



A Stygian Lifeboat: On the River of Moral Relativism

One of Alfred Hitchcock's most memorable films was his 1944 classic *Lifeboat*, which depicted eight survivors adrift in a boat after their ship had been sunk by a Nazi submarine. Their story is one of courage self-sacrifice, and Christian charity in the face of tremendous odds. Working together helped them survive their terrible ordeal.

THE HORNS OF A DILEMMA

Moral perceptions have greatly changed since 1944. Fewer than 30 years after *Lifeboat*, liberal Catholic Martin Sheen starred in *The Last Survivors*. After a typhoon had sunk his ship, Sheen assumed command of a lifeboat, bursting at the seams with survivors. The boat is in serious danger of floundering and possibly losing everyone. Sheen is forced to *play God*, and decide who may remain in the boat and who would be cast overboard. These *hard* decisions impaled him on the horns of dilemma. He arbitrarily establishes a natural selection: *human value*. The elderly are the first to be jettisoned, followed by the weak and unfit. In an over-crowded lifeboat, an elite of scientists, intellectuals, and authority figures always seem to head the survivors' list.

For an historical parallel, one need only look to Adolph Hitler and Nazi Germany in the 1930s. One of Hitler's first acts in *purifying* the German race was the elimination of all *useless eaters*; the weak, the elderly, and the infirm because they were sinking the Nazi lifeboat. His notorious T-4 Program in 1939 euthanized over 250,000 Germans. The program's success served as a bellwether for the *Final Solution* to the *Jewish problem*.

This *Naziesque* attitude is now current in the West. To leftist environmentalists the world is a big lifeboat, bursting at the seams with unnecessary humanity. The earth's resources are limited. The world is running out of petroleum, water, and all the resources to sustain life. Led by such disoriented neo-Malthusians, like Paul Ehrlich, *Green Marxists* have preached a gospel of death and the annihilation of the world's *useless population*. Birth control, abortion, global plagues, a DDT ban, and wars are mere tools in their store of destruction.

THE BOATMAN OF DEATH

Garrett Hardin, Professor Emeritus of Ecology at the University of California at Santa Barbara, coined the term *Lifeboat Ethics*. He believed rich nations were *lifeboats* and the sea around them filled with poor people who would swamp the boat if helped. Government leaders should stifle their *better angels* and deny aid to the world's poor people. Hardin is more akin to a modern Charon, the Stygian *boatman of death* who ferried souls across the Underworld's River Styx.

Hardin's lifeboat metaphor has infected many schools and universities. Ethics teachers and moral philosophies have established numerous examples of life's difficult choices that involve railroad tracks, trolleys, shipwrecks and inadequate food. In each case, there is a hierarchy of human values that decides the *tough* moral choices. In each example, innocent people must perish or be violated for the greater social good. Some of the euphemisms which hide the immorality of their twisted examples include *altruistic adultery*, *sacrificial suicide*, and *merciful murder*. Some cases even favorably countered the family pet against total strangers. Such exercises reduce objective morality to a *situation ethic* that customizes moral choices to one's life style and personal needs.

THE RIVER OF HISTORY

Communists and many Liberals also deny absolute truth. They will never admit human nature exists. They think mankind can be sculpted and molded like clay. Their solemn vow to change human nature is written in a century of violence and 170-million dead.

The ancients knew better. Greek philosopher and the *Father of History*, Heraclitus, wrote that history is like a river, which flows through time. Paradoxically the river is always changing yet remains the same river. While there have been many variations in governments, cultural attitudes, language, style, and technologies, the one constant has been the inner struggle that is evident in each and every human being. It is the universal tug of war between good and evil.

Pagan Indian tribes have portrayed this inherent trait as two

wolves, the one representing peace, love and honor and the other hate, greed and lust. When asked which one wins, the answer is *the one you feed*. St. Paul revealed the same moral civil war in Romans 7:19 *For I do not the good I want but the evil I do not want*. The Catholic Church has called this innate quality *original sin*, an attraction for evil, present in everyone.

MORAL CRACKS

During the long reign of the Catholic Church in Europe, moral issues were more black and white. Of course there was hypocrisy, some bad popes and inconsistent thinking, but until the 16th century, morality was objective. The writings of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas emphasized that the laws of God were written in the hearts of each and every human being. Men would be judged for all eternity by their ability to follow the dictates of their consciences, formed by these natural laws.

With the advent of the Protestant Reformation and Martin Luther's ideas about the absolute *freedom of conscience*, the first crack in the dike of faith appeared. Luther's notions gradually clouded the teaching of absolute morality, leading to a more subjective understanding of sin and punishment. The comprehension of what was right and wrong evolved into a choice of one's own truth and one's own morality.

Another fissure in the Christian moral edifice surfaced in 1513 with the publication of Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*. He observed that his political contemporaries lived by the maxim of *I must kill you before you kill me*. He concluded that since the Italians of his day were morally weak, cowards, or poor, traditional rules had to be altered. Machiavelli's *ideal prince* could be decent, and principled but he must never let his principles get in the way of the evil he must do to preserve himself and his state. His cardinal rule had to be *the ends always justified whatever means he must employ*. According to Arthur Hippler, in *The Wanderer Newspaper*, Machiavelli was the first Western thinker to promote the idea that *moral evil is necessary for political good*. One need only view most American Catholic politicians to witness how prevalent his ideas have become.

WINDS OF DOCTRINE

Following the lead of several of his papal predecessors, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger set the course of his papacy with his homily on April 18, 2005. In it he condemned the many dangerous *ideological currents* that have tossed the *small boat of thought of many Christians* on waves of *Marxism, liberalism, collectivism, radical individualism and...a vague religious mysticism*. Echoing St. Paul's warnings to the Ephesians (4:14-16) the future pope (now Pope Benedict XVI) stressed that *we must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine*. Every day new sects are created, underscoring St. Paul's warning to beware of

the human trickery, *which tries to draw those into error*. This has inevitably ensconced the world in a *dictatorship of relativism*, threatening the foundations of moral truth.

This dictatorship is especially true of the United States. Moral relativism has emerged as the ruling heart of secularism and has permeated every aspect of American culture. Cardinal Ratzinger recognized this in his book, *Truth and Tolerance*, when he referred to Egyptologist Jan Assmann, who claims that it was Moses who introduced the notion of truth into religion and insisted that the Jews reject all false idols. According to Assmann, Moses' destruction of the *Golden Calf* was responsible for monotheistic intolerance. He falsely asserts that it was the Jewish religion that introduced intolerance for the liberal virtues of *diversity, tolerance, mutual respect, and civil peace*, which is in direct contrast to organized religion, and brings on wars and persecutions. In order to understand how wrong Assman is, one need only cite the surfeit of liberal hate crime legislation, designed to squelch any criticism of government's protections for its favored minorities.

NOSE OF THE CAMEL

Today the *freedom of conscience* combined with Machiavelli's scandalous promotion of *evil actions are necessary for political good* are the dominant philosophical underpinnings of American secularism. No place is more evident than in the moral clash over the life issues: abortion, euthanasia, and Embryonic Stem Cell Research. The abortion movement, which attached its lucky star to the comet of the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s, has been saturated with *freedom of conscience* and the *good end* justification since then. In a self-indulgent culture, the idea of *choice* resonates well with millions of Americans, especially women who have bought the radical feminist message of the Cultural Marxists.

The logic, morality, or even the rhetoric of the *right to an abortion* has been never challenged or explored by its advocates. No thought is ever given to *what is chosen*. It started with an emphasis on the *tough cases*, the small percentage of unwanted pregnancies that resulted from rape or incest. These cases, which accounted for less than 1%, were the nose of the camel that eventually opened the flap for abortion on demand. For some 33 years and 42-million unborn dead in this country, the ends justifying the means rhetoric has held fast, despite the public's growing unease with unrestricted abortions.

With the precedent of abortion rights firmly entrenched within the cultural, social and legal American edifice, the proponents of the *culture of death* moved on to the country's elderly population. The rhetoric of *personal choice* and *heroic ends* has the same resonance. Only the targets have changed. The elderly have been conditioned to feel like a burden to their children and to society. Fear of disability and pain, plus the

inevitable loss of youth and vitality, makes their lives seem meaningless and desperate. *Right to Die* movements, with their assisted suicides, especially in Oregon, will inevitably lead to involuntary euthanasia, which is gaining momentum around the world.

The latest and potentially most outrageous issue has been Embryonic Stem Cell Research. Under the mere *promise* of a cure for many dreaded diseases from Parkinson's, ALS, paralysis, diabetes, Alzheimer's and others, a new line has been drawn in the sand. Billions of dollars of government grants have been wasted without any track record of success. To deceive the public these purveyors of false scientific hope cruelly parade victims or relatives of these dreaded diseases, such as Nancy Reagan, the late Christopher Reeve, and actor Michael J. Fox, who has been suffering from Parkinson's for years.

The unpublicized truth of this stilted debate is that Adult Stem Cells, procurement and use are perfectly moral, have track records of helping and even curing victims of at least 66 diseases. But since they involve no tampering with the delegated powers of creation, it is not attractive to those who have replaced the Christian ethic with what Ann Coulter calls a *Godless Religion*, one that is powered by a *Stygian lifeboat*.

A CIVIL UNION

The entertainment industry has adopted *freedom of conscience and the good end justification*. Ironically it was the lawlessness of the 1960s and early 1970s that produced the *vigilante film*. These films celebrated loners, portrayed by actors Clint Eastwood and Charles Bronson, who circumvented the bureaucratic façade of law and order to protect their families and society from the leftist decisions of Supremacist judges. Eastwood's *Dirty Harry* movies lionized Harry Callahan who was tired of seeing his good police work undone by liberal judges and his stiff bureaucratic superiors. He constantly disregarded their authority by any means possible, even defiantly killing some of the criminals he encountered. Charles Bronson was a private citizen whose family had been violated by a gang of thugs who danced around justice and punishment with ease and dexterity. In the *Death Wish* quadrilogy, the public and the police silently applauded his acts of deadly retribution.

No current television series better demonstrates the civil union of Luther's free conscience and Machiavelli's wrong means to good ends, than the extremely popular *24*, starring Keifer Sutherland. Over the course of its five seasons, the show has moved slowly toward the abyss of moral nihilism. Inspired by 9/11, Sutherland plays the refractory *Jack Bauer*, who works for a fictitious government agency CTU (Counter-Terrorism Unit). In the course of his service, Bauer has faced national threats such as nuclear bombs, the release of a deadly virus, and the sabotage of American nuclear plants. He has broken every moral rule in the

book. This antinomian hero is a modern Prometheus unbound from any conventional idea of moral order, except the seriously pragmatic goal of protecting his family and saving the world. In relentless pursuit of his goal, Bauer has tortured, even murdered suspects, done drugs, robbed and terrorized citizens—all in the name of the greater good. In one gruesome episode, he *executed* one of his CTU superiors on the command of a virus-toting terrorist. Under the guise of entertainment, the immoral attitudes of shows, like *24*, have subtly dulled the American people's sensitivity to what is right and wrong.

A ROCK IN A POISONED RIVER

Arguments that promise cures, safety or an easier life are attractive to all human beings—even devout Catholics. The secret is to recognize the insidious nature of these seductive arguments and focus on the moral principle that one can never do evil to effect good. The first rule of moral choice is what pagan medical pioneer Hippocrates urged: *first do no harm!*

St. Thomas Aquinas wrestled with this moral quandary over 500 years ago and arrived at the principle of the *double effect*, which has helped alleviate much of the anguish over such human responses. Not to be misconstrued as a compromise with moral evil, his underlying principle is that if an action has two results, one of which is good and the other which is evil, the action may be performed if the evil effect is not intended. Self-defense of individuals, families, and states flows from his saintly reasoning. Church teachings, based on St. Thomas, have allowed governments, soldiers, and private citizens to morally defend themselves against invasions, criminals and personal assaults. No anti-abortionist can ever take the life of abortionists, even though it would save countless lives. A soldier or civilian who throws his body on a grenade or flies his plane into an on-coming torpedo may do so, only to save the lives of others, not to end his own life.

Truly the greatest and most frequent temptations revolve around one's family. How many parents have assisted or looked the other way when their daughter sought the services of an abortionist, or their son married outside the Church. How many have accepted the *shacking up before marriage*?

All of the above underscores the fact why it is imperative that absolute moral truth never be eliminated from democratic rule. Otherwise the country will be doomed to follow the moral behavior dictated by *moral pragmatism* and hegemonic power. Catholics and all moral minded people must eschew the temptations of today's culture and remain firm in their beliefs, like rocks in a poisoned river of relativism.

William A. Borst, Ph.D., Feature Editor. He is the author of Liberalism: Fatal Consequences and The Scorpion and the Frog: A Natural Conspiracy which are available from the author at PO Box 16271, St. Louis, MO 63105.

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Eleanor Schlafly, *Publisher*
William A. Borst, Ph.D., *Feature Editor*
e-mail: info@mindszenty.org
web site: www.mindszenty.org