

INTRODUCTION

The Sanctity of Life and Its Discontents

It may be worth remembering that our present absolute protection of the lives of infants is a distinctively Christian attitude rather than a universal ethical value.¹

—PETER SINGER, PROFESSOR OF BIOETHICS, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

THE ROMANS WERE not the first anti-Semites. But they embraced, at times enthusiastically, this most ancient of hatreds. The Romans conquered most of Europe and the Mediterranean world. They pacified peoples far more powerful, numerous, and wealthy than the Jews. But they could never fully subdue this small tribe in the far southeastern corner of their empire.

The Jewish rebellions were not merely military. The Jews also engaged in a determined cultural resistance. Unlike other conquered peoples who eagerly adopted Roman ways, the Jews clung with persistence to their ancient religion and distinctive morality. As Jews migrated to the empire's leading cities, they even began attracting Roman citizens to their synagogues.

In the year 70 CE, Roman legions crushed a major Jewish revolt and destroyed the city of Jerusalem. Not long thereafter, the Roman senator and historian Tacitus tried to quash the Jewish cultural challenge. In his major work, the *Histories*, Tacitus attacked the Jews as “wicked,” “stubborn,” and “lascivious.” Turning his attention to the Jewish religion, he asserted:

Among the Jews all things are profane that we hold sacred; on the other hand they regard as permissible what seems to us immoral.

Tacitus then listed a number of these Jewish moral perversions. Among the beliefs he found particularly “sinister and revolting” was the fact that, for Jews, “it is a deadly sin to kill an unwanted child.”²

The Romans were proud practitioners of infanticide. So were the Greeks before them. Both Plato and Aristotle recommended that the state adopt a policy of killing deformed infants. The Roman philosopher Seneca wrote approvingly of the common practice of drowning abnormal or weak children at birth. The earliest known Roman legal code, written in 450 BCE, permitted fathers to kill any “deformed or weak” male infant or any female infant, no matter how healthy.³ Indeed, female babies were the primary victims of Roman infanticide.

The Roman approach to human life was highly utilitarian. They believed that females and weak males were never going to grow up to be effective farmers, soldiers, or leaders. They would therefore contribute little to the families and society that sustained them. With nothing in the Roman moral code to dictate otherwise, many parents decided that killing these babies made more sense than raising them.

Infanticide became so common a practice in the Roman Empire that parents could discuss it without the slightest remorse or shame. Here, for example, is a letter from a Roman soldier to his wife:

Know that I am in Alexandria. . . . I ask and beg you to take good care of our baby son, and as soon as I’ve received payment I shall send it up to you. If you are delivered [before I come home], if it is a boy keep it, if a girl, discard it.⁴

The Jews embraced a different and quite revolutionary view of human life. They were neither utilitarian nor pragmatic. The

Jews attributed a mystical value to every single human being. And they valued all humans equally, regardless of their age, gender, health, or ability. The Romans simply could not understand this Jewish fetish for human life, and they condemned it with the disdain they reserved for the most irrational of superstitions.



CULTURE FORGES MORALITY. It is our culture that defines for us what is right and what is wrong.* We did not evolve our belief in the sanctity of human life along with our opposable thumbs. Nor are we moral geniuses who reasoned our way to this insight. Most civilizations throughout most of human history never arrived at this view. The only reason we in the West recognize the sanctity and equality of all humans today is because centuries ago a small tribe on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean injected this radical idea into our cultural thought-stream.

Our culture is pervasive. It surrounds us as completely as the air we breathe. And, like the air we breathe, we often forget that it is there. From the moment we're born, we are bombarded by our culture's unique moral code. Our first stories and books impart introductory lessons on right and wrong. Our parents and teachers communicate the culture's norms in every compliment they give and every criticism they level. The culture's prevailing morality permeates our workplaces, saturates our entertainment, and pursues us to our retirement homes. The culture never rests.

It is therefore easy to forget that so many of the things we think we "just know" were actually lessons we drank in with our mother's milk. In fact, many observers seem to believe that they arrived at certain Judeo-Christian insights through their own

*In emphasizing the centrality of culture to the transmission of morals, I do not seek to deny that there are absolute moral truths fixed by God or inherent in nature. My point is simply that we humans tend to come to knowledge of these and any other moral codes by means of the cultures in which we live. When religious people worry about the movies their children watch or the lessons they learn in school, they are acknowledging this overwhelming cultural power.

independent moral genius. Here, for example, is a popular contemporary critic of religion describing how humans can simply reason their way to recognizing the evil of slavery:

The moment a person recognizes that slaves are human beings like himself, enjoying the same capacity for suffering and happiness, he will understand that it is patently evil to own them and treat them like farm equipment. It is remarkably easy for a person to arrive at this epiphany.⁵

This reasoning forms a perfect circle. Yes, once people accept that slaves are human beings like themselves they may well oppose slavery.* But why on earth would people ever recognize that slaves are human beings like themselves? The author of these words seems to have forgotten how very few people on the face of the earth have ever looked into their slave's eyes and seen a brother. The Egyptians never did. The Greeks never did. The Romans never did. Most of the Enlightenment philosophers never did.

Growing up in the heart of a Judeo-Christian society, such critics begin life on a high moral summit and believe that they have scaled a mountain. Yet such moral ingratitude is hardly new or rare. No less a figure than Thomas Jefferson made this mistake. Jefferson grew up in a Judeo-Christian culture that taught the equality of all men, and he enshrined this principle in the Declaration of Independence with the words "all men are created equal." Yet he famously introduced this piercing moral insight as one which is "self-evident."^{**}

The idea that all men are equal is anything but self-evident. And while Jefferson may have been capable of paraphrasing the

*Even though the Judeo-Christian tradition has always recognized the full humanity of slaves, it actually took many centuries for this idea to translate into opposition to slavery.

**Some scholars argue that the words "self-evident" were actually added by Benjamin Franklin.

idea, even he famously failed to grasp its full meaning. When he spoke of men being created equal, Jefferson meant men—not women. And he meant white men. When it came to slavery, therefore, Jefferson never fully arrived at the “remarkably easy” moral epiphany of this institution’s patent evil. While he saw abolition as a worthy goal for some future generation, Jefferson never pressed the issue in his own day and he never freed his own slaves.

There are some critics of the Jewish and Christian faiths who reject their core morality. But in the modern West, the more popular critique of the Judeo-Christian tradition comes from those who fully embrace its morality but simply fail to recognize the source. These critics employ the ideas, values, and vocabulary they have inherited from the Judeo-Christian tradition to sit in judgment on that tradition and find it wanting.

Discontents at Home

Carrie Buck was an 18-year old woman who gave birth to a child out of wedlock in the wrong place at the wrong time. The year was 1924, and the Commonwealth of Virginia frowned upon such behavior. The Commonwealth concluded that Carrie was “feeble-minded” and ordered her sterilized so that she could not bring any more children into the world who might inherit her deficiency. The Romans killed babies of weak mind or body. The Commonwealth of Virginia wanted to prevent such babies from being born in the first place.

In seeking to sterilize those it deemed unfit to reproduce, Virginia was hardly alone. During the 1920s and 1930s, the eugenics movement was growing in prestige and popularity throughout the United States and Europe. Proponents of this pseudo-science taught that government could help build a better society by encouraging healthy citizens to reproduce while discouraging or even preventing those deemed defective from doing so. States across America responded by passing laws establishing forced

sterilization programs. Those who advocated this practice did not believe themselves to be cruel or bigoted. On the contrary, most were self-professed progressives eager to end disease and poverty by applying the latest scientific insights.

The United States Supreme Court shared the nation's enthusiasm for eugenics. When Carrie Buck challenged the Virginia legislation under which she was to be sterilized, the Supreme Court upheld the law. Writing for the lopsided majority of eight of the nine justices, the legendary justice Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote that eugenics initiatives such as Virginia's were necessary:

in order to prevent our being swamped with incompetence. It is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind. The principle that sustains compulsory vaccination is broad enough to cover cutting the Fallopian tubes. Three generations of imbeciles are enough.⁶

The phrase "three generations of imbeciles" refers to evidence submitted at trial that both Carrie Buck's mother and daughter were, like Buck, "feeble-minded." Proponents and practitioners of eugenics relied upon this horribly vague category to give them the freedom to sterilize pretty much anyone they chose. The evidence proffered to support the charge of a feeble mind often spoke more to the victim's conformity than to his or her intelligence.

Subsequent research has demonstrated that Carrie's mother was simply unconventional and, possibly, a little promiscuous. Carrie's only offense was having a child out of wedlock. The authorities ignored the fact that Carrie's pregnancy was most likely the result of a rape. The evidence that Carrie's infant daughter was feeble-minded consisted of the most superficial of observations and was contradicted when she grew to be a top student.⁷ What Holmes called "three generations of imbeciles" would be characterized today as a single mother and a rape victim making the difficult choice to keep and raise their babies.

Justice Holmes was not bound by law or precedent to sanction this eugenics program. Instead, he took advantage of his position on the Court to further a cause he enthusiastically supported. Holmes, like Tacitus before him, had little sympathy with or patience for the Judeo-Christian fetish for human life. Holmes was a man of reason and a man of science, and he judged humans only by reference to their utility to society.

Holmes was by all accounts quite proud of his rejection of the sanctity of human life. Here, for example, is Holmes writing to a friend:

I think that the sacredness of human life is a purely municipal idea of no validity outside the jurisdiction. I believe that force, mitigated so far as it may be by good manners, is the ultima ratio, and between two groups that want to make inconsistent kinds of world I see no remedy except force. Every society rests on the death of men.⁸

In another letter, Holmes repeated the sentiment with even greater emphasis:

What damned fools people are who believe things. . . . All 'isms seem to me silly—but this hyper-aethereal respect for human life seems perhaps the silliest of all.⁹

Elsewhere, Holmes opined less eloquently on this topic. In a letter to a colleague he asked: “Doesn’t this squashy sentimentality of a big minority of our people about human life make you puke?”¹⁰

Given his rejection of the sanctity of human life, it was easy for Holmes not only to embrace eugenics but to take it to its logical conclusion. In a major address, he declared:

I can imagine a future in which science shall have passed from the combative to the dogmatic stage, and shall have gained such catholic acceptance that it shall take control of life, and condemn at once with instant execution what now is left for nature to destroy.¹¹

Far from being shocked by Virginia's sterilization statute, Justice Holmes may well have believed that it did not go far enough.

This Supreme Court ruling gave long-awaited legal sanction to the practice of eugenics in America. Eugenics proponents wasted little time capitalizing on this victory. Many additional states passed statutes similar to Virginia's, bringing the total number of states authorizing forced sterilization to twenty-nine. By 1941, over thirty-five thousand American men and women had been forcibly sterilized or castrated. Most of these were found to be "feebleminded," "morally degenerate," or exhibiting some other deficiency so vague as to apply to almost anyone out of favor in his or her community.¹²



EVEN IN AMERICA, our Judeo-Christian roots are sometimes not strong enough to hold us steady when we are buffeted by new cultural winds. The Romans were not the only ones to disdain the Judeo-Christian reverence for human life. We have had plenty of dissidents right here at home.

Since the supreme value we place on human life is not self-evident but learned from culture, it can be challenged and replaced by less generous appraisals. Our values are not written on our minds or hearts with indelible ink. They have been penciled in, and they are subject to being erased. America's record of practicing eugenics is but one small example of the fragility of our moral norms.

When it comes to the mutability of moral codes, the past century has of course provided us with far more terrifying cautionary tales. In Germany, the Judeo-Christian ethic was replaced by a Nazi race-based morality which narrowed the scope of the sacred from all of humanity to "Aryans." In the Soviet Union, the Judeo-Christian ethic was supplanted by a Communist class-based morality which narrowed the scope of the sacred from humans to the working class. In the former Yugoslavia, the Judeo-Christian ethic was rejected in favor of a nationalist

morality which narrowed the scope of the sacred to Serbians. The list goes on. In each case, those left outside of the newly narrowed zone of compassion were left vulnerable to the very worst that human nature can inflict.

These examples are not merely disturbing; they are obvious. We in America have heard these stories of slippery slopes before, and we are quite confident that we will not slide down them. And we very well may not, especially if we, as a nation, continue to revere our Judeo-Christian heritage to the extent we currently do. But episodes such as our embrace of eugenics should remind us that even we are not completely inured against cultural ill winds. Sometimes the house sways and the foundation is tested.

Scientific Discontents

James Watson is a scientific legend. In 1962, he won the Nobel Prize, together with his partner Francis Crick, for discovering the double-helix structure of DNA. He is the father of modern genetics.

On October 14, 2007, Dr. Watson's illustrious career came to an abrupt end. That day, London's *Sunday Times* published an interview with Dr. Watson in which he was quoted as saying that he was "inherently gloomy about the prospects of Africa." Watson then explained the reasons for his pessimism:

All of our social policies are based on the fact that their intelligence is the same as ours—whereas all the testing says not really.¹³

Watson went on to say:

There is no firm reason to anticipate that the intellectual capacities of peoples geographically separated in their evolution should prove to have evolved identically. Our wanting to reserve equal powers of reason as some universal heritage of humanity will not be enough to make it so.¹⁴

Dr. Watson had not suggested killing anyone. Nor had he called for sterilizing anyone. He may well have made his statement out of a hope that confronting this scientific “truth” would convince us to do more to help the Africans of whom he spoke. And Watson was far from the first scientist to suggest the existence of intellectual disparities among the races despite all of the evidence to the contrary.*

Yet no matter what his intentions, Dr. Watson was giving modern sanction to one of the most dangerous ideas in history. The suggestion that there are significant and immutable differences between the various branches of the human family is a profound break from the Judeo-Christian belief in the fundamental equality of all humans. Theories emphasizing these alleged differences have been excuses for slavery and rationales for genocide. Human inequality has been the mantra of modernity’s greatest murderers.

Dr. Watson may have thought that he was being scientifically honest. But he was in fact being morally reckless. This much should, by now, be elementary.



BEFORE HIS CONTROVERSIAL comments led to his suspension, Dr. Watson had been the director of the prestigious Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory on New York’s Long Island. This laboratory has a long and proud tradition of being on the cutting edge of biological research. And, it turns out, the laboratory also has a history of controversial directors questioning the Judeo-Christian ethic of the sanctity and equality of all humans.

During the early decades of the twentieth century, the director of the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory was a biologist named

*Most leading experts strongly disagree with Watson and the others who assert such racial disparities. In the weeks following Dr. Watson’s remarks, authorities such as Craig Venter and Dr. Elias Zerhouni issued public statements stressing the complete absence of scientific support for the claim that there are intellectual differences between the races.

Charles Davenport. Davenport was one of America's most prominent proponents of eugenics. Early in his tenure at the lab, Davenport opened the Eugenics Records Office. This institution became the intellectual and administrative heart of the eugenics movement during the height of its influence in America.

The team at the Eugenics Records Office pursued a most ambitious agenda. They set out to identify the estimated ten percent of the American population who were believed to be too defective to reproduce.¹⁵ At the same time, they sought to convince the states to pass legislation which would enable them to sterilize all those so identified. In 1914, the Eugenics Records Office drafted a model sterilization law to serve as a template for the states. This model law provided the foundation for the Virginia statute under which Carrie Buck was sterilized. This model later served as the basis for the German legislation, the Law for the Prevention of Defective Progeny, under which the Nazis sterilized more than 350,000 people.¹⁶

Beyond sterilizing alleged undesirables here at home, the Eugenics Records Office invoked the principles of eugenics in a concerted campaign to block the immigration of supposed inferiors from abroad. Embracing the racist orthodoxy of their day, most eugenicists believed that northern Europeans were genetically superior to eastern and southern Europeans. They were therefore horrified that America's immigration laws had opened the nation's doors to millions of Italians, Jews, Greeks, and other allegedly inferior breeds. They concluded that all of their other efforts to improve America's gene pool would be overwhelmed unless they stopped this massive influx of poor genetic stock.

The experts at the Eugenics Records Office worked tirelessly to reverse American immigration trends. While they accepted the existing immigration levels, they demanded that Congress shift the source of these immigrants from southern and eastern Europe to the "Nordic" countries of northern Europe. The director of the Eugenics Record Office, Harry Laughlin, championed these race-based revisions in repeated testimony before the

House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization. Laughlin so impressed committee chairman Albert Johnson that he was appointed the Committee's "Expert Eugenics Agent."

Enthusiastically accepting Laughlin's theories and recommendations, Chairman Johnson introduced and secured passage of a eugenics-based immigration bill. The National Origins Act of 1924 increased immigration quotas from northern Europe while severely restricting immigration from eastern and southern Europe. Under the new law, for example, the number of Italian immigrants permitted into America each year shrank from forty-two thousand to four thousand. Immigration from much of Asia was blocked altogether. With minor variations, these strict quotas remained in place until after World War II.¹⁷

It is, of course, an indirect link. But the American eugenics movement had long arms indeed. They reached past Carrie Buck and well into the heart of Europe. There they held back millions of Poles, Russians, Jews, and Italians who sought to flee an increasingly dangerous Europe with mounting urgency. For the Jews in particular, the denial of an immigration visa was typically a death sentence. One wonders how many hundreds of thousands of Jews might have escaped Hitler's grasp by immigrating to America during these years had the eugenics movement not been so successful in shutting our doors to them at this crucial juncture.



SCIENCE HAS BEEN the iron wedge by which the secular has penetrated the realm of the sacred. Science has been the sharp scalpel with which our most cherished ideas about humanity have been subjected to dissection and doubt. Those who suggest that religion is the primary source of human conflict and bloodshed are not looking closely enough. If we examine the history of violence in modern times we will often find rationales rooted in science.

The idea that all human lives are sacred and of equal value is not a product of science. The sanctity of human life cannot be

proven in a laboratory. When it comes to this most profound and foundational moral insight, we in the West have only one source: the Judeo-Christian tradition. This idea was first expressed in the Bible and it has survived throughout the centuries because of the ongoing authority of the Jewish and Christian faiths. If some of the Enlightenment thinkers later embraced and reiterated this concept, they cannot be credited with an immaculate intellectual conception. It was right there in the Bibles most of them read.

The Judeo-Christian tradition has built a wall between humans and the rest of the animal kingdom. It has placed man on a pedestal and put a crown on his head. Modern science, on the other hand, has consistently sought to tear down this wall and treat man as just another species of animal. Science has sought to take that crown off our heads—and measure the size of our skulls.

We are frequently warned these days about the great danger of religion expanding into fields where it does not belong. This concern is not without justification. There are areas of expertise, especially in the realm of science, where religion can contribute little. Religion cannot help us split the atom or map out our DNA. The Bible provides no clues that can help us cure cancer. As Cardinal Baronius is said to have put it in the sixteenth century, “The Bible teaches the way to go to heaven, not the way the heavens go.”

But we must also recognize that there exists an equal and possibly greater threat of science exceeding its proper boundaries. Especially when it comes to morality, science can confuse, but it rarely enlightens. Science can enable us to split the atom, but it cannot help us decide whether we are justified in using an atom bomb. Science can help us map out our DNA, but it cannot help us determine whether it is moral to clone humans. Science can help us cure cancer, but it cannot help us cope with cancer.

When science ventures beyond its core areas of competence into the realm of morality, it often leaves corpses in its wake.

Especially when scientists opine on the value or equality of human beings, they invariably chip away at a key cultural support-wall. With an air of authority to which they have no claim, scientists have called into question the key principles which protect humanity—especially the weakest among us—from annihilation. Before even grasping the danger, they could bring our whole ethical edifice crashing down. If religion does not belong in the science classroom, then it is equally true that science has no place in the ethics classroom. We need a wall of separation between science and morality every bit as much as we need one between church and state.

Philosophical Discontents

Peter Singer is a philosopher and writer who is currently the Ira W. DeCamp Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University. In 1993, Professor Singer released a book called *Practical Ethics* in which he set forth a series of controversial, and soon infamous, views.

Singer's main thesis is that we in the West have drawn our moral lines irrationally. While we cherish human life, he asserts, we do not extend similar respect to the non-human animals with which we share the planet. According to Singer, neither science nor philosophy can justify this distinction. We should not, he argues, value life according to its species. Instead, he urges us to value life on the basis of whether and to what extent it possesses certain positive attributes, such as rationality and awareness.

Singer then spells out the ramifications of his approach. He argues that we need to see beyond our Judeo-Christian obsession with human life to better value and treat many of the animals we currently kill for food or sport. From this compassionate start, however, Singer's thesis proceeds to a dark converse. Overcoming our fetish for human life, he asserts, will also enable us to more clearly see that not all human life is of equal value.

In particular, Professor Singer seeks to wean us from what he sees as an irrational attachment to newborn human babies. Using his support for abortion as a starting point, Singer proceeds to make the case for infanticide:

I have argued that the life of a fetus . . . is of no greater value than the life of a nonhuman animal at a similar level of rationality, self-consciousness, awareness, capacity to feel, etc., and that since no fetus is a person no fetus has the same claim to life as a person. Now it must be admitted that these arguments apply to the newborn baby as much as to the fetus. A week-old baby is not a rational and self-conscious being, and there are many nonhuman animals whose rationality, self-consciousness, awareness, capacity to feel, and so on exceed that of a human baby a week or a month old. If the fetus does not have the same claim to life as a person, it appears that the newborn baby does not either, and the life of a newborn baby is of less value to it than the life of a pig, a dog, or a chimpanzee is to the nonhuman animal. Thus while my position on the status of fetal life may be acceptable to many, the implications of this position for the status of newborn life are at odds with the virtually unchallenged assumption that the life of the newborn baby is as sacrosanct as that of an adult.¹⁸

Given this clash between his views and the widely accepted view that infanticide is murder, Singer concludes that “these widely accepted views need to be challenged.”¹⁹ This is an assault which Singer is prepared to lead. He reminds his readers, quite accurately, that our ideas about the sanctity of human life are neither obvious nor universal, but a cultural anomaly. As Singer notes:

Infanticide had been practiced in societies ranging geographically from Tahiti to Greenland and varying in culture from nomadic Australian aborigines to the sophisticated urban communities of ancient Greece or mandarin China. In

some of these societies, infanticide was not merely morally permitted but, in certain circumstances, deemed morally obligatory.²⁰

And Singer is correct again when he identifies the source of our unusual reverence for human life:

If these conclusions seem too shocking to take seriously, it may be worth remembering that our present absolute protection of the lives of infants is a distinctively Christian attitude rather than a universal ethical value. . . .

The change in Western attitudes to infanticide since Roman times is, like the doctrine of the sanctity of human life of which it is a part, a product of Christianity. Perhaps it is now possible to think about these issues without assuming a Christian moral framework that has, for so long, prevented any fundamental reassessment.²¹

To be fair to Professor Singer, he is not advocating that we euthanize adult humans. Nor is he suggesting that we implement the type of forced infanticide practiced by the Nazis. Singer is only suggesting that we permit parents to decide whether or not to kill their newborn babies. Furthermore, Singer has limited his actual policy advocacy to more extreme cases, such as supporting a parental right to infanticide in the case of terminally ill and severely malformed babies.

Yet, provided that parental approval is forthcoming, Singer seems quite willing to sanction a broader range of infanticide. He has argued in favor of killing babies with Down's syndrome, although he now suggests that these babies should be spared if there are people willing to adopt them. Elsewhere, Singer has suggested that even a baby with hemophilia, a perfectly treatable blood disorder, could be morally killed so long as its parents intend to have another, healthy baby in its place.²²

When it comes to whether or not to kill a baby, the only real moral limit Singer seems to recognize is the feelings of the

parents. Thus while he favors “very strict” limitations on infanticide, he acknowledges that “these restrictions might owe more to the effects of infanticide on others (i.e. the parents) than to the intrinsic wrongness of killing an infant.”²³



WE IN THE WEST have benefitted enormously from secular philosophy. All of us who are fortunate enough to live in a liberal democracy owe a debt of gratitude to the classical tradition as well as to Enlightenment philosophers such as Locke, Rousseau, and Jefferson. We who benefit from the genius of the American Constitution and its system of separation of powers must thank the classical philosophers as well as the Enlightenment thinker Montesquieu. Everyone who enjoys the protection of their human and civil rights must acknowledge the role played by the Enlightenment philosophers in embracing and popularizing these concepts. The list goes on.

Yet there are limits to what philosophy can teach us. And there are certain realms where philosophers should not tread. The fact is that philosophy, like science, has been a powerful wedge by which the profane has pierced the realm of the holy. Philosophy has been another means by which our most precious ideas about the sanctity and equality of all humans have been dragged down from their commanding heights into the muck of self-interested debate. The Judeo-Christian tradition attributes to humans a mystical value beyond our particular skills and contributions. Secular philosophy has too often sought to break this spell and subject us to far less benign systems of valuation.

The idea that all human lives are sacred and of equal value is not a product of philosophy. It is not a principle that is easily deduced or even logically defended. This is a belief we must place beyond the reach of the philosopher’s pen as well as the scientist’s probe. The sanctity of life is one idea we are better off not deconstructing.



When Professor Singer first arrived at Princeton in 1999, the university hosted a public debate between Singer and a colleague on the new professor's controversial views. Over the course of the evening, Singer repeated some of his trademark lines, including his assertion that "simply killing an infant is never equivalent to killing a person."²⁴

As she was leaving the debate, a Princeton senior was asked to share her reaction to Professor Singer. "I'm not all that disturbed," she replied, "because it's just philosophy. I'd be a lot more disturbed if he were trying to implement it."²⁵

Despite this student's hopes to the contrary, the barrier between philosophy and policy is a most permeable one. Ideas have a way of trickling down from the academy to the halls of power. The Spanish conquistadors invoked classical philosophy to justify massacring and enslaving the American Indians. The Enlightenment philosophers invented the concept of race and employed it to rationalize African slavery. Karl Marx was a philosophy student whose thought was heavily indebted to Hegel, Feuerbach, and other icons of his discipline. The Marxism he developed nurtured monsters as diverse as Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot. While Hitler was no scholar, he pieced together his racist creed from the bits and pieces of German philosophy and social Darwinist dogma popular in his day.

There is good reason for that Princeton student, and all of us, to be disturbed when philosophers begin to question the sanctity and equality of all humans.

Discontents Abroad

On May 12, 2008, a terrible earthquake shook China's Sichuan province. Over the course of the next days and weeks, a familiar scene unfolded. Chinese crews worked around the clock to rescue their fellow humans from the wreckage. Some families rejoiced at finding relatives still alive in the rubble. And one

could see in the terrified faces of others that their loved ones had yet to be found.

In watching scenes like these we are touched by something that seems to be truly wonderful and universal about humankind. In times of crisis, we forget our differences and rush to the aid of our fellow man. No matter what our culture, it seems, we humans will claw through rock and rubble to save our brother who is buried beneath.

Yet no matter how similar people may appear to be on the surface, important differences remain. The differences that matter are not ones of race, gender, or nationality. Our most significant differences are those of culture. The deep implications of these cultural variations are not always apparent in our day-to-day behavior toward those in our ingroup; they are often visible only at the margins. These differences are revealed in how we treat the weak, the very young, and the rather old. They are manifest in how we behave toward the strangers in our midst and beyond our borders.

The Romans treated their fellow citizens very well. It is the way they treated their slaves, their enemies, and their infants that revealed something troubling at the core of their culture. The same goes for contemporary society. Infanticide, for example, did not die out with the Romans. Nor has it only recently begun to be rehabilitated by Professor Singer and others. The fact is that this practice never went away. People continue to kill their unwanted offspring down to the present day. Which brings us back to China.

In 1990, the Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen came across some statistics that deeply disturbed him. Sen found that in China, India, and some other Asian and North African countries, men significantly outnumbered women. This is the opposite of what demographers would expect to find. In every other country across the globe, women outnumber men. While there are more male babies born on average, more female babies

actually survive infancy. These females then tend to live longer lives.

Applying standard male-to-female ratios against the actual population statistics, Sen came to the shocking conclusion that there were fifty million “missing women” in China and a total of over 100 million missing women in all of Asia and North Africa.²⁶ In a 2003 article in the *British Medical Journal*, Sen confirmed his earlier findings and concluded that, since his 1990 study, “the total numbers of missing women have continued to grow.”²⁷

While the estimates vary widely, a series of subsequent studies have confirmed Sen’s primary contention that massive numbers of Asian women are in fact missing. A 2000 report funded by the United Nations concluded that in South Asia “79 million women are simply ‘missing.’”²⁸ A 2002 article in the *Journal of Assisted Reproduction and Genetics* concluded that “approximately 50 million women are ‘missing’ in the Indian population.”²⁹ A 2005 United Nations Population Fund report noted that “at least 60 million girls are ‘missing’” in Asia.³⁰ A 2007 study by Chinese researchers concluded that “the estimated number of China’s missing girls was 40.9 million” at the time of the 2000 census.³¹

These “missing women” were neither overlooked nor misplaced. They didn’t pack their bags and move to sunnier climes. They were killed and aborted. The overwhelming consensus is that these gender disparities are primarily the result of the gross neglect of female babies, female infanticide, and sex-selective abortion.*

The cultures of ancient China and India, just like those of Greece and Rome, were ones in which sons were typically

*In a 2005 article in the *Journal of Political Economy*, a Harvard graduate student named Emily Oster offered an alternative explanation for at least part of this gender disparity. She wrote that many of the countries which are missing women also have high rates of hepatitis B infection, and that women who carry this virus tend to have more male babies than healthy women. Yet a number of subsequent studies have cast

preferred and daughters were often killed. Like so many other evils, infanticide has been a universal phenomenon. In the West, the spread of Christianity effectively ended these preferences and practices. In Asia, however, they have never been fully displaced. In many parts of India and China, a preference for sons and the disposal of daughters continues down to the present day.

Asia's rapid modernization has not narrowed this gender disparity. On the contrary, it may well have exacerbated it. For centuries, parents had to wait until a child was born to determine its sex and kill the females. Today, however, there is no need to carry an undesirable baby to term. Through readily available ultrasound technology, parents can determine a child's sex much earlier and eliminate unwanted children more easily through abortion. Yet even the most zealous defender of abortion rights recoils at the use of abortion as a sex-selection tool.

In China, furthermore, the government's one-child policy has also fueled the gender gap. Much of China's son-preference is driven by the widespread belief that sons are better able to provide for their parents later in life, especially since custom dictates that daughters go to live with their husbands' families after marriage. If a couple can have only one child to support them in their old age, then there is a stronger incentive than ever to make sure that this child is a boy.

This murder of so many millions of young girls has required that a new word be added to the English language. What is taking place in China and India is a "gendercide."³²

As the scope of this tragedy has come to light, the governments of India and China have both taken steps to address it. In 1994, the Indian government passed a law which prohibits the use of ultrasound for identifying the sex of a fetus. In 2003, this

serious doubt on this explanation. Oster herself came to question her thesis, and in a 2008 working paper she concluded that "hepatitis B cannot explain skewed sex ratios in China." (Oster, Chen, Yu, Lin, "Hepatitis B Does Not Explain Male-Based Sex Ratios in China," National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 13971, April 16, 2008)

law was amended to prohibit sex-selective abortion. In 2006, India launched a “cradle scheme” in which orphanages were opened throughout the country to raise unwanted baby girls.

In 1994, China outlawed both the sex identification of fetuses through ultrasound and sex-selective abortions. This law was strengthened in 2002. More recently, Chinese officials started a “Care for Girls” campaign to combat ongoing son-preference. According to China’s leading government paper, the *People’s Daily*, the program seeks to end sex-selective abortion as well as “the criminal activities of drowning and abandoning baby girls.”³³

Eliminating such deeply rooted practices will not be easy. When a reporter for the *New York Times* visited the Chinese city of Guiyang in early 2005, he noticed that the “Care for Girls” program was indeed being implemented. A bright red banner hung above the main street announcing that the government was going to “firmly crack down on the criminal activity of drowning and in other ways brutally killing female babies.” Across the street, however, in equally large characters, was an advertisement promoting ultrasound tests at a local medical clinic.³⁴

Yes, the Chinese respond to their natural disasters the same way we do. But many millions of Chinese react to the news that they are expecting a baby girl very differently than we do. No matter how much we may share as humans, our cultural differences remain. These differences are not simply quaint matters of custom or cuisine. They are very often a matter of life and death.



THIS BOOK HAS a simple premise. It is a premise which runs counter to a deeply flawed conventional wisdom. It is a premise to which history lends its most compelling testimony.

The premise is that the Judeo-Christian tradition has introduced, preserved, and promoted a key insight and a core

commandment. The insight is the sanctity and equality of all humans. The commandment is to treat our sacred fellow humans with love—to love one another. These ideas—what we will collectively call “the Judeo-Christian idea”—have been neither obvious nor universal, and they are continually under assault.

The Judeo-Christian idea has been the powerful force that has enabled Western civilization to overcome many of the evils which have plagued it, evils which have been too widely accepted in too many cultures for far too long.* The Judeo-Christian idea is the reason—the only reason—why we in the West rejected the custom of infanticide and shunned the practice of eugenics. This idea is what enabled us to finally, belatedly, end the institution of slavery. This idea has empowered us to combat genocide with all of our moral force.

In asserting that the Judeo-Christian idea has enabled us to overcome these evils, we recognize that the converse is also true. Wherever we in the West have rejected the Judeo-Christian idea, we have fallen backwards. In such cases, the very moral weeds that this idea helped to extirpate have returned, taken root, and quickly choked out any moral progress that may have been made in their absence. In the twentieth century, the rejection of the Judeo-Christian idea by certain cultures enabled both slavery and genocide to return to the West, and to do so on a far greater scale than ever before.

Let us be entirely clear. In the West’s moral progress, the Judeo-Christian idea has not been *an* effective force. It has been

*It is worth reiterating that this is a book about *Western* civilization. There may well be other faith traditions which both embrace such humanitarian ideas and have motivated men to act on these ideas. These traditions may have lifted other civilizations toward greater love and humanity. But when it comes to the West, only one such tradition—the Judeo-Christian—has had such an impact. This book does not claim to be a work of comparative religion. It is, by design, a study of one civilization and the ideas that have shaped it.

the effective force. The Judeo-Christian tradition has given the West a clear moral map. It has blazed and illuminated the path. And it has been the fire in men's souls that keeps them walking down this path, no matter how long or difficult the journey.