In a secular world, religion is an antidote to dogmatism. Like religious societies before them, today's secular societies take many things for granted. There are beliefs, even life-and-death ones, that hardly anybody challenges seriously or thinks through, if not even about. Such beliefs are secular dogmas.

In the Nordic countries, for example, abortion is as much a long-secured legal right as it is an obvious fact of life and daily practice for hospitals and their personnel. Academic debates on the ethical nature and status of abortion are, *nomen omen*, academic. Students do not get particularly excited about them, unlike what a philosophy teacher would experience in, say, North America or Great Britain. In these Anglophone parts of the world, instead, the debate can be so heated that it often degenerates in the opposite way: two factions scream aloud ("murder!", "patriarchy!") and nobody listens to any reason but their own–or better, they listen to prejudice that is supposed to count as reason. Yet, British champions of liberalism such as John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) or Leonard Trelawny Hobhouse (1864–1929) claimed that unchallenged belief, even if true, is worse than challenged belief, for which one must retrieve and think through solid reasons. Let contrary belief, even false belief, be heard, so that the human mind may not acquiesce into shared habit, prejudice, or *de facto* dogma.

Roman Catholicism, with its insistence on equating the destruction of embryos to the destruction of human life, serves as a token of contrary belief. Whilst heathen religions demanded life sacrifices and allowed infanticide, Christianity, at least in its declared intentions, stopped them, to the surprise of peoples that had been exposing children since time immemorial—Christ's death on the cross being ideally the last human sacrifice to the heavens. *Contra* the conventional wisdom of civilised peoples such as the Egyptians and the Romans, the radical Jewish sect initiated by Jesus Christ (or Yeshua ben Yosef) became the unlikely ideological conqueror of the ancient world and ushered an age in which the parent-child relationship, which noted Jewish historian of early Christianity and bioethicist Hans Jonas (1903–1993) regards as the veritable archetype of all moral responsibility, acquires powerful ramifications.

In the Nordic countries, whenever I voice my doubts about the comprehensive and commonsensical ethical legitimacy of abortion, I am quickly dubbed an "Italian Roman Catholic", as though that label could put an end to the issue. It does not, however. Uttering

disqualifying predicates may be popular and even effective (e.g. “fascist”, “populist”, “communist”, “chauvinist”, etc.), but it is cheap rhetoric nevertheless. Generally, I am regarded on almost all issues as a die-hard leftist. Personally, I consider myself a feminist, or at least I have been happily married and co-working with one for many years. Whether I am a leftist, a feminist, an Italian Roman Catholic, an Icelandic one, a Greek Orthodox, Jew or Buddhist, though, my doubts must be countered first through proper critical analysis, not put aside without thoughtful consideration by uttering some sort of supposedly negative or self-explanatory label that, in the mind of the utterer, means that the brain can be switched off in good conscience. If not a classic token of *ad hominem* attack, the standard reply that I receive in the Nordic countries is a case of fallacy of relevance. Let me articulate my doubts, then, and engage active reason, not automated numbness.

First of all, whatever a fertilised egg may be—a person, a cluster of cells, a magmatic centre of biological energy, a monad—we can all be certain of one thing: all persons have been precisely *that* at some early stage of their biological development. One does not have to deploy the full force of Aristotelian or scholastic metaphysics to grasp this fact, even if the notions of “potency” and “actuality” may appeal to her. After all, they appeal to engineers and physicists when dealing with energy; or to sport coaches and teachers when gauging the likely achievements (or failures) of a young athlete or pupil. But they do not appeal to me. Infinite regress seems excessive for something as temporally confined as a person, whom we know to have a beginning and an end, however blurry those may be. Besides, my doubts do not start with the reproductive cells taken independently, but with the fertilised egg. Plenty of sperm cells and, fairly regularly, of eggs, are disposed of without ever becoming a person. Far fewer fertilised eggs do not evolve into a foetus, which later becomes, often, a person. In any case, *no person has never been a fertilised egg*.

Could then a fertilised egg be a person? I do not know *for sure*. Though I do know that it *might*. Hence abortion *might* be prenatal infanticide. As such, on merely *prudential* grounds, I am strongly inclined to suggest that we should be cautious with regard to how we treat a fertilised egg, for it might be the case that we are dealing with a person, and I myself as well as all of my Nordic interlocutors (I have yet to meet an inveterate sceptic, social Darwinist or sadist outside philosophy books) wish to treat persons respectfully. Annihilating them is, with rare and typically tragically painful exceptions, something that we do not wish to do.

Secondly, when I look back at my personal experiences, and especially at whether growing up in a largely Roman Catholic country did make any difference, I can clearly see two things. One: on the most counterfactual level imaginable, I would be most displeased if my parents or just my mother had decided to abort me; I would have been deprived of my existence and all the experiences, bad as well as good, that have made it worth living. Two: when debating the legalisation of abortion in Italy, one of the most frequently heard arguments from the pro-abortion side was that, as painful and possibly harmful as it could be, it would have saved nonetheless the lives of many women, who would have otherwise sought illegal abortions.

Like several advocates of legalised drugs or prostitution, many who have favoured State-sanctioned and operated abortion suggest a choice in the face of empirical inevitability between two evils—one greater, another lesser—rather than between an evil and a good. Saving life, rather than contributing to destroying it, is a paramount aim to be attained by allowing *and* regulating abortions, even when it is found profoundly unappealing. Thus, the question arises: were we to find a way to save life to a higher extent, could we try to reduce the frequency of abortion, or establish conditions that could lead to the same result?

Please note that I have stated nothing so far about women's fundamental rights and liberties. I am not indifferent to them. Quite the reverse, they are so obviously paramount to me that I have not wasted any time debating them or their legitimacy. I do not wish to see them diminished, not least in the medical sphere. Rather, as with all cases of possible limitation of anyone's liberty and self-direction, such as penal law and traffic regulations, one can only intervene if some serious harm could be the case if no intervention takes place. Given that the ontological nature of the fertilised egg *might* be that of a person, or be so closely related to being a person as to entail some serious moral consideration, how could one ever intervene with all the authority, impersonality, clumsiness and yet inevitable necessity of State regulation in such an intimate sphere as a woman's control over herself, her body, her earthly existence?

Certainly, since I have not ascertained with much certainty that fertilised eggs are real persons and, at the same time, I do know that all reasonable human beings would avoid harming persons as far as plausibly possible, whilst granting them as much freedom as possible, I cannot allow the State, in principle as well as in practice, to be heavy-handed.

While it can be hypothesised academically that legal abortion is a modern woman's equivalent of the ancient Roman *pater familias'* having *ius vitae necisque* over all living beings that happened to be *sub mano*, the State's ability for murderous power is far more empirically certain and we are reminded of it by each and every war that occurs on our planet.

The solution that I propose is therefore a fairly indirect and, in the lack of certainty, *prudential* one, which is bound to prove dissatisfactory to many pro-life advocates. It is partly the result of the theoretical considerations spelled out above, as tentative and imperfect as they may be. And it is partly the result of personal and, if one wishes to be a little more 'scientific', socio-cultural observations that I have made in different European countries over many years of professional and personal life.

These observations can be summarised fairly quickly: in Iceland, compared to the United Kingdom, there is a similar abortion rate and at least as easy an access to lawful abortion, coupled with a high rate of unplanned pregnancies, especially among young women. Overall, however, more children are born in Iceland of younger mothers, even in comparison with the other Nordic countries. Emblematically, while I never had young students with children when I was teaching in England, that has been a most commonplace experience in my long professional life in Iceland. Why?

Several factors are at play, all of which are relevant, though I cannot say which ones carry more weight than the others. To begin with, the social stigma attached in Britain to unwanted and teenage pregnancies is almost non-existent in Iceland. Secondly, Icelandic women can continue to study or work without fear of dismissal, for the existing legal provisions protect them; besides, such provisions might actually facilitate the commencement of a young, double- or single-parent family *via* tax credits, free public childcare, maternity leaves, and affordable education for children up to adult age. Also, many young Icelandic women seem to regard motherhood as a fundamental step in their personal growth, self-realisation and long-term well-being, whether there will be a father available or just the State *qua* surrogate parent. Finally, Icelandic families, as mixed and crisscrossing as they may be, tend to be willing to help young parents and many generations come together to raise the new baby.

Given this picture of the situation, my suggestion is as follows: let the United Kingdom and any other nation on Earth be more like Iceland, for the welfare State is actually pro-life. While changing local cultures may be complicated, changing taxation, labour law, access to education and healthcare provision is a fairly common practice, at least as the history of the past hundred years or so has shown across the globe. Moreover, the financial resources needed for these changes are undeniably available. It is enough to consider the vast amounts of tax-avoiding money that have been siphoned for years into well-known tax havens or that Central Banks have "injected" into the world's economies over the past decade in order to keep failed private banks afloat. Whenever any talk of limited funds are heard, one should recall the exemplary and staggering 700-billion USD bailout package passed under George W. Bush's administration in October 2008.

If only a tiny fraction of that huge monetary mass were created to support family policies along Icelandic lines, then the worries about budgets could be easily overcome (I do not discuss here the details of the funding process, for they would obscure the simple fact of the actual availability of funds, given a positive political will). If Iceland managed to achieve all of this, despite being one of the poorest countries in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century, it is bizarre to think that at least all other high- and middle-income countries could not do the same. The Roman Catholic can thus conclude, in a spirit of hope: give us more Icelandic-style, or for that matter, Scandinavian-style social democracy in family policies, love thy children and thy nation's children, and more births should occur. That, in turn, can translate into fewer abortions though, I must admit, it is no strict guarantee of it. After all, we do live in a secular world, in which career considerations or Down-syndrome diagnoses do routinely lead to terminating pregnancies. Nonetheless, better conditions for life-enablement can certainly be established, granting personal liberty and free conscience more room as to whether make full use of them or not, consistently with constitutional human-rights provisions. The imperfect knowledge of imperfect humankind can only usher imperfect solutions, but different degrees of imperfection matter as well and can well make a difference.

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