

Terminology to Assault Human Life and Life-Affirming Responses

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Pro-lifers have long known that the success of the anti-right-to-life movement has depended on a change in language before any technology could be used to kill a human being. This axiom has been a consistent theme in pro-life literature from the foundation of the movement in the 1960s. Another axiom is automatically coupled with it: that technological advances could just as easily work for the protection of human life as they could for its dehumanization and destruction.

It may be difficult for technologically-dependent Millennials to understand the life-affirming work accomplished during the last four decades of the twentieth century by technologically unsophisticated Baby Boomers and newly-technologically aware Gen Xers. Imagine life without today's technological advantages. Instead of a pc or a laptop, imagine a typewriter. Instead of using email or LinkedIn or other internet services to communicate pro-life news and events instantaneously, imagine using that typewriter to create a master copy of a newsletter which is then reproduced on a hand-operated duplicating machine and then mailed through the US Postal Service in about two weeks to a group's mailing list. Instead of receiving RSS feeds or linking to online videos from Fox Business News, imagine waiting to hear "the news" from only three major networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) and only at times that the networks broadcast (usually at 6 and 11 PM).

In each decade since the foundation of the movement pro-lifers have resisted the linguistic assault on human life using a variety of technologies either well-established or emerging in each of those decades. **[slide two]**¹ In the sixties and early seventies pro-lifers used the famous Willke slides to illustrate fetal development and to respond to anti-life attacks on unborn human life; today's pro-lifers use PowerPoint. In the seventies the pro-life world used printing technologies to mail newsletters to their members and telephonic resources to generate legislative alerts; today's pro-lifers use blogs, email, robocalls, and social networking communication tools like Facebook and LinkedIn to generate tens or hundreds of thousands of messages to elected officials. In the eighties pro-lifers purchased air time and paid for slick, focus group-tested television ads at great expense to communicate their views, thus circumventing a biased media which prevented pro-life ideas from being aired; today's pro-lifers create, at insignificant expense, videos for YouTube. In the nineties pro-lifers were introduced to the capabilities of the internet for easy and inexpensive communication and for pro-life research; they are still exploring web resources, and I doubt that anyone who has been converted to accessing

¹ These bolded references indicate the PowerPoint slide which accompanied the paper presentation.

the news and research online would ever waste his or her time by paying money for a hardcopy of a newspaper or checking out books and journals at a university library. Pro-lifers mastered the technologies of their day and fought the good fight in the battlegrounds of public speaking venues, the media, the legislatures, and the courts.

The current and soon-to-be-concluded initial decade of this twenty-first century has seen the anti-life attack on human life move to a new battlefield, a technological terrain which couples the outdated dehumanization tactics of the old anti-life movement to highly advanced technological services. Of course, the internet, all of only twenty some years old, does not present much in the way of new technology per se. It is not as profound an invention as ultrasound and three-dimensional inventions which occurred subsequently which revolutionized the way we looked (literally) at the unborn child. Nor is the internet as significant as brain research which shows to what degree comatose individuals are aware of their surroundings and have intensive brain activity despite the limitations of older technology to determine if someone was cognizant. The internet does, however, change the frequency and instantaneity of communication on the life issues. The success of the pro-life movement's effort to restore the first civil right to life depends on efforts to counter the linguistic attacks on human life found in the new technological world.

Much of what I will mention below has already been stated elsewhere and certainly by speakers whose eloquence is superior to my own. However, as Harold Bloom, E. D. Hirsch, Stephen Prothero, and others have written, Americans either have already lost or are still losing their great cultural heritage, and one can argue that even pro-lifers have lost crucial aspects of the history of their movement.² What passes as knowledge in contemporary culture consists of vapid and relatively meaningless bits of minutiae about film, music, and reality television stars. (It's entertaining to know, but why should I care how Lady Gaga wears her hair?) The more important philosophical and literary tenets of the centuries either have been or are being forgotten at a rapid race. The role of the scholar in today's culture has never been more important; academicians have the vital task of sifting through the mess of what passes as knowledge to reiterate the great life-affirming principles of Western civilization if humanity will progress.

Moreover, I argue that each one of us—scholars and laypersons—has not only the privilege and duty, but also the ability and technological opportunity to counter what often passes as knowledge but often reads as the most unashamed bias or simple idiocy when it comes to what is said

² Consider, for example, the seminal work of E. D. Hirsch in his *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (1987), Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon: the Books and School of the Ages* (1994), and Stephen Prothero's *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't* (2007); all of these works address the common knowledge gap from which Americans suffer.

on major network and some cable television channels or the internet about the life issues. Fortunately, there are many scholars whose work has illuminated the disastrous effects of a society which has lost the life-affirming principles established through the centuries, and their research can assist the movement in the new technological world.

This presentation has four components which have been abbreviated to meet the time restraints of this conference. **[slide three]** First, since many in the audience either may be new to the pro-life movement or may have never heard of the pro-life response to anti-life language used to dehumanize human beings, a review of anti-life language analyzed by various scholars is not only preparatory, but essential. Second, the presentation will highlight a particularly egregious case study of anti-life dehumanizing rhetoric. The third component will offer general linguistic strategies to counter anti-life threats when future instances occur. Finally, during the question and answer period, I hope that the audience will not only contribute their own examples of anti-life efforts to dehumanize human beings, but also formulate ways to respond to those anti-life attacks.

I. Scholarly Commentary on Terminology Used to Assault Human Life

The terminological changes which led to the killing of human beings in the twentieth century had been documented decades before the disastrous Roe v. Wade decision which legalized abortion in the United States throughout the nine months of pregnancy for any reason whatsoever. **[slide four]** Leo Alexander formulated the trend toward the anti-life philosophy most eloquently and succinctly in a now famous passage which attempted to document how the horror of the Nazi regime began. His words are as appropriate today as they were in 1949:

Whatever proportions these crimes finally assumed, it became evident to all who investigated them that they had started from small beginnings. The beginnings at first were merely a subtle shift in emphasis in the basic attitude of the physicians. It started with the acceptance of the attitude, basic in the euthanasia movement, that there is such a thing as life not worthy to be lived. (44)³

What Alexander says about the Nazi crimes highlights the starting point for this study of anti-life rhetoric. When one believes that one is superior to another person, the balance of human relationships is altered and dehumanization can occur. The Nazi experience should have been sufficient to tell us the disastrous effects of such a perception of human

³ The notion of “life not worth living” in the Nazi regime and used by euthanasia supporters in the United States can trace its ancestry to Karl Binding’s legal discussion in his 1920 essay “Permitting the Destruction of Unworthy Life”; Alfred Hoche discussed medical implications of euthanasia in the article.

life. Apparently, it was not sufficient, for American anti-life efforts have surpassed anything that the Nazi crime machine created.

During the formative decades of the seventies and eighties (formative in that the pro-life movement became more open to scholarly activity and more politically powerful), dehumanizing anti-life rhetoric was analyzed by a diverse corps of scholars vis-à-vis rhetoric and technological innovations. **[slide five]** In a chapter on semantics in her 1979 monograph *Who Broke the Baby?* Jean Garton, noted founder of Lutherans for Life, writes:

[M]aking sound moral choices requires that we use language to describe reality (not create it), to communicate factual information and to aid understanding. As we conclude what may well be catalogued in history as the Sensuous Seventies, we recognize that for an increasing number of people, moral choices are being made on the basis of feelings apart from facts or truth. Ignoring evidence, indeed not even seeking it, many have embraced the maxim of the sensual Frenchman Rousseau who said, “Don’t think. It hurts. Just feel.” As a result, the decision-making process is not located in the intellect but in the pit of the stomach, in the shifting sands of human emotions. (16-7)

By the 1980s, thanks in large part to the debate surrounding the ultrasound abortion which is the basis of *The Silent Scream* video, pro-life literature began discussing technological advances in greater detail. For example, the 1983 anthology *To Rescue the Future: The Pro-Life Movement in the 1980s* has a section solely devoted to technological aspects.

William Brennan discussed the success of the Nazi regime’s efforts to dehumanize millions of human beings in his 1983 work, *The Abortion Holocaust: Today’s Final Solution*; chapter eleven is devoted to linguistic camouflage of the killing operations of the Nazi regime. The comparisons that he establishes with anti-life arguments of abortion and euthanasia supporters in the United States are inescapable.

The various editions of the Willkes’ “handbooks” on abortion (which standardized pro-life discussion of the issue for years) consistently discuss not only anti-life rhetoric, but also ways to correct such language from a pro-life perspective based on technological advances in neonatology and social science. Chapter thirty of the 1990 edition of *Abortion: Questions and Answers*, for example, continues this practice by offering a paragraph-by-paragraph refutation of anti-life arguments.

[slide six] William C. Hunt considers various aspects in his 1994 essay “Technological Themes in the Abortion Debate,” discussing categories such as means and efficiency and several pairings of concepts which are viewed differently from the technological versus the philosophical and moral perspectives (for example, artificiality and naturalness). Hunt conjectures that

[T]he dominant themes of our technological world are in conflict with what we have hitherto known as our moral world. This stems mainly from a tendency to look upon human organizations in terms of machines and to understand human interactions primarily by way of a mathematical methodology. As a result, it is difficult, if not impossible, for someone immersed in the technological world to act morally in any traditional sense of the word. Quite literally, technological themes demoralize decision making and diminish responsibility. (256)⁴

Brennan expanded his earlier research on the implications of the Nazi dehumanization efforts in his 1995 monograph, *Dehumanizing the Vulnerable: When Word Games Take Lives*. **[slide seven]** Brennan continues his study of anti-life rhetoric in his 2008 monograph *John Paul II: Confronting the Language Empowering the Culture of Death*, wherein he suggested that the pope used a

[T]wo-pronged verbal strategy in countering a burgeoning culture of death that is engulfing an increasing number and range of victims. On the one hand, the Pontiff employed sometimes graphic but always authentic terminology in stripping away the litany of euphemisms constructed to obscure the destructive practices used against the victims. On the other hand, he exposed the defective, degrading definitions of the human person spawned by utilitarian, reductionist ideologies and replaced them with a wealth of life-affirming designations founded on the Judeo-Christian ethic of equal and intrinsic value for all human lives whatever their status, condition, or stage of development. (vii)

II. A Pro-Life Study of an Instance of Anti-Life Rhetoric

Some attacks on human life are common in the ordinary language of most persons, and it is a task for scholars to document these cases and to recommend corrected language lest the errors in thinking committed by inaccurate language, whether stated intentionally to dehumanize or not, remain. **[slide eight]** The most egregious example of faulty language which uses a scientific term for the purpose of dehumanization refers to a human being as a “vegetable,” a corruption of the lengthier medical phrase denoting that one is resting in a “persistent vegetative state.”

Exploring this prime example in greater detail is necessary. It is easy to see how the perfectly valid medical phrase has been misunderstood and corrupted into a dehumanizing vehicle. The mind of the uneducated person cannot process the word “state” in such a way that it becomes

⁴ He ends his essay with the hope that “we will be better able to deal with the rhetoric surrounding issues of public policy such as abortion” (265) once the technological bases of our culture are explored.

personally identifiable with someone or something that the person knows. Similarly, the uneducated person cannot identify with the adjective “persistent”—that is, he or she does not visualize someone or something when hearing the word. The uneducated person, however, is able to identify the adjective “vegetative” with a noun form and can visualize his or her favorite vegetable—tomato, zucchini, etc. Transferring the visualization from his or her favorite vegetable to someone, a living human being such as Terri Schiavo, becomes mentally easy. Dehumanization of that human being can quickly occur if the uneducated person is open to the effort to reduce that human being to a non-human entity.

For a contemporary analysis of this dehumanizing term, I searched the internet for the words “Schiavo” and “vegetable” to see how many sites would appear and if any blog contained the terms. **[slide nine]** The GrassfireBlog contained an article by Keith Fournier which faced the dehumanizing vegetative metaphor directly, “Terri Schiavo a Vegetable? No!” As of the date of last access (Monday, 6 September 2010) responses to the article received 17,000 words of commentary in nearly seventy posts. **[slide ten]** Two anonymous posts were dramatically representative of the anti-life and pro-life viewpoints. The anti-life post simply reads, “You ask is Terri schiavo a vegetable? YES SHE IS!! She will never be like you and I again!! NO THERAPY WILL EVER DO ANY GOOD!!”

Besides being grammatically incorrect (no capitalization of the surname, no introductory comma where necessary, and use of the subject instead of object pronoun), the characteristics of this post are simple: it must have been written in an irrational rage with no effort made to provide a logical basis of the claims made. Merely asserting that someone is a zucchini does not make the person a zucchini. Moreover, claiming that someone will “never” attain a better condition in life is the grossest form of hasty generalization; one can conjecture what the future will bring, but no one knows with certainty that the future will only bring negative consequences. The claim that “no therapy will ever do any good” is a victim of a double hasty generalization; certainly, that some therapy could have assisted Terri Schiavo can be argued with as much certainty as the anti-lifer does that no therapy would have accomplished any good. The anti-lifer does not believe in the possibility that any good could have occurred in Terri Schiavo’s life, and it is unfortunate that this person’s lack of hope is offered as evidence against the life of another human being like Terri Schiavo, whose family had great hope in her.

Here is the life-affirming post:

Too many people don't value the life of a person who seems to be inconvenient. Indeed, we are killing ourselves off. The people who labeled unborn children as embryos and fetuses (strictly scientific terms) or products of conception to make their execution seem more acceptable are the same people who are labeling Terri and others like her as vegetables. These same people may well be the ones who later live only by

(younger) people who are healthier and stronger than they are—people who have no more of a conscience than they do. Where the anti-life post was more of a rant than a logical support for a hopeless position, this life-affirming post contains much that can be admired as an instance of a pro-life counter to anti-life negativity for three reasons. First, the grammatical perfection of the post is an important element, since people tend not to believe others who cannot write or speak well, consigning them to the class of ignorant persons. Second, it is logically rendered. The person conveys his or her education without being pompous; citing the Latin terms as examples not so much of dehumanizing but scientifically accurate language helps the reader to understand the point being made. Finally, the writer attempts to show the logical progression that euthanasia would make (affecting the same people who support the killing of Terri Schiavo).⁵

III. Life-Affirming Strategies for Future Instances of Anti-Life Thinking

I offer the following strategies to correct instances of anti-life thinking. **[slide twelve]** First, one can adopt the philosophical position of Richard M. Weaver, who writes that

After all, there is nothing but sentiment to bind us to the very old or to the very young. Burke saw this point when he said that those who have no concern for their ancestors will, by simple application of the same rule, have none for their descendants. The decision of modern man to live in the here and now is reflected in the neglect of aging parents, whom proper sentiment once kept in positions of honor and authority. There was a time when the elder generation was cherished because it represented the past; now it is avoided and thrust out of sight for the same reason. Children are liabilities. As man becomes more immersed in time and material gratifications, belief in the continuum of race fades, and not all the tinkering of sociologists can put homes together again. (30)

Second, one can implement Brennan's strategy of "authentic terminology." As I analyzed the misunderstanding of the phrase "persistent vegetative state," one can see that moving one's language from the abstract to the concrete, minimizing or reinterpreting Latin words into

⁵ **[slide eleven]** Although not a scholarly quote, I discovered this comment on being a "vegetable" in the autobiography of the Oscar-winning actor Patricia Neal, someone who deserves respect not only for her film career, but also for the honesty with which she writes about an abortion in the 1940s which affected her entire life. Neal writes about her body's condition after having suffered three strokes:

I lay in a coma like an immense vegetable. No one detects any movement in a vegetable except, perhaps, the shrewd gardener who knows its roots are reaching deep into the earth. So, perhaps, was my unconscious body reaching into the wellhead of raw existence. ([254])

more accessible common vocabulary, will help uneducated persons to see the dehumanizing effects of certain language. **[slide thirteen]** For example, the phrases “embryonic reduction,” “pregnancy reduction,” and “selective termination” can be “translated” into the following clearer sentence so that readers will understand that these phrases mean that “poisonous substances are injected into the hearts of unborn children of women pregnant with more offspring than desired as a result of taking fertility drugs” (Brennan, *John Paul II*, 3).

[slide fourteen] Third, in what may sound oxymoronic, affirm the stigma of certain words. “Abortion” is virtually always negative, “infanticide” is the killing of the (usually handicapped) newborn, and “euthanasia” is a similarly negative code term for denying food and water rights to the dying or the elderly.

Fourth, use apposition, an increasingly necessary linguistic practice to educate today’s younger students and those older persons who may have lost the life-affirming heritage of Western culture. For example, it is necessary to refer to abortion as “legal throughout the nine months of pregnancy for any reason whatsoever” because many people still think, thanks to a biased media, that the Supreme Court legalized abortion only during the first three months of pregnancy. Similarly, it is necessary to refer to a person in a PVS state as “someone who is resting in a persistent vegetative state” or “someone whose body is resting in a coma.” If a specific person is mentioned, then a better reference would be “Terri Schiavo, who was not terminally ill and who was starved to death.”

A restricted reading of the literature of the pro-life movement in the United States illustrates a dual hope—that technology could protect human life and that linguistic assaults on humanity could be countered by an intelligent and sophisticated use of that technology. I trust that what can be investigated and learned at conferences like this one will help us see that the tragedy of 22 January 1973 can be corrected by a future reality where all life is respected.

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