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# Personalism vs. Abstract Humanism

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## *"Love of the Individual vs. Love of the Utopian Dream"*

The essential paradox of man is that he desires the perfect and yet must dwell in a world where everything he encounters is imperfect. Every man experiences the conflict between love for ideal perfection and love for a concrete, imperfect being. This paradox is not easy for him to comprehend, and he sometimes simplifies it in a way that can be dangerous not only to himself but to mankind as well.

A common form of simplifying this paradox that is prevalent in the modern world is to remain faithful to the ideal while abandoning the concrete. Yet the ideal without the concrete, the perfect apart from the imperfect, exist only in the mind as abstractions.

Hence, the French existentialist philosopher, Gabriel Marcel, for whom concrete, caritative love is man's essential obligation to his fellowman, could appraise his life work "as a persistent, unceasing fight against the spirit of abstraction," and assert that "the philosopher can help man to save man from himself only by a pitiless and unwearying denunciation of the spirit of abstraction."

It was Marcel's abiding conviction that a natural and logical connection exists between the spirit of abstraction and mass violence. For, if all man is concerned about is a perfect order that does not exist, then it is inevitable that he come to reject the imperfect order which does exist.

Bertrand Russell exemplifies this modern preference for the abstract in his *Mysticism and Logic* when he states:

Real life is, to most men, a long second-best, a perpetual compromise between the ideal and the possible; but the world of pure reason knows no compromise, no practical limitation. . . . Remote from human passions, remote even from the pitiful facts of nature, the generations have gradually created an ordered cosmos where pure thought can dwell as in its natural home, and where one, at least, of our nobler impulses can escape from the dreary exile of the actual world.

Again, it is consistent with man's paradoxical nature that by following one of his nobler impulses — pure reason or pure thought — he can come to denounce the real world and all its real inhabitants. One of the hardest lessons for modern man to learn is that without love and

good will directed toward individuals, all those other strengths which are at his disposal — his knowledge, technology, culture, etc. — only serve to make him more evil and more unhappy.

The abortion debate is particularly difficult to resolve because those who approve abortion usually do so for some noble or humanitarian motive. Malice toward the unborn is a genuinely rare occurrence. Unborn babies are aborted because they fail to meet certain standards of perfection, because they happen to be unwanted, because of the problems they might cause society later on. They are aborted because their substantial reality is judged to have less weight than the abstract standards against which they are measured. They are aborted because they are not loved, but not because they are despised.

The purely rational temper, dedicated as it is to its revered trinity of reason, knowledge, and power, finds caritative love an obstacle in the path of progress. In the *Scientific Outlook*, Bertrand Russell indicates graphically how little significance he holds for the individual:

The new ethic which is gradually growing in connection with scientific technique will have its eye upon society rather than upon the individual. . . . We view a human body as a whole, and if, for example, it is necessary to amputate a limb we do not consider it necessary to prove first that the limb is wicked. We consider the good of the whole body a quite sufficient argument. Similarly the man who thinks of society as a whole, will sacrifice a member of society for the good of the whole, without much consideration for that individual's welfare.

It is characteristic of hard, rational thinking not to be deflected by human sympathy. Love for the individual is regarded as a sentimental indulgence that spoils society. Thus, the essential incompatibility between love and rational progress.

### Questions Remain

And yet a problem remains. Even if an ideal society were realized, would it be a human society if the individuals who composed it were not loved? Where people are desirable because they are perfect, are they not still empty if their existence is not affirmed through love?

Only abstractions can do without love. The mind alone is sufficient to support them. But individual people, no matter how extraordinary they are, need more than to be admired for their qualities; they need to be loved for themselves. Qualities, even perfect ones, remain exterior to the core of an individual's being. Unless that innermost core is affirmed through love, the individual remains incomplete and unsatisfied — a hollow man within a soul-less world.

Frederick Winsor parodies the modern preference for thought over reality in his book, *The Space Child's Mother Goose*, when he writes:

I have a pet hen whose name is Probable. She lays eggs in concept, being a sophist-bird. But not in reality at all; those would be inferior eggs; for thought is superior to reality.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn in *The Gulag Archipelago* comments on the mentality of the Soviet court after the Revolution. "People are not people," he writes, "but 'carriers of ideas.' . . . And it must also be kept in mind that it was not what he had done that constituted the defendant's burden but what he *might* do if he were not shot now."

We recall the commonplace argument that approves abortion on the grounds of what problems the child *might* bring to society in the years ahead. Thus, abortion is sanctioned for sociological reasons. The concrete reality of the child is offset by the hypothetical problems he may cause. Fear of future possibilities precipitates a rejection of present actualities.

Throughout the political writings of Jacques Maritain, time and again, he comes back to his basic premise: that man does not exist for the state, the state exists for man. It is the individual as person who is substantially real and deserving of being accorded dignity and rights. The state as such, conceived apart from the dignity of individual men, is a dangerous abstraction; and the painful tragedy of this spirit of abstraction is that real men are killed for the sake of an empty idea.

Thus Maritain could lament that in the modern world, "Human Reason lost its grasp of Being, and became available only for the mathematical reading of sensory phenomena, and for the building up of corresponding material techniques — a field in which any absolute reality, any absolute truth, and any absolute value is of course forbidden."

By the spirit of abstraction, some desirable quality or factor is separated from the original and total human reality — such as beauty, intelligence, gender, wantedness. Next, that quality or factor, although now existing in an abstract state, is given primacy so that an individual human being — the unborn child, in the case of abortion — may be sacrificed whenever he fails to embody it to a satisfactory degree. Hence, the abstract idea is upheld when often the life of the child is destroyed.

Perhaps no single American novelist saw more clearly the dangers of abstraction than William Faulkner. In 1939 he published two novels, under the collective title of *The Wild Palms*. They were released in counterpoint form: one chapter of "The Wild Palms" followed by a chapter of "Old Man," then a second chapter of "The Wild Palms" followed by a second chapter of "Old Man," and so on. The effect Faulkner intended was to contrast vividly two types of men: the modern society man and the man of nature.

In the first work, an intern runs away with a married woman who has two children. She becomes pregnant with his child and asks him to abort her. He is reluctant at first but finally consents.

In the second novel, a convict serving a life sentence is ordered to rescue a pregnant woman who is a victim of the great 1927 Mississippi River Flood. He finds the woman, helps her to dry ground and assists in the delivery of her child.

The irony is obvious. The intern, taught and trained to assist in life, performs an abortion. The life convict, supposedly socially incorrigible, assists in the birth of life. Yet Faulkner is implying more than just society's inversion of life values.

In contrast to the natural response of the convict and the woman to elemental conditions of human life, Harry and Charlotte — the central figures of "The Wild Palms" — dedicate themselves to an ideal, a mere abstraction.

They isolate love from marriage, children, society and responsibility; and treat it as if it were an entity unto itself. They flee from family and society to a mine in Utah where, ironically enough, the forty-degree-below-zero cold and the presence of their companions keep them apart for six weeks. When they are finally alone, the cold bursts Charlotte's douche bag — the perfect symbol of nonfunctional love — and she becomes pregnant. Abortion is the logical consequence of their abstracted love.

### Allusion to Modern Culture's Tragedy

Faulkner is alluding to the tragedy of modern culture that has lost sight of its proper relationship with nature and reality, that has falsified values by abstracting them from their substance and normal functioning. Charlotte remains dedicated to love but not to her lover, or her family, or the natural consequence of her sexual love — her unborn child. She remains to the end, dedicated to love as a free and simple, abstract ideal. She dies of a bungled abortion; Harry is subsequently imprisoned for the deed.

The collective desire to pursue an abstraction that all would enjoy is the essential dynamic of Utopianism. The Utopian dreamer unites the natural relationships that things have with each other. He believes he can have life in terms that are his own. The Spanish existentialist Ortega y Gasset remarks that "An idea framed without any other object than that of perfecting it as an idea, however it may conflict with reality, is precisely what is called Utopia."

Yet, in the imperfect cosmos that we inhabit, a perfect world is not possible. All achievements must be relative, that is to say, we can improve our world but we cannot perfect it.

Thus, rather than sacrifice real human beings, in whatever stage of development, for an end state that is unattainable, prudence and justice demand that we direct our good deeds on the small, concrete plane of individual people where good can be effectively realized.

Modern man's ambitious plans to cure the world inevitably fail because they miss the mark. What is most urgently and immediately needed is the loving care that flows from person to person. Dag Hammarskjöld, in his *Markings*, reflects on these thoughts:

The 'great' commitment all too easily obscures the 'little' one. But without the humility and warmth which you have to develop in your relations to the few with whom you are personally involved, you will never be able to do anything for the many. Without them, you will live in a world of abstractions, where your solipsism, your greed for power, and your death-wish lack the one opponent which is stronger than they — love. . . . It is better for the health of the soul to make one man good than 'to sacrifice oneself for mankind.'

Love for the individual, caritative love, involves descent: descent into the suffering world which agonizes in darkness. Love for the ideal, the Platonic form of love, moves in the opposite direction toward the perfect. A recent statement made by 215 American specialists in ethics, religion, and related fields advised that "abortion may in some instances be the most loving act possible."

It is difficult to interpret this form of love for the fetus as anything but a love for the ideal, for it is a love which maintains that any unborn child who cannot attain a certain standard of perfection should be destroyed. But this is not the love that affirms him in his being, that acknowledges and promotes the dignity he possesses as a concrete, living, unrepeatable human.

The absolute disparity of these two attitudes toward love was revealed with dramatic clarity in 1976 as the result of an accident that took place in the town of Seveso, Italy. In July of that year a factory mishap caused four pounds of Dioxin, a chemical agent known as a possible cause of birth defects, to escape into the air of Seveso. Pro-abortionists lost no time in predicting severe deformity of the unborn and advised pregnant women to abort. In all, thirty-six women underwent abortion. Subsequently, five Italian and two German doctors studied thirty-four of the aborted infants and found that in no case could gross or conspicuous malformation be detected.

For what reason, then, did these unborn children die? C.S. Lewis concluded a celebrated trilogy with the admonition: "You will have no more dreams. Have children instead." Were the Seveso abortions done for a dream — a dream of a perfect child or a perfect society? Some women reported being pressured, particularly by feminists, to abort. One, who later gave birth to a healthy son, disclosed that she was urged to abort so as to "help the cause of the abortion bill in parliament." "But," as she explained, "we really wanted the baby."

### Ambivalence of Pro-Abortionists

Pro-abortion idealists exhibit a strange ambivalence toward men. They are naively optimistic in theory but often brutal and pitiless in practice. Is this not because their love is for the ideal and they feel justified in destroying those who mock the ideal by being less than it?

The debate between the quality of life ethic and the sanctity of life ethic devolves upon one ethic centered on abstractions and another

centered on being. According to the sanctity of life ethic, one has a right to be because he is. According to the latter, one may not have a right to be, in spite of the fact that he is, because he is not what he cannot be.

The quality of life ethic, in order to approve abortion, must re-define both "human" as well as "life." A human is not simply a human but a human with certain perfections. Likewise, life is not life but a certain quality of life. Thus abortion is approved because a given unborn child does not meet standards of humanness and life that exist in the minds of the abortionists. Such is their tendency to regard abstractions as weightier than being.

There is tacit agreement among those who advocate the quality of life ethic that their own quality of life is sufficiently high to justify their own existence. Their function is to pass judgment on the quality of life of others. There is more than a hint of Narcissism here. And we may well wonder whether the world can tolerate an increase of Narcissism.

The quality of life vs. sanctity of life debate also turns on the opposition between power and reverence. Those who are willing to judge who shall live and who shall die desire to gain power over the lives of others. Those who uphold the sanctity of life have reverence for all life and ask but to be its ministers.

In a world that already suffers acutely from selfishness, violence, and a lack of reverence, abortion is a way in which these evils are given an even firmer foothold. The more afflicted the world becomes, the more anxious it is to change everything at once, and the more eager it is to sacrifice for a Utopian end state. Yet, in order to be thorough about the change that is needed, it is, as Hammarskjöld has reminded us, the "small" commitment that is needed most.

We are able to heal when we ourselves are whole; we are ready to help when we are willing to serve the most helpless. At the origin or the apex of human civilization the ultimate vindication that man is worthy of the life granted him, that he duly values its presence in all others, is his expressed love for the individual person.

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