
4. The First Article of the Creed," *Small Catechism*, 16.
5. "First Commandment," *Large Catechism* in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), para. 26, p. 389.
6. Wingren*, Luther on Vocation*, 124. See his full treatment of the subject on pp. 123-143.
7. Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 128.
8. See my discussion of this point in *God at Work*, 50-57.
9. Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 29.
10. Exposition of Psalm 127. Quoted in Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 195.
11. "Confession," *Small Catechism*, 25.
12. "Office of the Keys," *Small Catechism*, 27.
13. Divine Service, Setting Three, *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 185.

Gaining Clarity on the *That* and *What* of Life

Dennis Bielfeldt

I

We shall engage the question of life by reflecting upon the fundamental distinction between the *what* and the *that* of any entity. Given that there are many kinds of things, how ought we value particular things that could or might be? Given that an individual is different in some way from any other individual, what are the conditions that make this individuality *precious*? Furthermore, given that a particular thing is precious, what relevance, if any, should be afforded to its act of existence over and against the particularity of that which exists? Ought the individuality of a precious thing, or its existence as such, be sufficient for it to exist *paribus ceteris*? Simply put, what considerations should count against the judgment that an individual thing that would otherwise exist ought not to be?

While this article cannot address all of these issues, it is profoundly interested in the last question, particularly in light of my claim that, in general, *existence is irreducible to essence.* Accordingly, Section II below briefly discusses the metaphysical difference between the *what* and the *that* of a thing, Section III applies those insights to the issue of abortion, and Section IV argues that because of the incommensurability between the act of existence and the kind of particular things that exist, common consequentialist moves in the abortion argument are problematized. A short Epilogue reflects on the theological implications of all of this.

II

In *The Categories,* Aristotle (384-322 bc) famously distinguishes the *said-of* and *present-in* relations that apply to primary substances. A primary substance can, for Aristotle, neither be *said-of* another thing, nor is it *present-in* another thing. Nonetheless, a primary substance is a *particular* about which certain things might be asserted.

A *secondary substance*, on the other hand, is that which can be *said-of* primary substances. Accordingly, secondary substances are universals for Aristotle, e.g., Socrates is a primary substance and human being which can be *said-of* Socrates is

a secondary substance that can also be *said-of* a great many other particulars. The *said-of* relation is transitive; what can be *said-of* a secondary substance can be *said-of* the primary substance, e.g., since mammality can be *said-of* human being, and human being can be *said-of* Socrates, mammality can be *said-of* Socrates. Traditionally, we say that what is *said-of* something else, in Aristotle's sense, is *essential* to that thing.[1] Clearly, Aristotle placed the universality of the abstract form within the thing or *primary substance*.

The *present-in* relation, for Aristotle, is one of inherence. Primary substances have properties dependent upon them that nonetheless might not have been instanced by those substances. These are known as *accidents*, and the list, for Aristotle, is well-known: quality, quantity, relative, place, time, position, having, affecting, and being affected. While Socrates could be Socrates without having a particular whiteness of skin, Socrates cannot be Socrates without being a human being. Accordingly, the particularity of accidents a primary substance displays is *contingent*, while the secondary substances that can be *said-of* the primary substance are *necessary*. Unlike the *said-of* relationship, the *present-in* relationship is not transitive. While a particular mood of foreboding might be *present-in* Socrates, and while what is *present-in* this mood of foreboding is the relational property of being known by *x*, it does not follow that Socrates himself is known by *x*.

Since every primary substance differs from every other primary substance, what is it by virtue of which a primary substance is what it is? The question has traditionally motivated debate among Aristotle scholars about whether or not the philosopher countenanced *individual essences*. To say that something has an individual essence is to say that there exist sets of properties that individuate a particular entity in all possible worlds. If Socrates were to have an individual essence, then any entity in any possible world having that essence would be Socrates. Accordingly, individual essences, unlike general essences or natural kinds, are not *shareable*. While there is some textual support in Aristotle for the existence of individual essences, there is clearly a *prima facie* objection to them in that Aristotle explicitly says in the *Metaphysics* that individuals are indefinable,[2] yet equates definition and essence.[3] Asserting individual essences would, however, solve the problem of what makes a thing a particular thing, since accidents can't ultimately individuate because they are properties that the thing might have but need not have in order for it to be the particular that it is.

Whatever might be thought of this, conjoining those features essential to a thing with those accidental to it does deliver a kind of contingent particular, a primary substance differing from other substances by virtue of the essential and accidental properties it possesses.[4] Left unsolved on this assumption, however, is the question as to the particularity of the particular, for the particularity of Socrates is not definable in terms of the accidental features Socrates possesses.

While Aristotle sought to discriminate universality and particularity, he did not identify particularity with the act of existing itself. This move had to await the ruminations of the High Middle Ages when *esse* was routinely distinguished from *ens*. While the latter refers to a thing having being, the former concerns the *to-be-ness* of that being. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) famously argued that God is wholly *esse* and that all things that exist share *esse* with God. For Aquinas, an *ens* is a determinate limitation of pure *esse*. *Essentia* is, in fact, that limitation of *esse* which produces an *ens*. Accordingly, to be at all is to have some of what God wholly is, for God's essence, that which makes God, is God's *esse*, pure existence itself. To be God is to be in an unqualified way. Accordingly, Thomas can say that God's essence is God's existence.[5]

Duns Scotus (1265-1308) was suspicious of Thomas' Neo-Platonic-inspired understanding that individual things participate in *esse,* the pure existence that is God *in se.* For Scotus, being becomes simply the most general and abstract of concepts applicable to both the finite and the infinite orders. Any possible thing either is or is not. A thing that is has *esse*, while a non-existent thing lacks it entirely. God has *esse* because God exists; mud hens have *esse* because they exist. Unicorns don't have *esse* because they don't exist. Accordingly, God is an *ens*, but a unicorn is not.[6]

While Scotus' consideration of being as the most general and abstract of concepts spelled an end to the "degrees of being" model of the earlier tradition, Scotus was, like his predecessors, very interested in being, particularly the *thisness* of things in comparison to their *whatness*. In fact, Scotus was so interested in particular existence that he routinely employed a technical term to refer to it. For Scotus, *haeccitas* is the primordial thisness of a thing that is not deducible from a thing's *quidditas* or whatness.[7] While every *ens* participates in *esse* for Thomas, Scotus' *haeccitas* is logically irreducible to *quidditas*. God grants and values the *particularity* of being. Particular things have a self-identity not explicable in terms of general natures. Moreover, over and against Thomas, the divine essence does not entail existence.[8]

The separation between *thatness* and *whatness* was enshrined by Kant (1724-1804) in his critique of the ontological argument. The ontological argument, classically stated by Anselm (1089-1152), had argued that since God is that which none greater can be thought, God must exist because it is greater to exist than not to exist. Accordingly, the conceivability of God entails the existence of God. Famously, Anselm had offered a second argument claiming that since God is that which none greater can be thought, God must *necessarily* exist because it is greater to exist necessarily than merely to exist contingently.[9]

Kant, though likely not reading Anselm, would nevertheless have none of this reasoning, for while one can derive three-sidedness from the concept of a triangle, one cannot derive existence from the concept of God. Why? The reason is

that although the c*oncept* of God's perfection might include the *concept* of God's existence, God's *actual* existence is a different matter entirely. The *concept* of an existing God does not an *actual* existing God make. One must distinguish the instantiation of any concept from the concept itself. If one allows existence to be a predicate, then one is stuck with saying, "there is an *x,* such that *x* does not exist." But this is nonsense. Accordingly, no amount of determining *what* can issue in an actually existing *that*.[10]

Once upon a time, the Western tradition widely accepted Augustine's (354-430) notion of *creatio ex nihilo*, the claim that creation itself emerges from nothing. It knew that no amount of moving the deck furniture around upon the ship of existence could produce through that moving a newly existing ship. A causally efficacious God was needed to create and sustain the universe. A divine being with efficient causality was necessary for there to be created things. Being is not merely an inversion or unexplored side of nonbeing, but rather stands out from being on the basis of a divine *fiat*. Existence is not a move in the unfolding of the Absolute Idea, but it is a bringing about of that which was not, *a bringing about not related ultimately to other things that are*.[11]

The West has, of course, been very busy forgetting this insight. Human beings, we are told, are co-creators with God. We envision, construct, paint, compose, and otherwise bring new things out of old, believing that God also engages in ordering the chaos. We forget the old ways because we have forgotten Leibniz's (1646-1716) fundamental question: "Why is there something and not nothing at all?" We dream of quantum cosmology where a multiverse contains all possible ways that the universe might go, including the actual way it went, and thus we attempt to make less jarring the fact of the *existence* of the universe by pointing to the *essential* structure of that from which existence flows. But we lose the point of Leibniz's question, for why does the multiverse, which grounds every trajectory of possible existence, itself exist? Why is there *something* and not merely *nothing*?[12]

Our modern logic presupposes the distinction between *that* and *what*. We express the *what* of anything through monadic and polyadic predicates which take as their values names or terms for existing entities.[13] We might say, for instance, that the *whatness* of the subatomic world is found in the spins, charges, and mass that particular entities possess. But theories of particle physics are accordingly committed to the existence of those entities over which the fundamental theories of particle physics quantify. Quine's (1908-2000) famous quip applies clearly: "To be is to be a value of a bound variable." The domain over which bound variables quantify is the *that* which exists, while the properties and relations that the *that* which exists sustains constitutes the *what* of the properties and relations exhibited. The early Wittgenstein (1889-1951) taught us that we cannot reason from the fact that something exists with determinate properties to the existence of some other existing thing. After all, following Kant, *existence is not a predicate*.[14]

The rejection of the ontological argument and the acceptance of the gap between essence and existence, between polyadic properties and relations and their *instantiation* is standard fare in philosophy, though reasoning in the way of Aquinas is clearly not. But why is this so? Does not the distinction between properties and their *instantiation* recapitulate, as it were, the Thomistic distinction between essence and existence? Moreover, what is the value of this insight to a small subdomain within philosophy dealing with the *ethics of abortion*? Why is it the case here that certain arguments seem to forget the irreducibility of existence to essence—or perhaps the incommensurability of existence and essence—and accordingly assert that the existence or nonexistence of something ought to be justifiably derivable from the particular way other things are?[15]

III

I BELIEVE THAT ARGUMENTS about the permissibility or non-permissibility of abortion often suffer from a loss of precision between the *what* and the *that* of a thing. In what follows I want to be precise *in exploring the structure of common consequentialist arguments that allow abortion*. I shall here not try to prove abortion is always wrong, or even determine under what conditions abortion might be morally permissible. I am only concerned with arguments that regard the property of the *existence* or *nonexistence* of the fetus/baby as inferentially relatable to the *description* of the happiness of agents within the wider context in which that fetus/baby is the ingredient. In simple language, *I am interested in exploring arguments that claim that* "*the baby would be better off not existing than be existing in a situation like this*." For those trained in ethics, I am also assuming that an *ought* cannot be derived from *is*, that whether the baby ought or ought not be aborted is not properly derivable from facts about other matters.[16]

Imagine female *f* and her partner *p* decide that it is morally justified to terminate *f*'s fetus/baby *b* because of the likely liabilities that *f, p*, and *b* would suffer were *b* to exist. Let us assume, for instance, that *f* is living in poverty, that *f*'s relationship with *p* is unstable, that *f* already has three young children, and that *f* will likely descend into substance abuse to mitigate the tensions in her life were *b* to exist. One might, given this scenario, simply do the calculation about what the likely collective utility or disutility would be to *f*, *p*, and *b* were *b* to exist or, alternatively, were *b* not to exist. Included in this utilitarian calculation might be the putative *rights f* has for self-determination, and how carrying and delivering *b* might intrude on the exercise of these rights. One might even suppose that *b* also has a *prima facie* right to exist, for this makes no difference to the structure of the argument. Arguments like this, while structured as purely *consequentialist* in nature, might thus include an element of *deontology,* as suggested

by *f* and *b* having rights. In what follows, however, I am interested only in the *consequentialist* component of the argument.

The question before us is this: Can a description of the *what* of *f*, *p*, and *b*'s pleasure, happiness or tranquility entail either that *b* should exist or should not exist? More to the point, should the calculation of *f*, *p*, and *b*'s total possible happiness on *b* existing or *b* not existing justifiably affect the *existence* of *b* at all?[17]

There are perhaps reasons to say it should. After all, don't we often argue from the *whatness* of an organism's physical condition to a determination to end the *thatness* of an invading virus, bacteria, or parasite? Assume *f* and *p* and bacteria *s* rather than fetus/baby *b.* Thus, *s* exists and this eventuates in the suffering of *f* in whom the bacteria is operating and also perhaps some set $P = \{p_1, p_2 \ldots p_n\}$, the family or friends of that agent. Clearly, we would never claim that the existence or nonexistence of *s* is incommensurate with the happiness of the other agents, that there is no reasonable entailment relation between the eradication of *s* and the happiness of *f* and relevant subsets of *P*. But is not the existence of fetus/baby *b* analogous to the existence of parasite *s*?

We might generalize from this example to the obvious fact that human beings have always had to end the life of other entities for they themselves to survive. I grew up on an Iowa farm and knew that ending the life of bovine, ovine and swine was necessary for a successful farm operation that could provide a means to live. Even if we were only producing cash crops, we knew that we had to limit the population of both noxious plants and insects if we were going to remain profitable. Clearly, we on the farm were motivated by considerations of utility, and in order to bring about this utility, we had to eliminate certain kinds of life. The primitive mists shrouding the origins of humankind cannot occlude the obvious: other life has had to die for human beings to live!

Furthermore, we regularly calculate how much collateral death we can accept in order to bring about other goods. The current response to the Hamas attacks in the Gaza Strip display that just war theory itself enshrines the relatability of the *what* and *that* of life. To respond to Hamas in the way that Israel has done entails their taking of other life, even life not directly involved in the original attacks. Clearly, there is some relation between a description of the *what* of a class of entities or events, and the *that* of other possible things that may or may not exist. Are not we here deciding what to *instantiate* on the basis of what overall utility that instantiation will likely produce, and accordingly relating existence and essence?

Accordingly, it seems that our efforts to disambiguate the act of existence from beings that exist have not been helpful in advancing the discussion with respect to abortion. We have claimed that considerations of utility do not easily inferentially relate to the question of the continued existence of the fetus because existence is of a

different order than how things already existing are. Unfortunately for the argument, however, it seems that human existence itself has always been engaged in calculating how the existence of other things affects the utility of human persons, groups, and perhaps the species itself. One might claim that this is what any evolutionary theory that includes a "fight for survival" assumes. Accordingly, the question is this: Is there a path available to override the incommensurability argument between the *that* and *what* of being for instances of survival and/or livelihood and not in consideration of the life of the fetus?

I don't, however, find the general argument convincing that the *that* of existence of the fetus can be calculated on the basis of utility, even though we routinely calculate *what* beings ought exist (or ought not exist) for the maximal benefit of human life. Why is this?

Perhaps the best way to show the disanalogy between the bacteria's existence and that of the fetus is through employment of a functionality argument. One can plausibly argue, I think, that while having baby *b* is within the proper function of agent *f*, the having of lethal parasite *s* is not within the proper function of agent *f*. The reason is this: *s* it not beneficial for *f*'s survival (or that of her species), making *f* less than what *f* otherwise might be. However, having *b* is within the very nature of *f*, that part of what *f* is includes the possibility of *b*. Simply put, *b* is beneficial for the survival of *f* and her species.[18] In fact, in another age one would have plausibly argued that *f* is diminished were *f* not to have *b*. Thus, while the natural organism *f* has its function optimized in not having *s*, it is arguable that *f*'s function is optimized by *not* terminating *b*. To see what the proper function of a thing is, it is necessary to know the nature of *that* thing, of course, and this commits us to the existence of *natures*, not a category everybody easily countenances.

Clearly, it is now the case that some no longer would regard birthing *b* as part of the nature of *f*. They might say that *b* is no more determined to come about given *f* as *s* is determined to come about given *f*. Accordingly, there is no natural tie between *f* and *b*.

But, of course, it is difficult to claim that there is no natural tie between *f* and *b* when *f* is clearly the *sine qua non* of *b* occurring, i.e., that the having of *b* seems to be a good because were there to be no *b*s at all, there would be no people, no civilization, and certainly not this entire discussion. Accordingly, if *b,* then *f,* and without *f* there can be no *b* (I am going to avoid for now the question of *b* being produced in a laboratory).

But functionality arguments generate controversy, and it is unlikely that I can here develop a fully defensible one. I avert to them only because I am cognizant that some way must be found to argue for the preciousness of *b* existing and not *s* or myriad other things existing. Whatever might be thought about arguments from

proper functionality, that *b* should not be terminated given the happiness of *f* and other relevant agents, while *s* should be terminated does not entail that we accept functionality arguments, but only that we allow defeaters to the claim that the existence or non-existence of some entity cannot be related to the utility for some group that *b* not obtaining might have.

The argument can easily enough be sketched for various defeaters:

1. For all *x*, such that *x* may or may not exist, the existence of *x* is logically independent of the utility that *x*'s existence might have for some group of agents A = $\{a_1, a_2 \ldots a_n\}$.
2. Defeaters of (1) are the following:
   a. When *x*'s existence threatens the existence of subsets of A, and *x* is unconnected to their proper function.
   b. When *x*'s existence threatens the existence of subsets of A, and *x* has very little intrinsic value.
   c. When *x*'s existence or non-existence has historically been connected to the survivability of subsets of A.[19]
3. In all other cases for *x*, the basic incommensurability between the fact that *x* exists and the what or how subsets of A exist, provides *prima facie* justification for the existence of *x*.

Let us thus assume then that we can disarm arguments that make *s* like *b* with respect to *f,* and simply look at calculating the goodness of *b*'s existence given the possible scenarios for *f* and *p* on both *b* and ~*b*. How would such a calculation work? How could one assign a value to the existence of *b* or nonexistence of *b* given that the happiness or pleasure of *f*, *p,* and *b* is incommensurate with the existence of *b*?

Clearly, since there is no *rule* or *recipe* tracking from *whatness* to *thatness*, there can be no rule or recipe from a description of likely or unlikely *consequences* of having *b* to the actual existence of *b*. While it might be possible at the conceptual level to think that *b* should or should not exist given the pleasure or happiness of *f*, *p,* and *b*, the failure of the ontological argument means that the actual *instantiation* of *b* is logically disconnected from a description of the present states of *f, p,* and *b*. The situation is, in fact, relatable to the concept of God where the actual instantiation of God is not derivable from consideration of God's putatively perfect attributes.[20] When it comes to denying the ontological argument, what is good for the goose is good for the gander.

Many more considerations can be added to this argument suggesting that *b* has a fundamental right to exist, but I am not adding them here. I am merely claiming that one cannot simply derive that it is morally permissible to terminate *b*'s existence on the basis of the happiness of *f*, *p*, and *b*. In fact, the ease by which some would reason to the morally permissible of terminating *b* given the likely happiness of *f,*

p, and *b* eerily recalls the *Dasein ohne Leben* reasoning of certain German doctors in the 1930s. They reasoned that the life of a person might be at such a low level of development and concomitant happiness that it is morally permissible to end the *fact* of *that* person's existence to save him/her (and their families) from the *what* of *that*'s likely existence. *Dasein ohne Leben* assumes that existence (or non-existence) can somehow be derived from essence. If existence is not a predicate, that is, if existence is not a property of a being, then there is clearly no conceptual way to argue to it (or away from it) by considering the relational and non-relational properties of that being.

IV

Mary is considering terminating her pregnancy because the total amount of happiness for her, her family, and her fetus/baby will likely increase were she to terminate. She reasons to this in facile ways widely accepted by her culture. Clearly, the fetus/baby is at the stage where its immediate happiness or unhappiness is not profoundly relevant in comparison with Mary's own happiness, her partner's happiness, and the happiness of her family. She aborts the fetus/baby on strictly utilitarian grounds, seemingly including the happiness of the fetus/baby in the calculation. How does what we have discussed concern Mary's concrete decision?

I claim that consequentialism must respect the distinction between the *whatness* and *thatness* of the beings which it is considering. The consequences of events concern the existence or non-existence of properties instanced by the beings impacted by the event. Accordingly, the consequences of Mary's abortion concern which properties Mary, her partner, her family, and the fetus/baby instantiate. One reasons here from w*hatness* to *whatness*. The happiness, pleasure, and total human flourishing of all engaged may indeed increase on the termination of the pregnancy. What I am arguing, however, is that no amount of consideration of *whatness* can entail *that* any of the morally relevant beings *not exist*. *The fact of existence is of a different order entirely than the how or what of existence.* One cannot derive a *that* from a *what*.

This is not to say, however, that consequentialism should not be employed when comparing the *that* of the mother's life with the *that* of the life of the fetus/baby. Here considerations of the *what* of both mother and fetus/baby are relevant. *What-talk* can be helpful when comparing one *that* with another. It may well be that the consequences of not-aborting are decidedly worse for the mother facing possible death in delivery than for the fetus/baby. After all, the mother is conscious in a way that the fetus/baby is not. In addition, the mother has other children; she has a family who has known her for years and loves her. Given the choice between the existence of the mother or fetus/baby, one could likely construct consequentialist arguments showing that it better to abort than not abort. I am not, however, claiming this here.

I am only pointing out that while consequentialist arguments might be helpful in the adjudication between two or more *thats*, they are less helpful when comparing *whats* and *thats*.

But what about rape or incest? Does not the distinction between *that* and *what* mean that a fetus/baby can never be justifiably aborted? I am not claiming this here. What I am arguing is that a *consequentialist* argument cannot legitimately be employed to derive the justifiable non-existence of the fetus/baby from considerations of the happiness of the mother, her family, and friends. This does not mean the *deontological* considerations are not ethically relevant. Not everything in complicated issues of abortion can be decided based on consequentialist thinking. What I have argued is only that for a certain class of moral judgments based upon the likely consequences of aborting the baby/fetus for the happiness of the mother and her family/friends, it is *unjustified* to move from the *what* of their happiness to the *that* of the fetus/baby's existence.

A full defense of this view perhaps demands that one can distinguish degrees of goodness with respect to the *thatness* of a person, fetus/baby, pet, cricket, tree, or mountain. While the *that* cannot be directly derived from the *what,* our moral reasoning oftentimes is concerned with questions about whether or not something justifiably should exist given other things that exist. But considerations of degrees of goodness or rightness cannot be themselves based upon consequentialist reasoning but must employ other kinds of moral reasoning. My argument here is simply that consequentialist reasoning cannot justifiably conclude to the existence or non-existence of fetus/baby *b* based upon sum total of happiness of agents *f, p,* and *b*.

An Epilogue

Christian theology has always understood the preciousness of the individual. God created a particular world in which the kinds of animals were named. Human beings, however, carry particular names because God is interested in each and every particular human being. Particular human beings are baptized and gather around the communion rail where the Body and Blood of Christ is shared *for you.* God calls particular people in and through their walks in life and sometimes while they are in their mother's womb.

The distinction between the *what* of something (*quiddity*) and the *that* of it (*haecceity*) points to the importance of the particular, and Thomas' analysis of *esse* and *ens* speaks to the non-conceptual *grace* of existence itself. Things exist not because their existence is entailed by their essence, but because God has bestowed existence upon them. A Christian theology of existence is a theology of grace. Existence bespeaks contingency, and those things that exist when they might not have do so because of the *freedom* of God. God freely chooses both whom to save and whom to create.

Beginning with this understanding of God easily takes us to the realization of the general incommensurability of existence itself. I have sketched here an argument based upon the presumption that the existence of something is due to the freedom of God and is ultimately *grace*, and that *ceteris paribus*, we have no easy consequentialist argument that allows us to reject the existence of fetus/baby *b* from a consideration of the total utility or disutility of *b*.

That we can reject the existence of bacterium *s* based upon utilitarian grounds can be seen in the defeater provisions we have sketched. However, theologically considered, the defeater conditions carry with them an important property: Those entities we claim are immune to the incommensurability argument are not entities whose *particularity* makes them precious. One lamb feeds the family as well as another; one bacterium causes an illness as well as the next. There is nothing about the particular entities *qua* particular entities that place an incumbency on existence.

This is not so, one could argue, for the fetus. Here *particularity* is all-important. What will my child be like when he or she grows up? Considering the fetus *qua* fetus in isolation for whom that fetus might become is to eschew the presumption of particularity altogether. The argument I have sketched takes particularity and the grace of existence itself very seriously and suggests that we are better off to search for defeaters to the presumption of existence than to cast around for general ethical arguments that build to the notion that human life is precious and upon that basis must be protected.

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Notes

1. Aristotle does not explicitly say this in *The Categories.*
2. See *Metaphysics,* Z10, Z15.
3. See *Metaphysics,* Z4. For more, see Marc Cohen, "Individual and Essence in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*," in George C. Simmons, ed., *Paideia: Special Aristotle Issue* (Buffalo, NY: State University College, 1978), 75-85.
4. As already stated, while a primary substance can for Aristotle exist in itself, accidents are "present-in" primary substances as *features* of those substances. Accordingly, they are *present-in another*, not *beings in themselves.*
5. Even raising the issue of Aquinas and his interpretation of existence as *esse* involves us in fundamental questions about Aristotle, his putative commitment to essentialism, and any

"conceptual imperialism" practiced both by Aristotle and the Neo-Platonic traditions in "forgetting" actual existence. I must confess that I have found the work of Etienne Gilson persuasive on Aquinas. See, inter alia, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 2nd ed. (Toronto, ON: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1952), *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York: Random House, 1955). In *De Ente et Essentia* Aquinas writes: "*Quicquid enim non est de intellectu essentiae vel quiditatis, hoc est adveniens extra et faciens compositionem cum essentia, quia nulla essentia sine his, quae sunt partes essentiae, intelligi potest. Omnis autem essentia vel quiditas potest intelligi sine hoc quod aliquid intelligatur de esse suo; possum enim intelligere quid est homo vel Phoenix et tamen ignorare an esse habeat in rerum natura. Ergo patet quod esse est aliud ab essentia vel quiditate, nisi forte sit aliqua res, cuius quiditas sit ipsum suum esse*"; and "*Unde relinquitur quod talis res, quae sit suum esse, non potest esse nisi una. Unde oportet quod in qualibet alia re praeter eam aliud sit esse suum et aliud quiditas vel natura seu forma sua. Unde oportet quod in intelligentiis sit esse praeter formam; et ideo dictum est quod intelligentia est forma et esse*." See *Corpus Thomisticum*, Saint Thomas Aquinas, *De Ente et Essentia*. Text published by L. Baur of the Westphalian Monastery in 1933. Edited by J. Koch and transferred to magnetic tapes by Roberto Busa SJ. Revised and arranged by Enrique Alarcón, Chapter 3. 2011 Fundación Tomas de Aquino. OCLC nr. 49644264. https://www.corpusthomisticum.org/oee.html. Accessed January 15, 2024. See also Joseph Bobik's 1965 translation of the above Latin in his book, *Aquinas on Being and Essence: A Translation and Interpretation* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965), 159-160: "Whatever is not of the understood content of an essence or quiddity is something which comes from without and makes a composition with the essence, because no essence can be understood without the things which are parts of it. Now, every essence or quiddity can be understood without anything being understood about its existence. For I can understand what a man is, or what a phoenix is, and yet not know whether they have existence in the real world. It is clear, therefore, that existence is other than essence or quiddity, unless perhaps there exists a thing whose quiddity is its existence" (159-160). "Whence it is necessary, that in every thing other than this one its existence be other than its quiddity, or its nature, or its form. Whence it is necessary that existence in the intelligences be something besides the form, and this is why it was said that an intelligence is form and existence" (160).

6. Obviously, my way of speaking suggests that there are *possible* beings, beings that otherwise lack actual existence. The ontological status of *possibilia* was an important question in medieval theology. The debate now is between *possibilism* and *actualism*, of which there are many kinds. Issues arising here go to the heart of questions of identity, namely, the identity of individuals across possible worlds. See Christopher Menzel, "The Possibilism-Actualism Debate," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* Fall 2023, Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman, eds. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/possibilism-actualism/. Accessed December 18, 2023.
7. Paraphrasing Max Black ("The Identity of Indiscernibles," *Mind* 61:153-164), imagine a universe with only two exactly similar balls. Since there is nothing more in the universe than these two balls, all relational properties of the first would have to be that of the second. Accordingly, all qualitative and relational properties are the same for b_1 and b_2. So what makes the first different than the second? While Black holds that the example refutes the principle of the identity of indiscernibles [$\forall x \forall y \forall P(Px \leftrightarrow Py) \rightarrow x = y$], one might claim it does not do this because there is a haeccity that b_1 has that b_2 does not

have, a thisness that is *constituent* in b_1 that is not in b_2. Trying to give an *account* of haeccity is, of course, notoriously difficult. See Richard Cross, "Medieval Theories of Haecceity," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* Winter 2022, Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman, eds. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/medieval-haecceity/. Accessed January 6, 2024: "The reason is that a haecceity is clearly something like a property of a thing – hence like a form – but is at the same time wholly devoid of any correspondence to any conceptual contents. It is not at all a qualitative feature of a thing – not at all a 'quidditative' feature, in the technical vocabulary. As irreducibly particular, it shares no real feature in common with any other thing. This does not mean that haecceities cannot fall under the extension of a concept. *Being an individuating feature* is not a real property of a haecceity (it cannot be, since any haecceity is wholly simple, and shares no real features with any other thing); but any concept of what a haecceity is certainly includes among its components *being an individuating feature*. A concept of a haecceity includes representations merely of logical, not real, features of any haecceity."

8. The so-called ontological argument is usually interpreted as an argument from the perfections of God to divine existence. Anselm is generally regarded as having two ontological arguments. The first reasons that since it is greater for a thing to exist than not exist, that which has perfection – that which none greater can be thought – cannot not exist. The second argues that since it is greater to exist necessarily than to exist contingently, that which none greater can be thought cannot exist merely contingently. On this reading, if that which none greater can be thought can possibly exist, that which none greater can be thought cannot exist non-necessarily.

9. Generally, the second version of the ontological argument has caught the most interest recently. Consider the contingent existence of a necessary being: either it does not possibly exist or does not possibly not exist (~possibly p v ~possibly ~p). From this we derive (possibly p → necessarily p), that if it possibly exists it necessarily exists. It turns out that if p is possible, that is, exists in some world, then it exists in all possible worlds including the actual one. Therefore, from the mere possibility of God's existence we can conclude that God exists.

10. An easy way to grasp the difference between the conceptuality of an individual and the instantiation of it is to imagine oneself on a committee to select a new Dean. Everybody on the committee has contributed to the list of characteristics that this new Dean is to have. He/she must be kind, brilliant, organized, a published scholar well-known in his/her field, a paragon of virtue in the community, etc. Think how odd it would be to add to this list, "he/she must *exist*." Arguably, the concept of the successful candidate does not change when adding or subtracting existence. Consider how odd it would be were the concept itself to change when moving from possibility to actuality. The actual thing would always be a different individual than the possible thing and one could never think of *this* thing not existing. What does not exist could not be *this* thing, though it could be a close counterpart to it.

11. An essential unfolding of what is out of an Absolute Idea (*a la* Hegel) stands far removed from the Aquinas-inspired interpretation I am sketching here. The move from possible existence to actual existence is not conceptual, but deeply *contingent*, and is ultimately dependent upon God and what God finally actualizes.

12. This is the question Heidegger (1889-1776) takes up in his 1929 *Was ist Metaphysic?* In Heidegger's hands, however, the question is reinterpreted as asking why there is the lighting up process of Be-ing itself. How and why is it that Be-ing allows beings to be the beings they are without itself being a being that is?

13. We must accordingly distinguish functions and relations within first-order logic. A function like "father of Mike" uniquely picks out an individual within the set over which the language is quantifying. For instance, for any y and z, + is the sum of y and z, x. Accordingly, + determines a unique x for any y and z. '>' in 'x > y' however is a *relation* because given that x ∈ X and y ∈ Y, it does not follow that for each and every x ∈ X, there is some distinct y ∈ Y to which x maps.

14. One could modify Wittgenstein's assertion 2.024 in the *Tractatus*: "Substance is what exists independently of what is the case" to "existence is what is independently of any description."

15. One might avert here again to Heidegger's efforts to reawaken the ontological question as it has laid dormant under the general "forgetfulness of Being." Heidegger famously argues that in its preoccupation with beings – ontic questions – the Western tradition has passed over the transcendental horizon making possible such beings, a passing over that has ignored phenomenological evidence of Being itself, that "lighting" (*Lichtung*) that cannot be a being, nor the general Being of those beings, but shows itself as that by virtue of which beings are beings for that being (*Dasein*) for whom Being is at issue. Heidegger's emphasis on the process of Be-ing which itself grounds beings but is itself not a being recalls the irreducibility of existence to essence generally. Just as the essentialist tradition stemming from Aristotle has covered up existence, so has it obscured Be-ing generally, interpreting that which is rightfully ontological and transcendental as itself a denizen of the realm of *Vorhandensein*.

16. The question of deriving an *ought* from an *is* is fundamental in ethics, and the controversy rages on. While Hume famously argued that factual statements ("is" statements) cannot entail value statements ("ought" statements), many philosophers challenge the distinction nowadays, with John Searle giving the example of *institutional* statements such as promise-making. Here, clearly, "x promises to do y" logically entails "*ceteris paribus*, x ought to do y." A. N. Prior pointed out that if P is an is-statement and Q an ought-statement, and P entails P v Q, then we must ask if P v Q is an is-statement or and ought-statement. If P v Q is an ought statement, then we have derived an ought from an is. So assume P v Q is an is-statement. But now P v Q on the supposition of ~P, gives Q, which is an ought statement.

17. All utilitarian or consequentialist ethics have the formal structure of "given that act *x* likely produces consequences Y, we ought to (or ought not to) do *x*." The problem, of course, is that while *x* likely produces Y, one never knows for sure that Y will obtain given *x*. The problem of *unforeseen* consequences is, I believe, a profound one for consequentialism, although it is often not thematized in consequentialist argumentation.

18. One might quibble with my statement that *b*'s existence is beneficial for *f* herself, because many women have died during childbirth. A rejoinder might point to the traditional role that children played in the survivability of their parents, but it is unclear that this response is strong enough to overcome the objection. It is, however, uncontroversial that having *b* is necessary for the continued existence of the species.

19. We can provide more defeaters, of course. These were the three that occurred to me.

20. We can argue that the Christian God and God's relation to creation cannot be understood in terms of Neo-Platonic categories, or in the way of Spinoza whose embrace of the ontological argument is well known.

A Pauline Response to the Myth of the Autonomous, Normative Self

Daniel Lioy

Major claim: The concept of the autonomous, normative self,[1] which is often idealized in the global North, can be seen as a form of idolatry that Paul condemns in Romans 1:18–32.

Introduction

Western societies today face many internal challenges related to changing cultural norms. The global North's emphasis on the autonomous, normative self—as well as obsessing over sexuality, identity politics, intersectionality, and so on—is especially pervasive and harmful.

Carl Trueman, a professor at Grove City College, traces how the intellectual, aesthetic, and cultural developments in the West set the stage for the societal pathologies noted above. He does so in *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Crossway, 2020) as well as in *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution* (Crossway, 2022).

What appears below is a candid, objective distillation, synthesis, and meta-analysis of the architecture of ideas that Trueman examines, followed by a consideration of Paul's indictment in Romans 1:18–32 of those who reject the one, true, and living God. This includes the direct applicability of the apostle's remarks to the myth of the autonomous, normative self, which engages in sexual behaviors that contradict the teaching of Christian Scripture.

Trueman, while operating from a Reformed Calvinist perspective, approaches the subject of how the contemporary, mythological notion of the self became psychologized, then sexualized, and finally politicized. That said, his evaluation and critique resonate with classic, orthodox Christians.

Concededly, as with any taxonomy that makes broad generalizations, a shorthand like that put forward by Trueman has its limitations, including the possible

oversimplification of complex, multi-causal phenomena. Yet, despite the provisional nature of Trueman's various classifications, these help to distill important ideas in ways that are cogent and accessible.

For example, consider the following notions that comprise the accepted ideology of contemporary society:

INTERSECTIONALITY: the supposedly immutable hierarchy of oppression against certain groups;

CRITICAL RACE THEORY: insisting that racial identity is determinative as to the entire trajectory of one's life;

RADICAL FEMINISM: not that women should be equal to men, but that women need to be "liberated" from traditional, heteronormative family roles; and,

TRANSGENDERISM: allegedly there are multiple genders, and individuals can fluidly transition between them.

As the upcoming sections detail, *anthropology* is the core issue being debated, namely, one's understanding of what it means to be human.

The Dramatic Transformation of the West's Understanding of the Self

TRUEMAN BEGINS BY FRAMING his historical narrative about thinkers, philosophers, and poets around three theoretical pillars. First is the concept of the "social imaginary" worldview (as described by Charles Taylor). This refers to the complex web of beliefs and assumptions, along with expectations and practices, that are unconsciously shared throughout a culture and shape the lives of its members in dramatic ways.

Second is the notion of the "psychological man" (as described by Philip Rieff). This claims that existential meaning and genuine authenticity are only found within a person, not in the outside world (such as one's community and institutions).

Third is the assertion that there are no moral absolutes. Instead, all ethical discourse in the West is just a matter of a one's subjective feelings, arbitrary preferences, and shifting desires (in other words, "emotivism"; as described by Alasdair MacIntyre).

Trueman uses the preceding triad as the foundation for the superstructure of concepts he sets forth in his treatise. His objective is to sketch how a diverse cast of luminaries—including Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Charles Darwin, and Sigmund Freud, along with three poets of the Romantic era, William Wordsworth, Percy Shelley, and William Blake—have influenced societal thought over the past several hundred years.

In the process, Trueman outlines the dramatic transformation of the West's understanding of the self. The author also delineates how this radically new mythological notion dominates the current intellectual and cultural horizon (ranging from politics to the performing arts to literature to music).

For instance, the modern self is characterized by "expressive individualism," which means that people are truly authentic only when they display outwardly what they are feeling inwardly. Likewise, the modern self equates happiness with an inner sense of psychological wellbeing and satisfaction.

Admittedly, the concept of interiority is not a recent invention. The notion can be found in Aristotle, in Paul's teaching about the inner and outer man, in the kind of medieval mysticism that influenced Luther, in Calvin's insistence on the knowledge of God that comes with the knowledge of self, and so on.

The above notwithstanding, the contemporary understanding of interiority has evolved significantly. As detailed below, there is an emphasis on individualism, materialism, and often neglecting interpersonal relationships.

Furthermore, the modern self sees all things immanently. Here there is nothing beyond the material realm to provide it with any significance or purpose. Every aspect of reality is understood by the limits of what can be detected and experienced through sensory information.

The above is exhibited in the West's notion of moral right and wrong. Rather than being determined by a transcendent, metaphysical, or supernatural authority, ethical thinking is driven by what enables a person to feel happy.

Also involved is the idea of consent. When an action is given consent, it is regarded as ethically right, whereas the absence of consent labels an action as ethically wrong.

Furthermore, in the West, morality is often viewed through the lens of utilitarianism, namely, what brings the most happiness to the most people. This contrasts with moral frameworks that are grounded in religious doctrine or natural law, which rely on an authority that exists above and beyond mere human experience.

The Sexual Revolution's Domination of the Present-Day Cultural Imagination

The upending of morality is most explicitly seen by the way in which the sexual revolution now dominates the present-day cultural imagination. This development is not simply a relaxation and expansion of acceptable ethical standards.

Instead, the sexual revolution is an across-the-board repudiation and overturning of traditional morality. This is evident by the fact that, in just a few generations, there has been a dramatic change in how society understands sexuality and its importance.

For example, consider society's visceral renunciation of the longstanding conviction that the "male" and "female" genders are biologically rooted and scientifically validated distinctions. According to current understanding, "gender" is not binary, but rather fluid, encompasses diverse identities, and varies across cultures and over time.

Additionally, the sexual revolution goes beyond a mere fine-tuning of what is permissible behavior. As noted above, the giving of consent makes an activity morally acceptable, whereas withholding consent makes an activity morally unacceptable. Here, the rules of right and wrong have been so attenuated that violating them carries virtually no public stigma.

The current social and cultural movement is an utter break from the traditional notion of human identity. Specifically, sex is regarded, not so much as an activity, but as the way in which individuals define and describe their personhood.

The foundational reasoning of such arguments displays a lack of coherence, internal contradictions, and a departure from reality. In effect, whatever claims to truth this view makes are discredited, especially since it fosters a pattern of self-destructive behavior among its most zealous adherents.

Nonetheless, it would be shortsighted to downplay, ignore, or dismiss the significance of what has transpired in recent years. As Trueman cogently observes, the "sexual revolution, and its various manifestations in modern society, cannot be treated in isolation." Instead, it "must be interpreted as the specific and perhaps most obvious social manifestation of a much deeper and wider revolution in the understanding of what it means to be a self."

The Historical Trajectory of How the Myth of the Autonomous, Normative Self Evolved

What follows is a more nuanced explanation of how the myth of the autonomous, normative self evolved over time. For instance, a longstanding view is that the self and culture are rooted in an external, transcendent, sacred order (as reflected in one's ethnic group, family, and faith community). According to this understanding of reality, personal, private morality, along with how society is shaped, are meant to conform to and imitate what God originally established in creation before the fall of humankind into sin.

Yet, since at least the mid-twentieth century, secular thinkers have argued that either God does not exist or is irrelevant to daily life. Likewise, individuals and institutions (whether public or private, religious or secular) have jettisoned the notion of God and supplanted it with the myth that the self reigns supreme as an autonomous, normative entity over every aspect of life.

Moreover, it is said that a just society exists to resist the oppressiveness of entrenched heterosexual norms. This includes obliterating sexual taboos, repudiating the biblical teaching about gender and marriage, and abolishing the biological family, along with not only tolerating, but also being forced to affirm the validity of abortion on demand, same-sex marriage, no-fault divorce, rampant pornography, and other forms of unbiblical sexual behavior.

The preceding mindset embraces the contestable assertion that the world is sharply divided between two opposing classes or groups. These are referred to as either the oppressors and the oppressed or the victimizers and the victims. Allegedly, the marginalized have the mandate and moral authority to strip the privileged of their status, wealth, and power.

Trueman utilizes various labels to trace the historical trajectory of how the myth of the autonomous, normative self evolved over time. At its most basic level, human selfhood is the conscious awareness people have of who and what they are. This notion includes the ways in which people imagine their purpose in life, what makes them happy, and wherein their freedom is found.

One label Trueman puts forward (which he obtained from Rieff) is the "psychological/therapeutic self." The underlying concept is that individuals find real identity in their inner, emotional autobiography.

One's conscience is informed, not by a heteronormative, patriarchal, misogynistic, and systemically racist society that is cruel, degrading, and inhumane, but by a person's empathy and sympathy. What a person instinctively feels becomes the sole basis for making decisions that have ethical ramifications.

The above mindset gives rise to the present-day notion referred to earlier as "expressive individualism." Admittedly, given the pervasiveness of this mindset within the culture of the global North, even Christians exhibit it in some ways.

Nonetheless, a more radicalized version of expressive individualism has become the basis for the spread of socially liberal, consumerist/consumptionist, and antinomian attitudes. For instance, it is claimed that everyone has a distinctive core of emotions, intuitions, and sentiments. Moreover, these must be allowed to develop, as well as be publicly voiced and enacted, for one's identity and potential to be fully actualized.

The "romantic self" picks up on the idea of turning inward, along with going back to an idealized, rural existence. In this way of perceiving reality, true morality is determined by what impulsively looks and feels right to those living in harmony with nature.

The "plastic/pliable self" refers to those who affirm the notion of an independent, self-consciousness. They also reject any real dependency on others, which leads to an overemphasis on being self-reliant.

These individuals imagine they can reconstruct their personal identity whenever and however they wish. Allegedly, by exploiting technology (including the mutilation of bodily appearance through puberty blockers, cross-sex hormones, and irreversible surgical procedures), everyone can rise above their innate biology (particularly, their sex assigned at birth).

The preceding mindset is reflected in the slogan, "You create you." It is also a form of transgenderism (namely, to exceed the bounds of one's gender). In turn, transgenderism serves as a gateway to transhumanism (namely, to go beyond the limits of one's corporeal restraints).

The intent is to redefine who and what an individual is with the lofty ambition of being totally liberated from (or to be unshackled by) the confines of one's physical embodiment. Advocates claim that through advancements in genetic engineering, nanotechnology, and so on, humankind can achieve a quantum leap in intelligence, strength, and lifespan (including the eradication of mortality) to become *homo deus* ("god-man").

So, on the one hand, the modern self renounces the biblical teaching of a transcendent Creator, who alone is glorious, holy, and all-powerful. Yet, on the other hand, there is the self-absorbed goal to transcend the limits of one's humanity and ascend to a higher plane of endless, conscious existence. In short, this is a disembodied, libertarian anthropology.

The basis for the above crypto-gnostic view is the belief that one's anatomy and physiology are neither fixed nor required to abide by the fossilized, repressive, ethical norms imposed by heteronormative society. Rather, all aspects of human nature—especially one's sex/gender—are fluid, malleable, and ever-evolving (particularly in response to trendsetting cues, prescriptions, and norms).

The "sexual self" builds on the preceding ideas by equating personal identity with sexuality and sex (rather than seeing these as a function of who people are). For this reason, people are categorized according to their sexual desires, whether straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, transgender, and so on.

Moreover, the sex drive becomes the all-defining center and meaning of a person's identity. Indeed, it is asserted that those who experience high levels of contentment and satisfaction feel free to explore their sexual desires.

One's inner, imagined notion of their "sexual self" even takes precedence over their biological sex. This explains why such assertions as "I am a woman trapped in a man's body" or "I'm a man trapped in a woman's body" are now part of a militant social dogma to which everyone must conform.

Because personal preferences about sexual desire and orientation are treated as ironclad truth claims, they become the basis for charting the ethical path one follows. So, to be truly authentic, one must be willing to acknowledge and act on their unique desires, even if these are considered off limits by those who embrace traditional values.

The "politicized self" considers heteronormative society's disapproval of one's sexual desires as a moral offense, as well as a form of harassment, violence, and tyranny. Those who feel stymied to express their sexual preferences claim they have been unfairly stereotyped, marginalized, and harmed by strict codes of conduct.

Any attempt, then, to challenge someone's right to personal happiness is labeled as a wicked or even illegal act. So, if heteronormative society outlaws certain sexual orientations and activities, it is tantamount to the criminalization of particular sexual identities. Stated another way, it is a dehumanizing attack on the core personhood, dignity, and worth of an individual.

The modern self regards the above circumstance as so odious that the authoritarian state, as reflected in longstanding, Western ideals, must be toppled by means of a culture war centered on issues of race, gender, and sexuality. It is claimed that through sexual revolution, all white, male, hegemonic power structures can be demolished, resulting in political liberation.

The Consequences of the Autonomous, Normative Self's Hegemony in the West

To discern the consequences of the autonomous, normative self's hegemony in the West, we begin with Trueman's discussion of two different ways of thinking about the world (as articulated by Taylor). First, *mimesis* (from the Greek term for "imitating") considers the world as having a given order and meaning. Likewise, people discover that meaning and conform themselves to it.

Second, *poiesis* (from the Greek term for "making") regards the world as nothing more than raw material out of which everyone constructs their own meaning,

purpose, and destiny. Expressed differently, the world is comparable to a giant blob of playdough over which a person can impose his/her will.

Here the autonomous, normative self is like a deity that is free to explore and create its own personalized reality (including its own concept of existence, of meaning, of the entire universe, and of the mystery of life), yet without any pushback from others. This mindset overemphasizes individualism, in which the all-out pursuit of happiness and the rituals associated with self-fashioning take center stage in one's life.

Next, Trueman draws attention to Rieff's delineation of three different types of worlds. "First world" cultures are predominantly non-Christian, and devise ethical codes based on widely accepted myths.

In contrast, "second world" cultures are established on some sort of faith in God. Like "first worlds," "second worlds" anchor their moral outlook on what is transcendent and external.

"Third world" cultures reject moral imperatives being linked to anything metaphysical and sacred. Instead, ethics are defined by one's personal interests. Since there is nothing and no one above the autonomous, normative self, people become the sole basis for their attitudes, priorities, and actions (all of which are beyond critique, disapproval, and regulation).

Many believe that society exists to satisfy an individual's psychosexual needs and appetites. For instance, colleges and universities traditionally were centers of learning to educate, train, and mentor students.

Now many of these organizations have devolved into platforms that promote controversial and extreme views, organize disruptive protests, and damage the reputations of those who disagree. In turn, this has led to what some have declared to be a declining quality of faculty, a politicization of scholarly disciplines, an intolerance of opposing views, and a constricting of academic freedom.

Moreover, other institutions and communities (including churches) must accept and accommodate the above prevalent outlook. Any law, regulation, or organization that becomes an obstacle to a preferred outcome is deemed illegitimate.

If required, compliance is maintained through various enforcement mechanisms, such as updated guidelines for speech, housing regulations, school curriculum, employment laws, adoption standards, and so on. This can sometimes lead to a form of strict behavioral control, which may inadvertently contribute to feelings of isolation, division, and extremism.

A failure to virtue signal one's fealty to the new authoritarian teaching often invites outrage, scorn, and vilification (including animus toward historic Christianity), especially through social media fatwas (or strident assertions of condemnation).

Dissenters are frequently seen as suffering from a serious mental illness that is labeled as *phobic* (for example, homophobic, transphobic, and so on).

Moreover, free speech is condemned as a means of oppression, a tool of linguistic hatred, and an instrument for psychological harm. In some cases, free speech that runs counter to prevailing narratives may be regulated, restricted, or prohibited.

Concurrent with the preceding developments is a marked shift throughout the global North in its cultural attitudes toward traditional Christianity. In general, as various observers of societal trends have argued, until around 1994, the West seemed largely positive in its sentiment toward Christianity. Then, for roughly the next two decades, the West adopted a more neutral posture. Finally, around 2014, the West embraced an increasingly negative, antithetical stance toward Christianity.

The widespread repudiation of Judeo-Christian moral values has led to an antagonistic view of orthodox Christianity as an incomprehensible, contestable, fringe sect. Indeed, biblically-based ethics are not only regarded with suspicion and hostility, but also considered to be an existential threat to the axiomatic views favored by many left-leaning radicals (including their desire to usher in a progressive utopia).

The above reality explains why devout followers of the Lord Jesus increasingly find themselves to be social pariahs. This is particularly so among elitists within education, politics, corporations, journalism, and entertainment. Justifiably, in 2012, Pope Benedict XVI observed that the "light of Christianity" was "flickering out all over the West."

Also noteworthy is Rieff's concept of *deathworks*. This is described as an all-out attack upon anything considered to be of utmost importance to the entrenched culture.

So, for example, Rieff labels "third worlds" as being an "anti-culture." In keeping with what was stated above, the moral frameworks and civilizations connected with the "first" and "second worlds" are so oppressive and restrictive to the freedom of the autonomous, normative self, that they must be spurned, dismantled, and invalidated.

In a similar vein, Rousseau claims that at birth people are inherently moral creatures whose instincts and sentiments are misshapen by their environment and culture. Put another way, it is a corrupt society, not a fallen self, that is the repository of and catalyst for evil.

There are also such Romantic writers as Wordsworth, Shelley, and Blake, who each emphasize an emotive intuition of reality. It is alleged that for the autonomous, normative self to be genuinely authentic, it must discover and freely act on the inner, pristine voice of one's (sexualized) nature.

Yet, by throwing off all moral restraint, those championing pervasive self-indulgence have unwittingly spawned the destructive forces of ethical nihilism, chaos,

and anarchy. Then, as competing factions battle one another for power, privilege, and cultural supremacy, it creates a toxic and divisive environment.

Trueman discusses what Taylor calls "expressive individualism" and Rieff labels the "psychological man." These notions of personhood contribute to the radical redefinition of human sexuality.

Furthermore, Trueman spotlights the works of Nietzsche and Marx, who politicize the concept of the self. Freud and Reich go further by sexualizing the self.

The result is that sex moves from a physical act to the basis for defining one's inner identity as an innately satisfied and fulfilled human being. In brief, *homo eroticus* ("sexualized man") replaces *homo adorans* ("worshiping man").

Each of the above thinkers pave the way for the rise of the therapeutic self, along with the constructs of sexual and gender identity. Those who adopt this view of reality experience cognitive dissonance between how they perceive their gender versus the sex assigned to them at birth.

Absent are any notions of people being created in the image of God as either male or female, who, though fallen, are redeemed through faith in Christ. Embraced is the mantra of being liberated from allegedly repressive and abusive forms of heteronormative sexuality, as well as the racist, colonizing political structures imposed by an obsolete and impotent moral order.

Emphasis is placed on one's feelings and psychological impulses. These become all-defining, especially as each person looks inward to indicate who they are as unique, sexually liberated, and self-determining individuals.

Furthermore, true personhood is equated with self-consciousness (in other words, the ability to operate as a sentient, free, and intentional agent). According to this view, an unborn fetus, a newborn infant, and people suffering from severe forms of dementia, do not possess a minimal degree of self-consciousness.

For the preceding reason, it is allegedly lawful to deny such entities any rights and treat them in non-personal, inhumane ways (including such state-sanctioned, culture-of-death atrocities as abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia). The logical outcome of this line of reasoning is that if one human being is disposable, then every human being can become disposable.

Classic orthodox Christians view reality (both physical and metaphysical) quite differently from the above cruel utilitarian formula, including the equitable treatment of the weak, the vulnerable, and the excluded in contemporary society. Instead of promoting the myth that the autonomous, normative self is the measure of all things, followers of Christ consider God to be the sovereign Creator and Scripture to be the highest revelatory authority.

Paul's Indictment in Romans 1:18-32 of Those Who Reject God

THE PRECEDING THEOLOGICAL STANCE is validated by an examination of Paul's indictment in Romans 1:18–32 of those who reject God. This includes the direct applicability of the apostle's remarks to the myth of the autonomous, normative self, which engages in unbiblical sexual conduct.

To begin, Paul explained that God, who reigned from heaven, made known His "wrath" (v. 18) against all forms of wickedness. Manifestations of His righteous judgment in the present anticipated the final day of reckoning.

People used profane thoughts (especially about God) and debased behavior (especially between people) to hold down the "truth" about God's eternal existence and sovereign rule. All such efforts were futile, for the Creator would never permit anyone to restrain the knowledge of His sacred character and the reality of His invisible qualities from being disclosed in creation.

In verses 19–20, Paul declared that God has made the truth of His existence obvious to all humankind. Scripture reveals that the Lord, who is "spirit" (John 4:24), is invisible (Col 1:15; 1 Tim 1:17; Heb 11:27); yet, even though the physical eye cannot see the Creator, His existence is reflected in what He has made.

Moreover, Paul explained that since God brought the universe into existence, He has made His "invisible attributes" (Rom 1:20) plainly clear. This included the Creator's "eternal power" and "divine nature."

Indeed, since the dawn of time, people have an instinctive awareness—which is reinforced by observing creation—that there is a supreme being. So, they cannot reasonably justify their decision to reject the Creator and refuse to submit to His will.

By seeing the intricate design of the universe, people—who bear God's image—can innately understand certain aspects of His nature (v. 21). Regardless of humanity's mental prowess and educational attainments, the Creator's assessment is that they are morally deficient (v. 22).

Verse 23 draws attention to a descending hierarchy of idolatry, beginning with the veneration of humans and moving to the worship of birds, animals, and reptiles. Expressed differently, people invent gods and goddesses patterned after various forms of life (Deut 4:15–18; Ps 106:20; Jer 2:11). In turn, the enslavement of some people to idols leads to their alienation from the one, true, and living God.

Because of idolatry, God deliberately abandoned the Gentiles to their depravity (Rom 1:24). So, instead of attempting to restrain their wickedness, God simply allowed their objectionable behavior to run its course. Specifically, the Creator

removed His influence and permitted fallen humanity's willful rejection to produce its natural and inevitable consequences, which in this case were deadly.

Paul was writing from Corinth, the location of Aphrodite's temple. At the time he penned Romans, this shrine housed hundreds of temple prostitutes who were used sexually as an act of worship to pagan deities. These degrading acts were believed to provoke the gods and goddesses into doing similar acts, which resulted in increased crops and larger families.

Such religious prostitution was common in Roman culture. In this way, many individuals traded the truth about God's existence and rule for a "lie" (v. 25), particularly when it involved idol worship.

As noted earlier, through people's attitudes and actions, they revered created things, rather than the all-powerful Lord. As a counterweight to humankind's perverted acts, Paul burst forth in praise to God and sealed the exclamation with an "Amen."

In verse 26, we read for the second time that God intentionally abandoned humankind, but in this case it was to degrading passions. Yet, unlike the immorality committed by the cultic prostitutes, these sexual sins were private.

Individuals perverted God's gift of physical intimacy in the context of marriage by shamelessly engaging in homosexual acts. Men and women exchanged "natural relations" (between men and women) with "unnatural" relations (men with men and women with women).

Paul literally said those of the same gender "burned with intense desire" (v. 27) for one another. As a result of such indecent behavior, people received the divinely-sanctioned "penalty," namely, the scourge of indulging their sexual perversions.

In verse 28, we read for the third time that God actively abandoned people, but in this case it was to a morally reprehensible way of thinking. People not only refused to acknowledge the Creator's existence, but also to submit to His will.

Expressed differently, the reprobates put God's sensible boundaries out of their thoughts, and He responded by surrendering them to a distorted view of reality. Out of this mindset arose all kinds of evil deeds.

Verses 29-30 list the indecent behaviors condemned in verse 28. Paul categorized the conduct of the morally degenerate into four clusters of active sin: wickedness (the opposite of righteousness), evil (the profound absence of empathy, shame, and goodness), greed (the relentless urge to acquire more than one needs), and depravity (a constant bent toward immorality). These four basic kinds of deliberate, objectionable behavior in turn express themselves in specific ways.

For instance, those whom God abandoned are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God haters; they are insolent, arrogant,

and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, and ruthless (vv. 29–31).

The despicable conduct of these individuals was not due to ignorance of God's commands (v. 32). Rather, they sinned despite their limited awareness of the Creator, making them all the more culpable.

Even worse, these individuals applauded the preceding objectionable practices among others. Perhaps seeing their peers do these sorts of activities filled the instigators with a sense of self-justification. In any case, they received what they deserved, namely, death or eternal separation from God.

Conclusion

This essay presents a candid, objective distillation, synthesis, and meta-analysis of Trueman's two recent works. In these treatises, he explains how the myth of the autonomous, normative self arose and became the catalyst for the sexual revolution.

The essay first considers the dramatic transformation of the West's understanding of the self. Second, the discourse explores the sexual revolution's domination of the present-day cultural imagination. Third, the essay traces the historical trajectory of how the myth of the autonomous, normative self evolved. Fourth, the discourse details the consequences of the autonomous, normative self's hegemony in the West.

Fifth, and finally, the essay sets forth Paul's indictment in Romans 1:18–32 of those who reject God, including its applicability to the myth of the autonomous, normative self. Despite often being idealized in the global North, it is a form of idolatry that the apostle condemns.

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Note

1. An earlier version of this essay was published in June 2022 as a blog article on the website of South African Theological Seminary. Weblink: https://sats.ac.za/blog/2022/06/22/the-autonomous-normative-self-by-professor-dan-lioy/

A Christian Critique of Transgenderism

Robert Benne

Sexual dysphoria was recognized and treated as a psychiatric disorder for many years. One of the first public cases was that of a tennis player by the male name of Richard Raskind, who transitioned to be Rene Richards in the mid-70s. In these classic cases, it was assumed that sexual dysphoria was indeed a disorder. There are still a small number of such persons suffering from that disorder, for whom Christians should show compassion and understanding.

However, what we are experiencing currently is something entirely different. A growing number of persons, centers, and proponents of transition are driven by a destructive and anti-Christian ideology that Christians must resist. The transgender movement is an "ism" capturing the minds and wills of an increasing number of young persons, even those who have not yet reached puberty. It is contagious among adolescents, especially girls, who are anxious and nervous about their sexual identity. Other young people have psychological and spiritual maladies that they think will be cured by transitioning toward the opposite gender and sex. Transgenderism—pushed by therapists, teachers, doctors, and other "experts"— persuades and cajoles those young people into making the first steps toward sexual transition. The movement even wants to invade children's minds, a highly controversial and dangerous agenda eliciting political push-back. (The distinction between "transsexual" and "transgender" is now being collapsed for ideological reasons, but it is yet an important one. Transgenders aim at playing the role of the opposite sex without physical change, while transsexuals aim at both role-playing and physical change.)

While there may be some "successful" transitions (gender and sex), most, to say the least, are ambiguous. Even the successful ones give up the person's fertility and their ability to express sexual love to the opposite sex and, in many cases, give up their sexual organs themselves, with ugly and inadequate surgical substitutes. There is also a good deal of disapproval of their choice and their looks by strangers and friends alike. Many people view them as freaks, some of whom react violently to them. This precariousness leads to high rates of depression and suicide. A portion even tries to re-transition to their original sex/gender.

One could account for this growing negative trend by merely recognizing that societies of high affluence and false notions of freedom (license rather than virtue-guided freedom) tend to experience a degeneration of wholesome values. Christians know that freeing selves from training in virtue will result in decay and chaos. However, a more detailed analysis might be offered by Carl Trueman's celebrated book *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution.* Trueman traces the intellectual lineage that finally results in the triumph of "expressive individualism," which means a life of "authenticity" in which the internal desires and definitions of the self are expressed onto the surrounding world. Disapproving such expression is "hate" speech and violates the individual's freedom. Expressive individualism is particularly regnant in the realm of sexual identity and behavior, though with an emphasis on the former. Thus, we have sexual and gender fluidity, wherein each individual expresses his or her gender identity. The epitome of such expression occurs in sexual and gender transition. It is so extreme that it sometimes entails changing sexual organs to conform to that internal sense of identity.

Christians should oppose transgenderism simply because of the harm done to young people and society. That harm to body and spirit certainly involves a high incidence of suicide but also the danger of psychological abuse and even physical attack. Further, there is a broader harm done to the society. When a significant portion of young people obsess about their sexual identity, it undermines many essential social practices: marriage, having children, and participating in voluntary activities. Self-obsession also undermines other concerns and care.

On a deeper theological plane, transgenderism is a rebellion against the God-given sexual order. Male and female he created them, and Christians happily accept and embrace what has been given, not what is "assigned" at birth. It is a serious sin to refuse one's sex if the desires of the expressive self generate that refusal. If the transgender condition is a psychiatric fixed disorder, then it is not so much a sin as it is a tragedy and should be met with patience and compassion. But such a disorder would disallow such persons from occupying important positions in the church.

Further, transgenderism as an ideology and movement encourages persons to have contempt for the body given to them by the Lord. The imperial self rises above the given natural body of the person and manipulates it according to the self's desires. Such a claim to mastery is a sin of pride and has Gnostic reverberations: The physical world is inferior to our spiritual and intellectual capacities and can be manipulated—and transcended—by them.

People who follow transgenderism's ideological agenda can end up as transsexuals, people who have destroyed their given sexual organs and capacities. Such self-mutilation is a sin against the giftedness of our bodies as created in

the image of God, which in turn prevents natural love-making, marriage, and procreation. It refuses our calling to marriage, one of God's routes to purpose and service to the neighbor.

All in all, transgenderism as a movement and an ideology should be resisted by Christians on theological-ethical grounds. It is incompatible with a Christian theology of the body. Going against God's created order will lead to great harm for individuals and society.

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Tracking the Issue of Life in a Context of Antisemitism/Anti-Judaism

Is there a relationship between the Hamas attacks on Jewish citizens, Israel's defense of its country via an intense attack on Hamas and its minions in the Gaza Strip, and the issue of life generally? If so, what precisely is that relationship? Does Just War theory connect to the current context of widespread support for Hamas and the concomitant virulent denunciation of the Jewish policy and citizens? If so, how does it connect? Moreover, is the display of antisemitism/anti-Judaism we are witnessing worldwide suggestive of an underlying *ontology of death*, or is the matter simply that different people see things differently, namely, that antisemitism/anti-Judaism now merely exist in the eyes of the beholder?

Clearly, these are very large questions, and they cannot be adjudicated facilely in a brief article. However, we do have the requisite space in this first issue of *Verba Vitae* to present Rev. John Rasmussen's statement on the reappearance of antisemitism/anti-Judaism again around the world. Rev. Rasmussen presented the following to the faculties of ILT's Christ School of Theology and Christ College recently. We print what he presented below in its entirety because we believe that John's work deserves to be in print and because we believe that the issues involved in Just War theory have much to teach us about the being of life generally.

Dennis Bielfeldt, General Editor

On the Eruption of Antisemitism/Anti-Judaism on University and College Campuses in the Wake of Hamas' Terrorist Attack on Israel and Israel's Declaration of War on Hamas:

A Declaration

John Rasmussen

We stipulate the following facts—

- On October 7, 2023, the terrorist organization known as *Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya* (HAMAS) [the Islamic Resistance Movement], without warning, launched a coordinated surprise attack on Israeli civilians from the Gaza Strip, massacring over 1200 non-combatants of whom at least 31 were Americans.[1]

- The assault included the intentional and wanton slaughter of young people attending a peace concert, the butchering of families in their homes, the raping of women, both young and elderly, and the beheading and burning of infants and toddlers. In one case, a pregnant woman's belly was sliced open and the infant mercilessly ripped from her womb and murdered before the woman was executed.[2]
- During the assault, the terrorists kidnapped over 200 innocents and soldiers, of whom at least 13 were Americans, bringing them to Gaza as hostages.[3]
- In magnitude and brutality, the massacre of October 7 constitutes the greatest crime against the Jewish people since the Holocaust.[4]
- On October 8, the Israeli cabinet issued a formal declaration of war against Hamas followed by the formation of a unity government on October 11 to deal with the national emergency.[5]
- Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated the war mission as follows: "This is a war for our home. It must end with one thing—in *total victory*, and the *crushing and elimination of* Hamas."[6]
- While the Biden administration has stated that the United States unequivocally supports the right of Israel to protect its people, it urges her to obey the "Law of War," especially with respect to the *jus in bello* (justice in war) requirements of *discrimination* (between combatants and non-combatants) and *proportionality* (limiting the damage and casualties to the minimum required to accomplish the mission).[7]
- Almost immediately, as news of the massacre began to break, voices broke out in the United States and around the world celebrating the attack and blaming Israel. Cries of "From the river to the sea…," "Gas the Jews!" and the display of swastikas were heard and seen far and wide on American and European university and college campuses.[8]
- Answering the call of Khaled Mashal, former political bureau chairman of Hamas, for a global "Day of Jihad," anti-Jewish and antisemitic demonstrations have exploded in our universities and colleges across the length and breadth of our country under the slogan, "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free," replete with demonstration "toolkits" featuring silhouettes of Hamas paragliders and flags.[9]
- Jewish students fear for their lives. They are isolated, marginalized, and scapegoated in the very institutions in which they once felt a sense of belonging.[10]

As Theologians of the Cross—

- We acknowledge that: "Arrogance cannot be avoided or true hope be present unless the judgment of condemnation is feared in every work."[11]
  - + Before God (*Coram Deo*), "None is righteous, no not one" [Rom 3:10].
  - + Before God, I must confess that I am the guilty one. I am Judas who betrayed Christ. I am Peter who denied him. I crucified him. I murdered God's only begotten Son.

    > You must get this thought through your head and not doubt that you are the one who is torturing Christ thus, for your sins have truly wrought this… When you see the nails piercing Christ's hands you can be certain that it is your work. When you behold the crown of thorns, you may rest assured that these are your evil thoughts etc.[12]

  - + We name antisemitism/anti-Judaism[13] as the primordial Adamic tactic of self-defense, of self-justification, of deflection of guilt. It is to scapegoat the Jews in order to escape the blame that belongs to me. It is to place the Jews under divine wrath, in order to deflect the curse that falls on me. It is to justify their exile and alienation from all peoples, to preserve my own standing. It is to caricature the Jew as the quintessential "Other," as the infection from which the world needs to be inoculated. It is to add the crime of slander and false witness to the crime of murder.
  - + We acknowledge that historically Christianity has been complicit in harboring antisemitism/anti-Judaism within itself, within its theology, preaching, and practice.[14]
- We acknowledge that though our works, statements, and judgments are devoid of righteousness before God, we are not thereby excused from our answerability before God and before humanity (*coram hominibus*) to bear witness against the evil of antisemitism/anti-Judaism as it manifests itself in our day. God himself thunders to Ezekiel:

  > If I say to the wicked, "You shall surely die," and you give him no warning, …that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness…, he shall die in his iniquity; but you will have saved your life [Ezek 3:18-19].

- Thus, we declare that though all our judgments are bankrupt before God, we are nevertheless called to testify before humanity, sinners to sinners, against the blight of antisemitism/anti-Judaism as it infects our present, culture, society, and world—to "sin boldly, but to believe more boldly still."[15]

    + We stand with those Christians throughout history who have harshly and forthrightly condemned the very antisemitism/anti-Judaism they found embedded in their midst.

    + We stand with Israeli innocents and unequivocally condemn the barbaric, indiscriminate, terrorist attacks of Hamas upon men, women, children, and infants—the intentional slaughter of unarmed youth attending a peace concert, the kidnapping, burning, and decapitation of toddlers and infants, the butchering of entire families in their homes, the massacre of over 1200 human beings not as enemy combatants, but simply because they are Jews.

    + We stand with our Jewish-American students and other citizens in universities and colleges across our country who are subjected to antisemitic/anti-Judaistic hate, intimidation, fear, and violence.

    + We unequivocally condemn those who celebrate such hate in our student bodies but especially among those who incite, teach, promote, and indoctrinate it in the name of free speech and academic freedom, polluting the minds of the very young people who are entrusted to their guidance and instruction.

As Theologians of the Cross—

- We acknowledge that: "That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things that have actually happened [Rom 1:20]."[16]

    + We deny that the inscrutable, unpreached will of God in his divine hiddenness (*Deus Absconditus*) can be divined in nature or history by any method devised by human beings.

    + We reject the sort of revisionist historicism taking place today that claims to be able to interpret historical events from a position outside of history uncompromised by the interpreter's existence within history.

    + We reject the sort of revisionist historicism taking place today that claims to be able to interpret all historical events from within a

closed meta-narrative of the antithesis between the oppressor and the oppressed.

+ We name such revisionist historicism as a form of idolatry that arrogates to the interpreter a divine objectivity that belongs to God alone.

  - To say to the United Nations Security Council that while one deplores the bloodshed of the Hamas incursion while simultaneously justifying it by saying that it "did not happen in a vacuum" is to participate in such idolatry.[17]

  - For the Presiding Bishop of the ELCA to "[denounce] the egregious acts of Hamas" while simultaneously "calling out" "the power exerted against the Palestinian people [by Israel] … as a root cause of what we are witnessing" is to participate in such idolatry.[18]

+ We reject the notion that, apart from revelation, there is any time within the dynamics of history that we can claim as *normative*.

  - Thus, while some might say that root cause of the present horror is Israel's acceptance of UN Resolution 181 in 1947 and subsequent declaration of independence which resulted in the displacement of the Palestinians,[19] it might just as well be said that—

  - The root cause for the necessity of a Jewish state was the Holocaust… which exposed, once and for all, the final trajectory of the diaspora, and that,

  - This trajectory resulted from centuries of successive imperial domination, persecution, and displacement (i.e., Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Macedonian, Roman, Ottoman etc.) of the Jewish people and that therefore the establishment of Israel was fully justified.

+ We declare that it is a "fool's errand" to attempt to divine from any subjective narrative of the facts of history definitive root causes or justifications regarding contemporary events; such attempts inevitably lead to antinomies of infinite regression ("turtles all the way down").[20]

• Consequently, we declare that the judgement of whether the attacks upon the citizens of Israel and the condemnation of Israel around the world as being motivated by anti-Judaism or antisemitism/anti-Judaism is logically independent from the question of whether the Jewish state ought to have been created where it is in 1948.

- We condemn as antisemitism/anti-Judaism every attempt to justify the October 7th massacre by referring to the sort of so-called "root causes" and "justifications" cited above.

As Theologians of the Cross—

- We acknowledge that: "[That person] deserves to be called a theologian who comprehends the visible and manifold things of God seen through suffering and the cross.[21]
  + Luther says, "…[I]t is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross."[22]
  + Concerning the Jews, Luther says—
    - "If I had been a Jew and had seen such dolts and blockheads govern and teach the Christian faith, I would sooner have become a hog than a Christian."[23]
    - "If the apostles, who also were Jews, had dealt with us Gentiles as we Gentiles deal with the Jews, there would never have been a Christian among the Gentiles."[24]
    - "When we are inclined to boast of our position, we should remember that we are but Gentiles, while the Jews are of the lineage of Christ. We are aliens and in-laws; they are blood relatives, cousins, and brothers of our Lord. Therefore, if one is to boast of flesh and blood, the Jews are actually nearer to Christ than we are, as St. Paul says in Romans 9[:5]."[25]
    - "To no nation among the Gentile has [God] granted so high an honor as he has to the Jews. For among the Gentiles there have been raised up no patriarchs, no apostles, no prophets, indeed, very few genuine Christians either."[26]
- We profess that according to the flesh: "The law came through Moses [Israel's offspring]; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ [Israel's offspring]" [John 1:18]; therefore—
  + *In* Christ, there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile; we are *one in him*.
  + *Apart from Christ* there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile; we are *one in sin*.
  + *As created in Christ's image* [John 1:3] there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile; *we are one in our common humanity.*

- We declare that—
  + Antisemitism/anti-Judaism is not merely racial hate; it is hatred of Christ himself, the Jew, who was descended from David according to the flesh [Rom 1:3].
  + We recognize the crucifixion of Christ here and now in the humiliation and shaming of and the violence against the Jewish people in our nation and around the world.
  + We hear the ancient cry of "Crucify him! Crucify him!" in the present-day cries of "From the river to the sea…" and "Gas the Jews!" and the celebration of Hamas terrorists.

As Theologians of the Cross—

- We acknowledge that: "The theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. The theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is."[27]
- We will call the thing what it actually is by declaring that—

  The root cause of slaughtering innocent people, raping women, beheading babies, and burning people to death is the coldness of the human heart. It is SIN that causes us to dehumanize the Other, to objectify them and not look at their face and eyes when killing them mercilessly. Not everything is structural. Some things are the responsibility of individuals who perpetrate them.[28]
- We will call the thing what it actually is by declaring that the Hamas massacre of October 7—
  + is terrorism, a hate crime, a genocide, a crime against humanity; it is not a legitimate or justifiable act of war.
    - A justifiable act of war (*jus ad bellum*)[29] is conducted *by* a legitimate authority, *for* a just cause, and *with* right intention.

      Hamas is a usurper of authority in Gaza; its cause is the elimination of the Jewish people "from the river to the sea"—and beyond; its intention is to prevent any peace from being established in the region.

      The Israeli government is the legitimate authority of an internationally recognized nation-state; its cause is to protect its people from death and destruction; its intention is to reach an end-state in which peace is the status quo.

+ is terrorism, a hate crime, a genocide, a crime against humanity; it is not just war fighting.

- Justice in war (*jus in bello*), i.e., just war fighting, is conducted with *discrimination* between combatants and non-combatants and with *proportionality*, i.e., keeping the lethality employed to the minimum necessary to accomplish the mission.

> Hamas directly violates both principles by intentionally targeting non-combatants with gratuitous and unnecessary cruelty, using hostages and Palestinian non-combatants as human shields, and preventing at gunpoint those whom it claims to represent from obtaining access to safe zones and their access corridors.
>
> The Israeli government bends over backwards to discriminate between combatants and non-combatants (e.g., creating safe zones and corridors with tactical pauses, using precision ordinance, warning of imminent attacks, delaying the ground war, striving to avoid collateral damage and unnecessary bloodshed to the extent possible, etc.).

• We will call the thing what it actually is by recognizing no moral equivalency between Hamas and Israel with respect to either the classic just war tradition[30] or Article 16 (Concerning Public Order and Civil Government) of the Augsburg Confession.[31]

As Theologians of the Cross—

• We acknowledge that: "We are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves."[32]

+ With Luther, we acknowledge the Satanic nature of this bondage—

> Scripture sets before us a man who is not only bound, wretched, captive, sick, and dead, but who, through the operation of Satan, his lord, adds to his other miseries that of blindness, so that he believes himself to be free, happy, possessed of liberty and ability, whole and alive. Satan knows that if men knew their own misery, he could keep no man in his kingdom.[33]

+ With Bonhoeffer, we acknowledge the mindlessness of this bondage—

> Stupidity (*Dummheit*)[34] is a more dangerous enemy of the good than malice… Against stupidity we are defenseless. Neither protests nor the use of force accomplish anything here; reasons

> fall on deaf ears; facts that contradict one's prejudgments simply need not be believed—in such moments the stupid person even becomes critical—and when facts are irrefutable they are just pushed aside as inconsequential, as incidental. In all this the stupid person…is utterly self-satisfied and, being easily irritated, become dangerous by going on the attack…. Never … will we try to persuade the stupid person with reasons, for it is useless and dangerous.[35]

+ With Bonhoeffer, we acknowledge the mob-mentality of this bondage—

> We note…that people who…live in solitude manifest this defect less frequently than individuals or groups…inclined or condemned to sociability. And so it would seem that stupidity is perhaps less a psychological than a sociological problem. Upon closer observation, it becomes apparent that every strong upsurge of power in the public sphere, be it of a political or a religious nature, infects a large part of humankind with stupidity.[36]

+ With Bonhoeffer, we acknowledge the diabolical nature of this bondage—

> The process at work here is not that particular human capacities, for instance, the intellect, suddenly atrophy or fail. Instead, it seems that under the overwhelming impact of rising power, humans are deprived of their inner independence… The fact that the stupid person is often stubborn must not blind us to the fact that he is not independent. In conversation with him, one virtually feels that *one is dealing not at all with a person,* but with slogans, catchwords, and the like *that have taken possession of him. He is under a spell*, blinded, misused, and abused in his very being. Having thus become a mindless tool, the stupid person will also be capable of any evil and at the same time incapable of seeing that it is evil. ...*[O]nly an act of liberation,* not instruction, can overcome stupidity.[37]

- We declare that—

  + The explosion of antisemitism/anti-Judaism on our campuses, on our streets, in the halls of our government manifests the mindlessness, the mob-mentality, and the diabolical nature of "stupidity" (*Dummheit*) in our midst.

  + Not reasons, not instruction, not appeals to decency, but only an act of liberation can overcome the antisemitic stupidity that possesses our nation and world.

+ "We must come to terms with the fact that…a genuine internal liberation becomes possible only when external liberation has preceded it."[38]

+ Therefore, external sanctions, coercions, and prosecutions under the law, i.e., God's left-handed rule, must be employed both by the civil authorities and especially institutions of higher learning against those who are caught up in such madness.

+ Therefore, those who encourage, indoctrinate, incite, or facilitate such madness must bear the most severe external sanctions, coercions, and prosecutions as the ones who cause God's "little ones to fall" [Matt 18:6]; they are the "tyrannical despisers of human beings" who "[consider] the people stupid and they become stupid."[39]

As Theologians of the Cross—

- We believe, teach, and confess that in a time of persecution [such as this], when an unequivocal confession of faith is demanded of us, we dare not yield to our opponents in such…matters. As the Apostle wrote, "Stand firm in the freedom for which Christ has set us free…" [Gal 5:1].[40]

  + While some may argue that "technically" we do not find ourselves in a "state of confession" (*status confessionis*) since the state (*politia*) is not *directly*, i.e., by force of arms, requiring us, the church (*ecclesia*), to teach antisemitism/anti-Judaism, this "technicality" must not be used to justify our remaining silent quietists in the face of manifest evil.

  + There are countless *indirect* ways and means by which the state is willing and able to coerce our churches and church-related institutions.

- We believe, teach, and confess that "…in such [situations] it is no longer indifferent matters [(*adiaphora*)] that are at stake. The truth of the gospel and Christian freedom are at stake."[41]

  + Our Christian freedom before God (*coram Deo*) by faith as "perfectly free lord[s] of all, subject to none,"[42] is at stake.

  + Since the concrete expression of our freedom before God is always expressed concretely in being "perfectly dutiful servant[s] of all [in love], subject to all,"[43] our freedom before humanity (*coram hominibus*) is at stake.

+ As our President Dennis Bielfeldt avers, "We are theologians of the cross in a situation of the persecution of our neighbor."

+ Therefore, we declare that while our situation may not meet a "canon lawyer's" standard for being formally declared a "state of confession" (*status confessionis*), it is no "matter of indifference" (*adiaphora*) either. We cannot stand idle in our faith as if it were. Freedom *itself* is at issue!

As Theologians of the Cross in the present crisis—

- We declare that "in [these] matters we can make no concessions but must offer an unequivocal confession and suffer whatever God sends and permits the enemies of his Word to inflict on us."[44]
- We don the yellow Star of David… We stand with the despised and hated. We ask God to repent us of our sinfulness and to situate us in our proper place, in our respective stations and callings. We pray that in those stations and callings he would make us of use to our neighbors, that he would place us in solidarity, as exiles, with our Jewish brothers and sisters, indeed with all our fellow human beings, without boundaries, praying for God's mercy for friends and enemies. In the name of Jesus Christ, the despised and hated Jew, our Lord. Amen.

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Notes

1. Daniel Byman, Alexander Palmer, Catrina Doxsee, Mackenzie Holtz, and Delaney Duff, Commentary: "Hamas's October 7 Attack: Visualizing the Data" (December 19, 2023), *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (*CSIS*), https://www.csis.org/analysis/hamass-october-7-attack-visualizing-data [Accessed January 2, 2024].
2. Lucy Williamson, "Israel Gaza: Hamas raped and mutilated women on 7 October, BBC hears," (December 5, 2023), BBC, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67629181 [accessed on January 2, 2024]. See also Noëlle Quénivet, "Israel-Hamas Symposium – Sexual Violence on October 7, 2023," *Lieber Institute for Law & Warfare at West Point*, https://lieber.westpoint.edu/sexual-violence-october-7/ [Accessed, January 2, 2024].
3. Barak Ravid, Erin Doherty, "31 Americans killed in Israel, others held hostage by Hamas in Gaza," *Axios* (October 17, 2023), https://www.axios.com/2023/10/08/hamas-attack-israel-americans-killed-hotages-gaza [Accessed January 8, 2024].
4. Byman, "Hamas's October 7 Attack: Visualizing the Data."

5. "Israel's parliament approves national unity government," *Reuters* (October 12, 2023), https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israels-parliament-approves-national-unity-government-2023-10-12/ [Accessed January 8, 2024].

6. Ibid.

7. "Readout of President Biden's Call with Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel," *The White House* (October 29, 2023), https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/10/29/readout-of-president-bidens-call-with-prime-minister-netanyahu-of-israel-7/ [Accessed January 8, 2024].

8. Kevin McGill, Stephen Smith, and Collin Binkley, "Israel-Hamas war has led to demonstrations on college campuses," *AP News* (November 15, 2023), https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinian-hamas-college-protest-tulane-29dca6e670639b73f5bfe7bfcf6befee [Accessed January 8, 2024].

9. "Hamas Calls on the Entire Islamic Nation to Join the Jihad against Israel, Declares Friday, October 13, 2023 'Day of General Mobilization,' for *Al-Aqsa*," *Memri* (October 12, 2023), https://www.memri.org/reports/hamas-calls-entire-islamic-nation-join-jihad-against-israel-declares-friday-october-13-2023 [Accessed January 8, 2024]. See also, Christ Nesi, "'Day of Jihad' protests draw tens of thousands around world as demonstrators clash with cops, burn US, Israel flags," *New York Post* (October 13, 2023), https://nypost.com/2023/10/13/anti-israel-protesters-burn-flags-fight-police-in-global-day-of-jihad/ [Accessed January 8, 2024].

10. "ADL survey finds Jewish students feel significantly less safe since Oct. 7; more than 75 percent are dissatisfied with their university's response to antisemitism," *Anti-Defamation League* (November 29, 2023), https://www.adl.org/resources/press-release/nearly-three-quarters-jewish-students-experienced-or-witnessed-antisemitism [Accessed January 8, 2024].

11. Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation* [Thesis 11] (1518); *Luther's Works*, American ed., 55 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-1986), 31:48; hereafter cited as *LW*.

12. Luther, *A Meditation on Christ's Passion* (1519); *LW* 42:9.

13. The use of the word pair 'antisemitism/anti-Judaism' requires some explanation. For the purposes of this statement the word pair accomplishes two objectives: 1) it distinguishes the hatred of Jews as a racial group (antisemitism) from the hatred of Jews as a religious group (anti-Judaism); 2) it recognizes that despite the distinction between them, anti-Judaistic tendencies tend to presage antisemitism and antisemitism inevitably employs the language of anti-Judaism to express its racism. The distinction is historically important because the term 'antisemitism' tends to be a twentieth century term while anti-Judaism has a millennia spanning history. Indeed, Hannah Arendt pushes this historical distinction to its limit: "Antisemitism, a secular nineteenth-century ideology—which in name, though not in argument, was unknown before the 1870s—and religious Jew-hatred, inspired by the mutually hostile antagonism of two conflicting creeds, are obviously not the same; and even the extent to which the former derives its argument and emotional appeal from the latter is open to question" (Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, "Preface to Part One: Antisemitism," [New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1976], xi). While I tend to emphasize the "*communicatio*" between them more than Arendt, the use of the word pair gives both perspectives their due. For a much more comprehensive analysis of this matter, see Jeanne Favret-Saada, "A Fuzzy Distinction: Anti-Judaism and Anti-Semitism

(An Excerpt from *Le Judaisme et ses Juifs*)," trans. Eléonore Rimbault, *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4/3 (2014): 335–340.

From a Christian theological perspective, a further distinction must also be made. To confess Jesus as the Messiah and to proclaim that our justification before God is by faith alone apart from the works of the law is not to be equated with anti-Judaistic hatred of Jews as a religious group. On the other hand, to name the Jews as "Christ-killers"—placing them under God's wrath is to be equated as such. Paul Hinlicky offers a helpful distinction with respect to this matter between "*popular* [*Christianity*]," or perhaps better, "*mob Christianity*" and "*doctrinal Christianity*." He writes: "Many Christians today have learned from the Holocaust to read the Bible historically and to appreciate the difference between doctrinal and popular Christianity. As a result they have widely repudiated not only anti-Semitism, but more profoundly the anti-Judaism that shadows the Christian tradition" (Hinlicky, "What is Anti-Semitism?" Roanoke College, Op-Ed). He points to courageous theologians such as Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer who proclaimed that "Jesus Christ *is* (not *was*!) a Jew," so that "whoever opposes the Jew (today!) opposes God" (Ibid.). "They could cogently make such a distinction," he avers, concluding that "In spite of the hold over the mob which the charge of 'deicide' has had, it represents a fall from normative Christian theology, which holds that "I, I crucified the Lord" (Ibid.).

14. The Lutheran tradition, of course, is not exempted from this complicity. It is particularly important, in light of the many failures of the evangelical-Lutheran Church in Germany and elsewhere during the rise of Nazism and the Holocaust, that those who claim to be theologians of the cross acknowledge this, and issue their testimonies not as the self-righteous judge but as the publican of Jesus' parable— "God be merciful to me, a sinner" [Luke 18:13]. For a comprehensive account and assessment of these failures, see Paul R. Hinlicky, *Before Auschwitz: What Christian Theology Must Learn from the Rise of Nazism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2013).

15. The entire citation reads as follows: "If you are a preacher of Grace, then preach a true, not a fictitious grace; if grace is true, you must bear a true and not a fictitious sin. God does not save people who are only fictitious sinners. Be a sinner and *sin boldly, but believe* and rejoice in Christ *more boldly still*. For he is victorious over sin, death, and the world. As long as we are here, we have to sin. This life is not the dwelling place of righteousness but, as Peter says, we look for a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. It is enough that by the riches of God's glory we have come to know the Lamb that takes away the sin of the world.... Do you think that the purchase price that was paid for the redemption of our sins by so great a Lamb is too small? Pray boldly—you too are a mighty sinner" (Luther, *Letter to Philip Melanchthon* [Wartburg, August 1, 1521], No. 91; *LW* 48:282; emphasis added).

16. Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation* [Thesis 19] (1518); *LW* 31:52.

17. Secretary General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres' remarks to the Security Council, October 23, 2023. A more complete citation of his remarks reads as follows: "I am deeply concerned about the clear violations of international humanitarian law that we are witnessing in Gaza. Let me be clear: No party to an armed conflict is above international humanitarian law…I have condemned unequivocally the horrifying and unprecedented 7 October act of terror by Hamas in Israel…[However], it is important to also recognize the attack by Hamas *did not happen in a vacuum*. The Palestinian people have been subjected to 56 years of suffocating occupation. They have seen their lands steadily devoured by

settlements and plagued by violence, their economies stifled, their people displaced and their homes demolished. Their hopes for a political solution to their plight have been vanishing" (Antonio Guterres, Remarks to UN Security Council, October 23, 2023, *Israel National News*, https://www.israelnationalnews.com/news/379091 [accessed January 2, 2024]; emphasis added).

18. Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton's statement on the Israel-Hamas War, October 13, 2023. A more complete citation of her remarks reads as follows: "As Lutherans, we are accustomed to holding tension between two truths. Thus the ELCA denounces the egregious acts of Hamas, acts that have led to unspeakable loss of life and hope. At the same time the ELCA denounces the indiscriminate retaliation of Israel against the Palestinian people, both Christian and Muslim. For the past week we have borne witness to the horrors of the escalating crisis between Israel and Hamas. We also watch a growing humanitarian crisis in Gaza as Israel blocks food, water, fuel, and medical supplies and as airstrikes continue to cause unbearable civilian casualties ahead of a just-announced ground assault…*We must also call a thing a thing. The power exerted against all Palestinian people — through the occupation, the expansion of settlements and the escalating violence—must be called out as a root cause of what we are witnessing*" (Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton, "Statement on the Israel-Hamas War," *ELCA News and Events* (October 13, 2023), https://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/8207?_ga=2.177148326.2036997126.1704493285-1959082996.1704493285 [accessed January 2, 2024]; emphasis added).
19. The United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine was a proposal by the United Nations that recommended a partitioning of Mandatory Palestine at the end of the British Mandate. On November 29, 1947, the UN General Assembly adopted the Plan as Resolution 181. The resolution recommended the creation of independent Arab and Jewish states linked economically and a Special International Regime for the city of Jerusalem and its surroundings. The Jewish negotiators accepted the plan; the Arab negotiators did not. In accordance with its acceptance, Israel declared its independence which resulted in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War in which portions of Mandatory Palestine reserved for the Arab state by Resolution 181 were occupied by Israel ("UN Resolution 181: Israeli-Palestinian History," *Brittanica* https://www.britannica.com/topic/United-Nations-Resolution-181 [accessed January 2, 2024]).
20. "Turtles all the way down" is an expression of the problem of infinite regress. The saying alludes to the mythological idea of a World Turtle that supports a flat Earth on its back. It suggests that this turtle rests on the back of an even larger turtle, which itself is part of a column of increasingly larger turtles that continues indefinitely ("Turtles All the Way Down," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turtles_all_the_way_down [accessed January 2, 2024]).
21. Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation* [Thesis 20] (1518); *LW* 31:52.
22. Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation* [Proof of Thesis 20] (1518); *LW* 31:52.
23. Luther, *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew* (1523); *LW* 45:200.

    It is true, of course, that Luther also penned the infamous treatise, *On the Jews and their Lies* (1543) which descended into a virulent anti-Judaism (*LW* 47:137-306). The contrast between 1523 and 1543 is jarring, to say the least. The treatise caused widespread dismay among the Jews of Luther's time, but also among Protestant colleagues such as Melanch-

thon, Osiander, Bucer, and Bullinger. While there is no space in this declaration for a more extensive discussion of this matter, it is important for us to acknowledge Luther's failure and sinfulness in this regard. It is also important to make the attempt, at least, to understand the contrast.

Gerhard Forde, in his excellent essay, "Luther and the Jews," *Lutheran Quarterly* 27/2 (Summer, 2013): 125-142, suggests that Luther's failure is that he fell short in applying the very evangelical perspective to his Jewish neighbors that had freed him. "If Luther is to be charged with something in this matter, it would seem to me that it would have to be that he did not work through sufficiently some of his own reformation principles in this regard. He did not hold to or work out sufficiently his own premise that God in his wrath is indeed hidden in nature and history and that one cannot so easily assign it to one group in distinction from another" ("Luther and the Jews," 139). In this regard, he became a theologian of glory, "[calling] evil good and good evil" (see *Heidelberg Declaration* (Thesis 21), below, 9, n. 17).

In the end, there is only Christ and him crucified—by me. Forde provides poignant and wise counsel and testimony regarding this, the heart of the Christian witness: "I cannot, of course, speak for others on this, but it seems to me that it belongs to the very essence of a faith founded on justification by grace, that there is no distinction, and that I am called upon to preach Christ crucified, not by Jews, but by us all, and thus to proclaim him to all. It is true, of course, that the Jews form a quite special case, since we share a large common heritage. But speaking for myself at least, if I thought there was something about Christ that would hurt the Jews or rob them of their heritage, I don't think I could preach him to anyone (Ibid., 140-141).

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid., 201.

26. Ibid.

27. Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation* (Thesis 21); *LW* 31:53.

28. President of the Institute of Lutheran Theology (ILT), Dr. Dennis Bielfeldt, PhD, "Response to Bishop Eaton's statement on the Israel-Hamas War," Facebook post, October 24, 2023 (https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100006370534681 [accessed January 2, 2024]).

29. *Jus ad bellum* refers to the justification for war and *jus in bello* refers to just war-making during war. Robert Kolb states that these terms are artificial constructions that were coined during the time of the League of Nations and have only been used since the Second World War. They are nevertheless the conventional terms employed by the academy with respect to the Just War theory and the Law of War. Robert Kolb, "Origin of the Twin Terms *Jus ad Bellum/Jus in Bello*," *International Review of the Red* Cross 320 (1997): 553-562.

30. See James Turner Johnson, "Just War as It Was and Is," *First Things* 149 (January 2005): 14-24.

31. See Leif Grane, "Article 16: 'Civil Affairs,'" in *The Augsburg Confession: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Rasmussen (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987), 166-177.

32. *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), 56.

33. Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), trans. Packer & Johnston (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1957), 162; cf. *LW* 33:130.

34. The English translation of "*Dummheit*" as "Stupidity" fails to convey the sense of hypnotic numbness to reality and vulnerability to seduction evoked by the German word.

35. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "On Stupidity," in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Works*, English ed., 17 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996-2014), 8:43; hereafter cited as *DBWE*.

36. Ibid.

37. *DBWE* 8:44; emphasis added.

38. Ibid.

39. Bonhoeffer, "Ethics as Formation," in *Ethics*; *DBWE* 6:86.

40. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 516.6; hereafter cited as BC.

41. Ibid.

42. Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520); *LW* 31:344.

43. Ibid.

44. BC, 516.6.

Book Review

Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020). 425 pp.

Reviewed by Douglas V. Morton

How did the Western world end up in a place where sexual norms are obsolete, and many consider it normal to detach gender from biological sex? At what point did an individual's inner conviction gain priority over biological realities? What has happened to bring us to the point where the statement "I am a woman trapped inside a man's body" (19) is accepted as coherent and meaningful by many people? The standard reply from many Christians would be *sin*. The author of *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* stresses that such an answer does not articulate *how* this radical thinking, which only a few years ago would have been considered abnormal and even psychologically dysfunctional, has ended up permeating the thought and culture of Western postmodern society.

Author Carl Trueman, Professor of Biblical and Religious Studies at Grove City College, Pennsylvania, documents how this radical ideology penetrated the Western World. The ascendency of transgenderism in Western society is due to a brew concocted by the ideas of radical nonconformist intellectuals over the past 400 years. The book is a travel guide through this history. It helps the reader comprehend how past revolutionary intellectuals and their ideas helped to bring Western society to its present state, where declaring one is a woman trapped inside a man's body is seen as perfectly rational. The author seeks to set Western society's current sexual revolution in a proper context of this history. For Trueman, what fuels the dissent against society's past sexual mores is a much more basic revolution—how society has come to view human selfhood. No one, according to Trueman, has been unaffected by this view of selfhood. To various degrees, it has affected us all, including the church.

The author is a biblically committed Christian who seeks to be objective and fair when dealing with ideas contrary to a biblically orthodox Christianity. The reader will not find the book to be an attack upon individuals or a caricature of positions with which the author disagrees. It is neither a lament nor a polemical statement. Instead, the reader will find an experienced historian examining history to demonstrate how the Western world came to the point where it adopted a radical ideology as something rational and normal.

Trueman describes how "intellectual shifts" (26) over the centuries helped cause the "radical and ongoing transformation" (21) of people's attitudes towards sex itself and the resulting behaviors. His writing is engaging, and this reviewer found the book difficult to put down. Of great benefit to the reader is the author's organizing the text into four parts, each building on the previous section.

Part One sets forth basic concepts to be used throughout the book as the historical narrative is explored. Trueman enlists three 20th-century philosophers to help guide this tour: Philip Rieff, Charles Taylor, and Alasdair MacIntyre. From Rieff comes the concepts of *the triumph of the therapeutic*, *psychological man*, *the anti-culture,* and *deathworks*. From Taylor, the author adopts the ideas of the *expressive self*, the *social imaginary*, and the *politics of recognition*. He uses MacIntyre to help the reader recognize that ethical discourse has broken down in modern society because the two narrative sides in the conversation do not work with the same narrative standard. They are "incommensurable narratives" (26). Another insight Trueman gains from MacIntyre is that moral truth claims today have become "*expressions of emotional preference*" (26), in other words, how one *feels* on the inside. By enlisting these philosophers' insights, the author provides the reader with a way to understand why today's debates concerning ethical issues use highly polarizing rhetoric and thus tend to be fruitless.

In Part Two, the reader tours the 18th and 19th Centuries. Here, the reader is shown how ideas in these centuries helped pave the way for today's deviant views. The author begins with Rene Descartes' separation of mind and body. This in turn leads to a more in-depth analysis of the life and writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and then moves on to Romanticism's poets: William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelly, and William Blake. These men and their ideas helped shift the focus from society and its mores to the individual's inner life. For these thinkers, society, particularly Christian society, is oppressive. Lifelong monogamous marriage and other Christian sexual codes are seen as inhibitive and overbearing. Next comes Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Through these men and their ideas, the world experiences a loss of any distinctive purpose. It ends up with no teleology. Human identity and morality are severed from any "metaphysical foundations" (27). By the end of the 19th Century, Trueman writes, "the groundwork" had been laid for traditional morality to be rejected by the masses.

Part Three of the book moves into the 20th Century. Sigmund Freud's "sexualizing of psychology" (28) is engaged, along with the Marxist writers Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse. These men, by appropriating Freud's thoughts, end up with a heady mix of sex and politics. This, in turn, births the New Left, which perceives oppression as essentially psychological. Sexual codes are seen as the main tools of this oppression. Words and ideas become repressive and inflict psychological damage on a person. Because it is the ruling class that tends to stress freedom of

speech, this must be curtailed so that psychological injury cannot be inflicted on those who have been oppressed by society. Institutions of higher education become bastions of politically correct speech, where the New Left can indoctrinate students into the politically correct ideology that fits this new view on the importance of the inner self as the master of one's life.

Part Four describes how the erotic, the therapeutic, and transgenderism are triumphs of today's sexual revolution. Here, the author examines surrealism in the art world and the mainstreaming of pornography, where sex is detached "from any kind of transcendent meaning" (299). Ultimately, Western society ends up being a place where societal norms are dethroned and the inner self rules the day, from one's views on abortion to sexuality, to where gender easily becomes separated from one's biological sex. The last several chapters of this section show how the rule of the inner self has worked its way into law, the academic community, and college and university campuses.

In his conclusion, the author stresses that the LGBTQ+ issues dominating our culture and politics today are not the problem so much as they are symptoms of something much deeper: the psychologizing view of the self that has developed throughout the past 400 years and brought us to where the inner self and its thinking has come to dominate the facts of the body and the body's biology. This is *expressive individualism* run amuck, where a biological male can say, "I am a woman trapped inside a man's body." Since Western society has become entangled in *expressive individualism*, it is no wonder why such aberrant psychological thinking is now seen as normal and rational, even by the medical community, educational community, and government bodies, including the Supreme Court.

The author gives three brief recommendations to the church. First, he calls for the church to seriously reflect on the danger of its beliefs and practices being affected by society's aesthetics that focus on personal narratives rather than biblical ones. Second, he calls for the church to embrace a doctrinal Christianity orientated around the church as a community. Third, the author notes that Protestants must recapture the importance of "natural law" and recover a proper and "*high view of the physical body*" (405).

The book closes with a plea that the Christian community takes to heart what the second-century church practiced. He chooses the second century for several reasons. Like the second-century church, today's church in the Western world is a marginal group existing in a dominant, pluralist society. Since the second-century church claimed total allegiance to Jesus as king, society around it saw it as subversive. Even its sacred practices were considered immoral by society. Today, ethical issues have been turned upside down, and thus, today's church is likely to run into similar problems faced by the second-century church. Yet, the second-century church laid the foundations for later successes in the third and fourth centuries. The author

believes the second-century church's game plan should be imitated by the church today. Today's Western church needs to exist as a fellowship, bound by its doctrine, living out its faith and life consistently, even as its members seek to be citizens of this world as far as they can remain faithful.

This reviewer might add that not only does the church need to take doctrine seriously, but it also needs to relearn and reemphasize God's two words of Law and Gospel. Without this, the church will quickly fall into a legalistic attitude on one side that will turn away many from its central message, or the church will fall into a Gospel reductionism that treats the Gospel as any good news to our individual felt needs and not as the forgiving, saving and empowering Christ-giving word that it is. While today's church can learn many things from the second-century church, it must go beyond much of the legalism embraced by this church. This can only be done by today's church properly distinguishing God's two words, Law and Gospel.

Having stressed the above caveat, this reviewer recommends the book for anyone who desires to understand the underlying historical forces that have brought the West to where it is today. It can be read by academics and intelligent non-specialists willing to wade through over 400 pages with numerous footnotes.

A shorter version of the book is the author's *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution*, published in 2022 by Crossway. This shorter account can be a stand-alone book for individuals or college and university classes. The book may also be used with a 120-page study guide by the same name, or the study guide can be used by itself, along with a set of videos developed by the publisher.

In this reviewer's opinion, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* and *Strange New World* are highly recommended to anyone seeking to understand the historical background that ultimately brought Western society to where it is today in this fast-moving sexual transformation.

The 120-page study guide would be excellent for Bible studies led by someone familiar with *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* or *Strange New World*. Thus, Trueman has enabled readers to engage with this topic on several levels. The first level is an intellectually challenging engagement through *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*. The second level is for a basic understanding of the history that brought society to where it is today through the shorter *Strange New World.* The third level is an introduction to the subject for church members through the Bible study booklet and videos. All in all, Trueman has produced a work that can significantly benefit the 21st-century church.

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Book Review

Christopher Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2022), xxiv + 648 pp.

Reviewed by Daniel Lioy

Introductory Overview

Since the Enlightenment, critical theories like Marxism, Foucauldian thought, and feminist critiques have emerged to dissect various manifestations of power, including economic forces (Marx), pervasive social controls (Foucault), and gendered hierarchies (feminist critiques). These diverse approaches, united by the broad goals of emancipation, progress, and justice often aim to expose and challenge inequitable power dynamics and institutions, particularly those disadvantaging marginalized groups, by employing methods like discourse analysis, historical materialism, and deconstruction.

The preceding observations raise two important lines of inquiry. First, what are the possibilities of finding common ground between critical theory's social criticism and a Christian view of reality? Second, looking broadly rather than narrowly, what are some ways that the central tenets of critical theory could align with the theological perspective of Scripture? These are some of the issues explored in the work *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Narrative Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture*.[1] The author, Christopher Watkin, holds a PhD from Jesus College, Cambridge, and lectures in French studies at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia.

In this volume, Watkin maintains that Scripture offers a storied version of a critical theory. Moreover, he asserts that the Bible provides a trenchant and fresh perspective on society that fulfills many of the values and aspirations championed by post-Kantian critical theories. Based on these premises, the author places classical expressions of Christian theology in dialogue with secular critical perspectives, such as Marxist, Nietzschean, and Foucauldian concepts of reality.

Watkin does so by adopting the two-city framework found in Augustine's acclaimed work, *The City of God against the Pagans*. The bishop of Hippo (354-430 ad) begins his treatise by offering a comprehensive overview of late Roman culture, dealing with its religion and philosophy (books I to X). He then explores the Judeo-Christian canon, along with the apostolic tradition (books XI to XXII).

Augustine uses the story of the two cities to analyze and critique his time's predominant societal norms and practices. He argues that the earthly city of man is doomed to imperfection and suffering, whereas the city of God represents the ideal Christian community. This early church leader emphasizes God's ultimate sovereignty over human destiny despite the trials and tribulations occurring throughout human history.

Watkin's approach mirrors that of Augustine, yet the order is reversed. First, Watkin surveys the grand storyline of Scripture, in which he moves diachronically from Genesis to Revelation. Second, while doing so, he interweaves what he considers to be a more compelling narrative about reality (particularly centered around creation, fall, redemption, and consummation) than present-day secular alternatives.

Furthermore, Watkin seeks to articulate a social and cultural theory based on the Bible. He does this by identifying and discussing various worldviews (or, as Charles Taylor puts it in *A Secular Age*, "social imaginaries") and pointing out their strengths and weaknesses. To accomplish this, the author describes and diagrams what he calls "figures." These are essentially recurring "patterns" or "structures" in "language" that can encompass various forms of "content." More specifically, "figures" are indefinable "patterns and rhythms in creation," including "matter, language, ideas, systems, or behavior." The treatise presents 114 of these organizing motifs, with each sketch or illustration representing a significant theme found in Scripture (such as justice, love, mercy, and truth).

Another facet of Watkin's project includes a concept called *diagonalization*. This refers to rejecting erroneous, either-or, ideological alternatives and charting a more coherent, unifying path. It is essentially a third way to engage culture that avoids seeking either to demolish or affirm it. In this approach, the Bible is employed to "diagnose and heal" polarized "cultural" options found throughout Western society (as opposed to the Majority World). The author's intent is to identify resonances between opposing worldviews, as well as to leverage insights gleaned from Scripture (particularly, the redemptive-historical arc of salvation history) to recover a "biblical harmony" between dissimilar perspectives. It is an example of what the author refers to as the Bible "out-narrating its cultural rivals."

Despite Watkin's reservations about using the term *worldview*, this review affirms its ongoing value. Specifically, it denotes a coherent system of thought that shapes people's impressions of reality and their interpretation of the world. Additionally, a worldview encompasses an individual's assumptions, values, and beliefs regarding the nature of existence, knowledge, morality, purpose, and humanity's position within the universe. Furthermore, in this review, the term *society* refers to a complex and organized group of individuals interacting with one another within a shared geographical or social space. In contrast, the term *culture* is a subset of

society, representing the distinct way of life and sense of belonging within a particular community-based context.

To reiterate, Watkin puts Christianity and other theoretical approaches to life in conversation with one another. For example, critical theory maintains that people hold beliefs or values contrary to their best interests, often resulting from societal ideologies or structures that obscure underlying power dynamics. The author connects this notion of false consciousness with Christianity's teachings that individuals may be ensnared by worldly influences, face spiritual separation from God, and experience a sense of estrangement from their true purpose.

Additionally, Watkin explores whether Christianity's idea of redemptive awakening (whereby individuals are freed from sin and deception through the Spirit's transforming work) parallels critical theory's concept of being emancipated from societal distortions (whereby awareness is fostered about power structures, ideologies, and biases that shape and constrain individuals' comprehension of reality). Furthermore, he considers the potential for Christianity's theological understanding of human nature and purpose to fulfill critical theory's aim to free people from restrictive social controls.

In his analysis, Watkin considers possible areas of agreement between competing views while being careful not to force connections or endorse incompatible perspectives. He also examines opposing ideologies to find ethical common ground. By offering a summary of antithetical philosophies, the author demonstrates how grappling with rival accounts can refine, rather than undermine, one's core assumptions. This irenic approach has the potential to emphasize and develop shared values despite also risking polarized reactions by detractors.

Watkin utilizes a balanced methodology by engaging with critical theory, without freely accepting all its presuppositions. He argues that the inspiration and authority of Scripture, along with the efficacy of the apostolic tradition, are affirmed not through polemics against opponents but through open dialogue to achieve mutual understanding. Also, rather than further reinforcing the views of opposing camps, the author identifies potential avenues to renew discourse as a collaborative search for truth.

As Watkin acknowledges, his project is neither new nor novel, especially in its consideration of such perennial topics as science, art, politics, human dignity, multiculturalism, and equality. He builds on the work of other academics and intellectuals who have attempted to interrogate social theories and their theorists from diverse perspectives. These luminaries include Alasdair MacIntyre, Robert Jenson, Charles Taylor, and Carl Trueman (among many others).

Tim Keller (before his death, a prominent Christian pastor and author) notes in his Forward that responses to Watkin's work tend to align with preexisting view-

points. For instance, more conservative perspectives deem engaging with critical theory as provocative and perilous. Conversely, supportive audiences praise the author's attempt to build common ground. Regardless of one's position, the author's treatise emphasizes the value of promoting meaningful dialogue between opposing ideological camps.

The review that follows first deals with a positive assessment of *Biblical Critical Theory*, after which is an overview of cautions and concerns, and ends with some concluding observations. As a disclaimer, given that Watkin's treatise is 672 pages and spans 28 chapters, it is beyond the scope of this review to provide a comprehensive, granular appraisal. Instead, the goal is to offer a high-level, objective, and selective assessment of the author's work so that readers can make their own decisions about the publication's overall merit.

Positive Assessment

Watkin's informed examination of critical theory's origins and core concepts is noteworthy. By tracing ideas through pivotal thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and the Frankfurt School, the author discusses how notions of emancipation and progress shape critical theory's ideological appraisal of power, social conditioning, and revolutionary consciousness.

For instance, Watkin delves into Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, which unmasks what it perceives as exploitative capitalist relations promoted under equality's guise. On one level, Watkin argues that Marx's political remedies prove to be deeply misguided. Yet, on another level, the author retrieves Marx's impulse to expose systemic injustice. This evenhanded orientation allows critical theory to indict structural oppression without glossing over critical theory's totalitarian excesses.

Likewise, Watkin explores Foucault's theory of diffuse "capillary" power circulating through institutions. The author deliberates how "power/knowledge" dyads classify, partition, and regulate populations, which, in turn, shape identities through normalization of judgment. By registering principled objections, Watkin attempts to wrestle with complex questions about the body and self while avoiding an all-out reactionary dismissal of these queries.

Also commendable is Watkin's ability to maintain a theological perspective in a secularized world. For instance, with respect to human nature's fixedness, the author affirms original sin while accepting critical theory's questioning of natural social arrangements as necessarily just. He tends to evaluate specific power structures on their own terms, as well as hold universal depravity and socially constructed hierarchies in dynamic tension.

Regardless of whether one accepts the preceding attempt at rapprochement, Watkin models judicious, critical sympathy while sustaining his argument. Yet, he does so without manifesting a reactive animus (i.e., a combative stance that simply opposes on principle whatever is being contended). His willingness to foster good-faith dialogue stands in contrast to the polarized, inflammatory exchanges prevalent in society now.

Another positive aspect of Watkin's treatise is his illumination of critical theory's religious impulses. For example, he foregrounds emancipatory ambitions to unshackle consciousness from constraint. In turn, the author exposes leftist soteriological quests to unmask idols of power, which results in destabilizing secular assumptions about truth's rational accessibility. Specifically, he explores the possible affinity between Marxian hopes to spark revolutionary awareness and the gospel's liberation of souls, which societal, aggrandizing powers have exploited.

Just as constructive is the analogy Watkin draws between Marxian surplus value extraction and the biblical category of greed as soul-destroying idolatry. The author affirms the importance of the fair exchange of goods and services within society. Yet, he argues that extreme forms of capitalist accumulation give rise to avarice, which depends on the exploitation and dehumanization of people to bring about the amassing of wealth and power.

Moreover, Watkin's effort to surface idolatry's hidden operations—regardless of their secular or religious origins and manifestations—enables the testimony of Scripture to facilitate a disruptive emancipation from all worldly forms of indoctrination. The author's attempt to show how contemporary appeals to piety and sanctimonious worship perpetuate injustice is comparable to the Hebrew prophets from long ago excoriating self-serving religious ideologies. Likewise, this parallels Jesus' challenge to the elitist authorities of his day, who misrepresented divinely revealed truth to advance their self-serving agendas.

Watkin carefully examines the ideological assumptions behind certain leftist theories. For example, he questions postmodern gender theory (inspired by Foucault) that does not consider relevant medical and ethical issues. This shows how some activists have pushed further than is prudent. In cases like this, Watkin tries to separate secular truth from falsehood. He also resists extreme stereotypes that drive the bitter arguments between opposing groups today.

Furthermore, Watkin aspires to establish a fruitful dialogue amid seemingly irreconcilable worldviews. Rather than forcing an artificial synthesis or retreating into parallel silos, the author models *faith seeking understanding* across ideological divides. His desire to nurture an earnest yet critical engagement recalls Paul's attempt to do something comparable when he delivered a speech to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers at Athens (Acts 17:16–33). Overall, the goal is to find common

ground between secular ideological frameworks and biblical categories of thought. These attempts at bridge-building discourse encourage principled engagement while avoiding reactive attacks between opposing groups of interlocutors.

Watkin does not shy away from acknowledging critical theory's indictment of Christianity's occasional legitimation of corrupt power structures. For example, the author is aware that throughout the centuries, distorted interpretations of Scripture have played a tragic role in the justification of institutional slavery. Yet, rather than become defensive at the exposure of this atrocity, Watkin models the potential that such candor holds for cultivating greater understanding and reconciliation between oppressor and oppressed (or victimizer and victimized). This exemplifies how honest self-discernment can be restorative, especially against the sullied backdrop of human fallenness.

This review has drawn attention to how polarized arguments are distorting modern-day discussion. Watkin's conciliatory approach to dialogue could provide balance. Specifically, by demonstrating active listening, the author shows a potentially effective way forward. It is a path which prevents the mutual misunderstanding that happens when opposing groups rhetorically attack each other. His writing invites readers to see how such a strategy can create shared wisdom, avoiding an overly simplistic battle of enemies that resembles gladiators trying to kill each other in an ancient Roman colosseum.

Watkin skillfully avoids forcing a choice between materially confronting corrupt institutions and being spiritually liberated from distorted reasoning. He rejects problematic "either/or" thinking by recognizing that rival worldviews can offer valid insights. His analysis shows how Christianity can address both current earthly realities and eternal horizons. Additionally, his discourse highlights the gospel's power to free people from bondage to harmful, unbiblical doctrines. Overall, the author provides a thoughtful model for affirming multiple perspectives rather than insisting on a single ideological framework.

Finally, Watkin often presents conflicting viewpoints side by side. This indicates that one of his goals is to encourage insightful discussion and analysis of theories. Related objectives include preventing oversimplification of complex topics and broadening the readers' awareness by placing different perspectives next to one another. As a result, the ongoing, productive debate between opposing concepts can lead to increased awareness and understanding.

Cautions and Concerns

The above positive assessment notwithstanding, there remain inherent shortcomings to Watkin's treatise. To begin, though he endeavors to integrate philosophy, theology, and biblical studies, the synthesis he attempts between these disciplines is negligible

in its usefulness. This is especially due to the developmental shortcomings noted later in this section.

Moreover, Watkin's effort to diagonalize antithetical worldviews does not accomplish its intended goal of articulating a plausible third way of identifying resonances between the two perspectives. For instance, the author's use of diagrams (or "figures") to distill layered, complex concepts strips away important nuances, contextual details, and caveats. In turn, this creates an incomplete, reductionistic, and distorted portrayal of the concepts being sketched.

To further develop the above assessment, consider Watkin's effort to amalgamate Marxist philosophy and Christian theology. On the surface, doing so appears viable. Yet, at a more focused level, there remain irreconcilable differences in outlook with respect to such issues as authority, identity, and salvation. This is a place where, even though the author's project offers a helpful overview of Marxist ideology (along with the other secular perspectives mentioned earlier), it does not fully engage with the practical economic analysis central to Marxism.

There is a potential downside in Watkin's attempt to incorporate secular assumptions at odds with God's Word. Specifically, concepts like "consciousness raising" poorly align with Scripture's teachings on human fallenness and renewal. Here, the author faces the challenge of drifting towards a Marxian view of false consciousness rather than aligning more closely with biblical hamartiology. He also risks subtly diverting the focus away from Christ and more toward secular social theories.

In some ways, Watkin's deliberations fall short of putting forward a seminal response to pressing modern challenges. Instead, his treatise tends to be a broad, derivative, and (at times) fragmented survey of biblical and secular ideas. The emphasis is more on breaking down concepts rather than offering well-integrated, practical insights into real-world concerns. This shortcoming is ironic, given the author's stated intent of wanting to deal with the "so what" of Christian belief. For example, the author mainly focuses on theoretical ideas instead of providing a constructive analysis of important, pressing issues like privilege, marginalization, and exploitation.

It remains unclear how Watkin's treatise might shape substantive engagement about such volatile matters as racial justice and gender identity. On the one hand, could legitimizing post-structuralist views about identity undermine appeals to share a common humanity under God? Or, on the other hand, does questioning socially constructed categories create space for affirming both difference and unity? In either case, the author's discourse, by glossing over such specifics, comments on abstractions without delineating the ways in which biblical truth might either renew hearts or transform lives.

The preceding observations highlight the limited capacity of theoretical discourse to establish conceptual bridges and find common ground between divergent worldviews. Admittedly, on one level, the author avoids disseminating caricatures and stereotypes. Yet, on another level, his endeavor to assimilate secular assumptions within classical expressions of Christian theology fails to resolve enduring ideological divides and tensions.

Furthermore, Watkin does not spend most of his time examining and explaining the biblical texts he overviews. Instead, much of his writing draws extensively on observations gleaned from popular culture, social media, personal experience, and publications dealing with ancient mythologies, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, psychology, sexuality, history, science, and politics. Perhaps this approach reflects the author's attempt to emulate Augustine's disquisition, *The City of God*, where he deals with a wide range of religious, philosophical, and historical themes.

Concededly, Watkin's divergent sources of information *occasionally* have their place, especially to illustrate a main point or line of argumentation. Yet, they end up being an inadequate substitute for a more direct, sustained, and substantive engagement with God's Word. As such, despite some endorsements, the volume would likely not suffice either as an introduction to or a thorough treatment of biblical theology.

There is also a serious lack of balance in the way Watkin moves diachronically through his survey of Scripture. For example, in his asymmetrical approach, he devotes ten chapters to discussing topics, themes, and individuals showcased in Genesis. In contrast, he only spends one chapter dealing with Moses, the Exodus, and the Torah.

Furthermore, issues surrounding biblical prophecy are covered in just two chapters, and all the wisdom literature has only one chapter assigned to it. Two chapters highlight distinctive aspects of Jesus' incarnation, while a sole chapter deliberates his entire earthly ministry (as recounted in the four Gospels). Two chapters cover Jesus' crucifixion, followed by one chapter on his resurrection. Lastly, four chapters discuss various aspects of the last days, followed by four more chapters deliberating themes related to eschatology.

Notwithstanding Watkin's stated aspirations for the long-term influence of his project on the work undertaken by other academic specialists, what he says with considerable verbosity is unlikely to become a cornerstone for future research. Also, despite the author's effort to canvas the entire Judeo-Christian canon (albeit in a disproportionate manner), he ends up saying little that is either pioneering or pathbreaking.

The situation is worsened by a considerable unevenness in the writing style of Watkin's discourse. For example, in some places, the prose is either conversational,

autobiographical, or sermonic in tone. Then, it can abruptly switch to being either excessively technical and academic or filled with a list of bullet/numbered points, such as one might encounter in an undergraduate university lecture or chopped up with a mixture of quotes. Furthermore, the author embeds these extracts at infelicitous places, with many quotes being quite lengthy and from an array of dissimilar sources. Rather than clarify and illumine the volume's overall line of argumentation, the recited information often comes across as interruptive to the main flow of thought and lacks tight integration with Watkin's discussion.

The preceding observations suggest that the author's work needs more editorial refinement. It would also have been prudent for him to drastically shorten the length of his project. In turn, the result would have been a treatise that examines the topics he includes with greater depth, clarity, and effectiveness. As it stands, Watkin's project never realizes its potential of being an important update to *The City of God*, in which Augustine explores human history and destiny through a Christian lens.

Concluding Observations

Watkin has authored an intriguing volume that attempts to bring secular critical theories into meaningful dialogue with classical expressions of Christian theology. His overview traces the development of key concepts in critical theory, such as false consciousness, emancipation, and ideological critique. The author also explores potential areas of agreement between these notions and biblical categories, such as captivity, redemption, and idolatry.

While avoiding outright embracing or dismissing critical theory, Watkin endeavors to chart a middle path that models principled engagement across ideological divides. By resisting polarizing rhetoric, he upholds the possibility for shared understanding between opposing worldviews. The author's winsome tone, centered on deliberating complex ideas, contrasts with the fractured state of contemporary discourse.

Yet, despite Watkin's attempts at a merger, the inherent differences between critical theory and classical expressions of Christian theology remain stark. For instance, at a conceptual level, the two frameworks clash on basic assumptions about authority, identity, and salvation. Also, translating the author's theoretical analysis into practical application proves challenging. Ultimately, the treatise falls short in delineating how a dialogue between biblical revelation and numerous critical theories could renew hearts, transform lives, and guide responses to volatile social issues.

As noted in the preceding section, the scale of Watkin's project remains unwieldy. Put another way, he tries to do too much and ends up not achieving the goals he

has adopted. For instance, his attempt to offer a genuinely biblical critical theory does not deliver on what the volume title promises. Similarly, the author's attempt to unfold the biblical story, as well as to make sense of modern life and culture, is not convincingly attained.

To sum up, Watkin's volume, while limited in practical import, nonetheless models a thoughtful path. On the one hand, his discourse attempts to bridge understanding, yet without ignoring enduring differences between rival schools of thought. On the other hand, his observations tend to be unoriginal and lack sufficient development in examining disparate ideas in a cohesive, persuasive manner.

Moreover, while the effort to span ideological divides has some merit, lasting progress requires grounding discourse in the biblical values of love, repentance, and restorative justice. Ultimately, Christ-centered renewal of both hearts and social structures is essential for dismantling oppression in all its forms.

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Note

1. The Logos Research Edition of *Biblical Critical Theory* was used for this book review.

Book Review

Gilbert Meilaender, *Bioethics and the Character of Human Life: Essays and Reflections* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020). 192 pp.

Reviewed by Robert Henry

The rise of today's technological advancements has raised concerns in relation to ethics. This is particularly true concerning Artificial Intelligence (AI), Media, and Medicine. These concerns have emerged almost as rapidly as the advancements themselves. Recently, these apprehensions have been dominated by AI's threat to the arts, labor, and our overall economy and way of life through such online software as ChatGPT. Bioethics, even more so as it relates to the medical field, presents some of the most profound challenges to humanity. Gilbert Meilaender, an American bioethicist and theologian, addresses many of these concerns in his book *Bioethics and the Character of Human Life*.

Many secular philosophical works seek to balance the practical with the academic and address ethics from both sides, with more emphasis on the former than the latter. Meilaender's book comprises a series of lectures addressing many concerns that reflect the lack of dignity and sacred reverence of our secular culture. Meilaender arranges his compilation of essays thematically. The book is a scholarly and secular expression of Lutheran bioethics and a testament to upholding the sanctity of humanity along with the individual by clearly delineating the practical distinction between therapy and enhancement in medicine.

The book's essays stem from the author's professional experience as an educator, researcher, and bioethics consultant. And while the topics are varied, universal themes are highlighted through four section headings. Section I contains the first of these themes and is entitled "Bioethics and Public Life." It was inspired by the author's participation as a member of the Presidential Council on Bioethics. Chapter One is entitled "Bioethics and the Character of Human Life." Here, Meilaender identifies four distinct areas of research: 1) Death and dying, 2) behavioral control, 3) genetic screening, counseling, and engineering, and 4) population policy and family planning (3). All of these culminate into a definition of bioethics, which he describes as "the wisdom to discern right order among other competing goods" (10) vis-à-vis issues in the medical field. Chapter Two is aptly titled "Bioethics in Public: Reflections on an Experience." Here, he explores personal experiences emphasizing public discourse over academic insularity and serves as a segue into Chapter Three, "Biotech Enhancement and the History of Redemption." Caution

is advised against "beyond therapy" into human enhancement and moves into the next chapter on stem cells and torture.

This first section of essays is a buildup to a succinct arrangement of essays in Sections II, III, and IV. Each section is labeled "Thinking Theologically." Section II is entitled "Thinking Theologically: Life's Beginning." Section III is listed as "Thinking Theologically: Life's Ending," and section IV is named "Thinking Theologically: Being a Person." These sections explore a blend of theological issues related to the intersection of secular public concerns. For Meilaender, to think theologically about the beginning of life and preserving its unique character entails maintaining a close tie of "babymaking" to relationships grounded in love, preferring the act of "making" over "doing," without "designing our descendants" (84). Section III, "Thinking Theologically: Life's Ending," discusses euthanasia and organ donations in the context of theologically sound principles of the body's sanctity as embodying the person rather than a sum of the body's parts. Section IV urges the reader to think of the person theologically, thus avoiding reductionistic identification of the individual or holding to the person as some disembodied Platonic, ethereal "idea." Meilaender leads the reader to think of the person as an embodied "unrepeatable" entity, irreducible and mysterious (157).

Meilaender's commitment to Lutheran theology is expressed in each section of "Thinking Theologically." He grounds ethical issues in theological themes. In the chapter "The End of Sex," the author reflects on Stanford law professor Henry Greely's book, *The End of Sex and the Future of Reproduction*. Greely presents specific objections to those criticizing his predictions concerning an end to the use of sex for reproduction and its moral implications. Greely dismisses the claims that PGDs (preimplantation genetic diagnosis) go against God's will and supporting PGDs is an employment of the naturalistic fallacy. And so, it is confusing an "is" with an "ought," to where one needs humility in the face of such alternatives to natural "baby making," and to Leon Kass's objection to cloning as innately repugnant, suggesting that feelings change over time. All of these concerns, as well as others mentioned in subsequent chapters, are dealt with by Meilaender through demonstrating a failure of secular ethics to map out its values onto any rationally consistent system. Instead, as in PGDs, the author distinguishes between an ethically neutral—and indeed indifferent—*finis* of babymaking and lovemaking. He does this in contrast to the ethics' proper concept of a *telos,* which identifies the two acts as one.

Similarly, Meilaender, in Section III of "Thinking Theologically," recommends the issues of euthanasia and organ donations to be seen within the context of our bodies as gifts. This means our bodies are not our own to do with as we wish. They are sacred and deserving of reverence. Thus, we should refuse the dangerously destructive temptation to divorce the soul from the body in which it is instantiated.

Likewise, in Section IV, "Thinking Theologically: On Persons," Meilaender draws on Karl Barth's three angles of seeing humans through creation, reconciliation, and redemption. The mystery of personhood is found in the same mystery of the Trinity, with God the Father neither created nor begotten, the Son not created but begotten of the Father, and the Holy Spirit as proceeding from this relationship of the Father and the Son. Therefore, personhood cannot be reduced to a parts/whole emergentism but must be upheld with the same attitude as the religious notion of God's mysterious nature.

Finally, Meilaender's work is a testament to upholding the sanctity of humanity and the individual through clearly delineating the practical distinction between therapy and enhancement in medicine. If one is to take anything away from these essays on bioethics, the most important matter is a call to "pump the brakes" in enhancing our natural abilities and avoid going "beyond therapy" in the medical field. To quote Jeff Goldblum's character, Dr. Ian Malcolm, in *Jurassic Park*, "Your scientists were so preoccupied with whether they could, they didn't stop to think if they should."1 Dr. Malcolm does not elaborate on what this "should" might entail. Fortunately, Meilaender does elaborate in these essays, with the framework of human health as therapeutic and human enhancement beyond the parameters of what it means to be human from the perspective of a sound theological (and natural theology) foundation.

Ultimately this book is a much-needed text for those tackling the challenges facing bioethicists today. Through these lively essays, he derives universal themes that propel the book's thoughtful and contemplative reflections on bioethics in the 21st Century. Presenting theological principles about life and humanity to the reader, Meilaender straddles the line between secular and religious obligations within the medical field. Even more, he presents terminology such as "beyond therapy" and "human enhancement" to delineate between ethical and unethical practices in modern medicine. All of this is due to an attempt to preserve the surreptitiously diminishing sanctity of humanity and the distinctiveness of the individual in our current era of advanced technology.

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Note

1. Spielberg, Steven [director]. *Jurassic Park* (Universal Pictures, 1993). 127 minutes.