Infanticide again

By Bill Muehlenberg
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When academics call for baby killing, you know we have reached the outer limits of the moral atmosphere. Our mighty intellects, who are supposed to be training the next generation both mentally and morally, are often instead doing a great disservice.

To be well educated is certainly no guarantee of general intelligence or wisdom. To have a string of letters after one's name is obviously not a sign of high moral acumen. Tragically we often have some of the most morally deficient and intellectually lacklustre positions being argued for by our academics.

And when these people try to make a learned case for baby killing, we have proof that all is not well in academia. Today's press presents us with yet another frightening example of this. Two more Melbourne-based academics are enlightening us on the case for infanticide. More on this in a moment.

But sadly this has been occurring for some time now. One of these profs is from Monash University. We of course have had other advocates of baby killing from Monash, most notably Peter Singer. He is now at Princeton University in the US, but he began his notorious career here in Melbourne.

He is a long standing advocate of not only abortion and euthanasia, but infanticide as well. He believes the new born must not automatically be considered to be persons, and they must be tested to see who should live and who should die which I have written about elsewhere.

So here we have two more "ethicists" telling us that the newborn are not persons, and are therefore fair game for killing. One article introduces things this way: "Two ethicists working with Australian universities argue in the latest online edition of the Journal of Medical Ethics that if abortion of a fetus is allowable, so too should be the termination of a newborn.

"Alberto Giubilini with Monash University in Melbourne and Francesca Minerva at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics at the University of Melbourne write that in "circumstances occurring after birth such that they would have justified abortion, what we call after-birth abortion should be permissible."

Yes we have heard all this before. Not only by academics like Singer, but earlier experts and academics said similar things. A major element leading up to the "Final Solution" in Germany was the notion that some people – indeed whole classes of people – are not persons.

Decades prior to the Holocaust there were many academic positions and pronouncements which prepared the way for what Hitler and the Nazis did. For example in 1895 the German legal scholar Alfred Jost wrote an influential volume, The Right to Die. And in 1904 the German Society for Racial Hygiene was formed.

Of special importance was the publication in 1920 of Alfred Hoche and Karl Binding's Die Freigabe der Vernichtung lebensunwerten Lebens (The Authorization of the Destruction of Life Unworthy of Life). Here was promoted the concept of "lives not worth living". The book spoke of the "incurable feebleminded" who should be killed. It all led nicely to Hitler's Mein Kampf (1925-1926).

State-sponsored euthanasia was called for, with the idea that many humans had to be excluded from those deserving the right to life. Other writings appeared, with much discussion especially in the German medical community. All this helped pave the way for the Nazi programs when they came to power in the early 1930s.
As Henry Friedlander says in the opening of his important book, *The Origins of Nazi Genocide*, "Nazi genocide did not take place in a vacuum. Genocide was only the most radical method of excluding groups of human beings from the German national community. The policy of exclusion followed and drew upon more than fifty years of scientific opposition to the equality of man."

But back to our two Melbourne academics. They state this in their defence of infanticide: "Merely being human is not in itself a reason for ascribing someone a right to life. Indeed, many humans are not considered subjects of a right to life: spare embryos where research on embryo stem cells is permitted, fetuses where abortion is permitted, criminals where capital punishment is legal."

The Nazi doctors would have been proud of such rhetoric. But anyone exercising some intellectual and moral clarity would see just how slippery such weasel words are. The authors do not establish what they are seeking to argue for: the non-personhood of certain humans: they simply assert it. That an argument does not make.

The case for the non-personhood of these classes of humans has not been made. They simply take a backward step in ethical reasoning: proceeding from what is to what ought to be. They assume description should lead to prescription. They think that if we are already killing some human beings, then it must be morally acceptable.

They of course have things back to front here. We first should be examining the moral and ontological status of these groups. We should determine if they are in fact persons. And if they are, then of course killing them is quite wrong. It is not my intent here to argue that case. I and others have sought to do that elsewhere.

The fact that embryos are now being destroyed does not mean it is morally licit. That which is legal is not always moral. As just noted, it was quite legal in Nazi Germany to kill all sorts of classes of human beings. But that legality did not mean it was therefore morally right.

The same is true of the unborn child. Simply declaring that such a human is a non-person is not based on science, it is a philosophical precommitment. In Singer's case it is utilitarianism and pragmatism. He has simply assumed ahead of time that certain groups are non-persons, and can therefore be bumped off at will.

And these two academics also have great misunderstandings about the nature of capital punishment. No one argues that those warranting the death penalty have somehow become non-persons. It is exactly because they are persons, and have committed heinous crimes against other persons (such as murder), that the state takes these issues so seriously.

So we have three cases appealed to by these ethicists, and none of them stand up under scrutiny. We simply have the same old story of some intellects and academics telling us that certain people are not persons, and therefore must forfeit the right to life.

They have simply made a pronouncement based on their secular utilitarian worldview. They have not established their case, and they have not proved in any sense of the term that the unborn and others are in fact non-persons. But by lending more intellectual and professional credibility to the case for baby killing, they make it seem all the more acceptable, and will undoubtedly sway many.

This is a great abuse of medical ethics and the academic community. Using the classroom and scholarly journals to make the case – coolly and calmly – for baby killing is not an indication of professionalism and progress. It is a sign of barbarism and regress. And we have seen it happen all before.

Have we not yet learned the lessons of history? Apparently not.

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