

The Abolition of the Person

Jeff Myers

Nearly 70 years ago — before *Roe v. Wade* and before the world discovered the full extent of the horrors of Nazi Germany — C.S. Lewis penned what could be regarded as prophecy for today’s bio-ethical conversations. In his radio lectures-turned-book *Abolition of Man*, Lewis described the outcome of humanity’s hubris when it comes to conquering nature. The more man attempts to manipulate nature — specifically in the realm of eugenics and “pre-natal conditioning” — the more man is left with a totalitarian society, in which the will of some is imposed on others. “For the power of Man to make himself what he pleases means, as we have seen, the power of some men to make other men what they please. . . . Man’s final conquest has proved to be the abolition of Man.”¹

If two [bioethicists](#) get their way, the next category of humans to be abolished will be newborns who are either “defective” or “inconvenient.” Drs. Alberto Giubilini and Francesca Minerva recently [published an article](#) in the *Journal of Medical Ethics* entitled “*After-birth abortion: why should the baby live?*” (The article was removed from the journal’s website after harsh reaction against it). In it they argue that the killing of newborn babies should be permitted in any situation where abortion is permitted. They cite the likelihood of prenatal testing failing to reveal diseases like Down’s syndrome and [Treacher-Collins syndrome](#). Because of the suffering children born with such defects would undergo, they should be killed early in infancy, the authors argue. But their reasons for killing a child stretch beyond the child’s suffering and into the realm of convenience.

Nonetheless, to bring up such children might be an unbearable burden on the family and on society as a whole, when the state economically provides for their care. On these grounds, the fact that fetus has the potential to become a person who have an (at least) acceptable life is no reason for prohibiting abortion.

Giubilini and Minerva couch their logic in the idea that there is a difference between “actual” persons and “potential” persons. The difference, they suggest, is that “potential” persons are mentally incapable of valuing their lives by way of goals, wishes, dreams, and ambitions. Therefore, killing a “potential” person isn’t actually doing any harm to any person. They also concede that there is no moral or biological difference between a fetus and a newborn, a premise actually shared by abortion opponents (see the [SLED](#) argument).

Pro-abortion Arguments Beget the Infanticide Argument: It All Depends on Personhood

Though Giubilini and Minerva’s argument is grotesque and disturbing, it is nothing more than the [logical outcome](#) of all pro-abortion arguments; the authors even base their argument on abortion’s legality. The key question is what is a person, as Life Training Institute President Scott Klusendorf said in a recent interview with Summit. “This debate is really not about killing newborns,” he said. “This debate is about whether human beings have exceptionalism. What matters is being a person. Clearly being a fetus or newborn is not a person [according to Giubilini and Minerva].”

What’s worse, the authors’ criteria for what makes an “actual” person are completely arbitrary. Klusendorf pointed out that in the article, the criteria are made as assertions, not arguments. Why is Giubilini and Minerva’s definition of a person the right definition? And what about those who aren’t infants but who don’t assign value to their physical lives? According to Klusendorf, that eliminates large swaths of the population from personhood. Buddhist monks, for example, who see the physical realm as illusion, would not be actual persons because of that view. Someone who has sustained brain damage and is cognitively unable to value his life is no longer a person. And a toddler, while more mentally advanced than a newborn, still does not possess the capacity to do so. Who actually decides what a person is? If a delineation between who is and isn’t a person is necessary, someone must make the call. Giubilini and Minerva leave the decision up to neurologists and psychologists. But they also argue that the families of “potential” persons have a say, and if a government is paying for citizens’ health care, then the state has a say too, they imply. Though the question of personhood is a sociological one, it’s being answered by scientists, according to [Georgia Right to Life](#) President Dan Becker. “It’s not based in science; we’re biologically human from the beginning,” he told Summit. Ultimately, the question will have to be answered in the courts and halls of legislatures, he said.

‘Why Should the Baby Live’: The Burden of Proof is Shifting

The more pro-abortion, and now pro-infanticide, logic takes hold, the more the burden of proof for when to kill another human shifts. Much of the West is now entering a posture where the default position for many is to kill a fetus (or newborn) unless one can prove why the child should live. Biola University’s Dr. Scott Rae sees that shift more pronounced in Europe than in the U.S. However, a [recent decision](#) by an Oregon jury to award almost \$3 million to a couple because their Down’s syndrome-stricken child was not aborted by doctors startles Rae. “That gets us dangerously close to a wrongful life situation,” he said. “This is, I think, something to be nervous about.” If “after-birth abortion” becomes ethically and legally acceptable, doctors in the predicament of the doctors in the Oregon case could then kill a baby in order to [avoid malpractice suits](#). In an insidious turn, the medical community would pivot away from its goal of protecting life.

Narrowing the Scope of Personhood Always Leads to Tyranny and Suffering

Since the Fall, groups of humans have always tried to exclude other groups of humans from being considered persons. The personhood debate is nothing new, though, circumstances have changed through the millennia. In the Roman Empire, handicapped or diseased babies were abandoned and left to die outside in the elements in a practice known as “exposure.” They weren’t regarded as full people. During the age of American slavery, African Americans were enslaved because white people regarded them as less-than-human. In fact, they were only counted as 3/5 of a person. And of course, Jews, the disabled, mentally handicapped, gypsies, and homosexuals, all regarded as less-than-human by the Nazis, were killed, tortured, and experimented on. We now rightly see these atrocities for what they are: crimes committed against fellow image-bearers. Yet some still want to employ the same reasoning to narrow the scope of personhood.

The logic used in the journal article — stemming from the logic used for pro-abortion arguments — is the [same logic used in the Nazis’ T-4 euthanasia program](#). What started as a way to eliminate infants with diseases morphed into a program to murder handicapped members of society — adults and infants alike. Once a distinction is made between a person and non-person, human and sub-human, the lines become increasingly easy to walk back.

The Netherlands instituted a similar program in 2006. Dutch physicians use the [Groningen Protocol](#) to determine when to euthanize babies whose lives they deem not worth living because: (1) their immediate death is inevitable, (2) they can survive long-term but only while on intensive care treatments, or (3) they will suffer unbearably even though intensive care treatment is not required. One of the supporting arguments used is that **since assisted suicide in the Netherlands is legal, babies should be given the benefit of the doubt that they would opt for suicide.** But it is documented in countries where assisted suicide is legal, abuses and instances of non-consent killing [occurs](#).

Rae says that once a society begins classifying some humans as non-persons, the likelihood of rolling back definitions and excluding more and more people increases. Though some say the slippery-slope argument doesn’t apply, Rae thinks this is the perfect example. “It’s from people who don’t like to face the logical conclusion of their view,” he said. “Once you accept the premise of this piece, you’re stuck. You can’t not go there logically.”

Despite the [rebuttals](#) of the article’s authors and their editor, this issue isn’t just for the scholarly. This isn’t just the object of academic discussion. Ideas have consequences, and the idea of limiting personhood has drastic consequences for every corner of society and every individual. G.K. Chesterton once said, “When men have come to the edge of a precipice, it is the lover of life who has the spirit to leap backwards, and only the pessimist who continues to believe in progress.” It’s time we as a society leap backwards.

1.C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, in *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics*, (New York: Harper One, 2002), pp. 721, 723.