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Philosophy and Theology: Better Never to Have Been Born

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PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

In “Better Never to Have Been Born,” Dan Thomas argues that Christians should not only permit but celebrate abortion and infanticide as the only ways to make certain that human beings go to heaven. He makes the case that there is an inconsistency in the beliefs of Christian critics of abortion. Christian belief holds that all human beings have one of two ultimate destinies: heaven or hell. Hell is the worst possible fate for a human being; heaven is the best. So what determines whether a human being goes to heaven or to hell? According to Thomas’s account of Christian belief, “damnation can only be conferred on moral agents who can act of their own accord and thus willingly accept or reject God’s grace.” Now, all human being prior to the age of reason—for example, toddlers, babies, and prenatal human beings—are not responsible agents who can be held ethically accountable for their actions. They cannot perform human actions as morally good or evil but only acts of a human being that cannot be evaluated ethically, such as breathing or circulating blood. If these beliefs are correct, Thomas continues, “the only way to avoid hell entirely is to come into existence briefly—for a few seconds, a few minutes, or a few years—and then die because an early death comes with an eternal safeguard: innocent children maintain their innocence forever.”¹

Indeed, Thomas points out that Christians hold that life in heaven is infinitely more important than life on earth as well as infinitely longer in duration: “According to the author of the book of James, human life does not last very long: ‘What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes’ (James 4:14). A blip, a bubble, a mist, a dream, a tiny speck, a poof of wind, a candle-snuff: such analogies appear throughout Christian literature and denote the transience of human existence.”² It is madness to prefer life on earth to eternal life in heaven.

1. Dan Thomas, “Better Never to Have Been Born: Christian Ethics, Anti-abortion Politics, and the Pro-life Paradox,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 44. 3 (September 2016): 522, doi: 10.1111/jore.12152.

2. *Ibid.*, 530.

Given their theological suppositions, Christian pro-life activists hold incompatible beliefs: “In their attempts to lengthen earthly lives,” writes Thomas, “conservative activists endanger infant souls. For the sake of life on earth, they jeopardize the assurance of life in heaven.” Since the death of the newborn baby or the prenatal human being secures eternal life for him or her, consistent Christians should not condemn but rather celebrate both abortion and infanticide, because “death alone guarantees the infant’s salvation.”³ Likewise, consistent Christians should not criticize but commend abortionists as bringing more people to heaven than anyone else: “If the unborn are indeed spiritually blameless, then abortion practitioners are not monstrous murderers. They are instead the nation’s most effective evangelists. Under their supervision, abortees reap the benefits of being born again without ever being born at all.” In Thomas’s interpretation of Christian beliefs about heaven and hell, “the only safe child is a dead one.”⁴ What Thomas calls the pro-life paradox is the alleged inconsistency in Christian beliefs about the afterlife and Christian defense of prenatal human beings.

How might a Christian critic of abortion respond to the argument that it is better not to be born? If Thomas’s argument were true, the pro-life paradox would also justify killing many normal adults. On the supposition that baptism takes away all sin and makes someone fit for heaven, should we not murder an adult immediately after her baptism? Why not wait outside a confessional and shoot someone in the head after his sins have been forgiven? Killing in these cases would assure that the person does not go to hell by later falling into mortal sin and dying in this condition. So murders of this kind should be celebrated as saving someone from the dangers of going to hell. This conclusion is absurd; so too is the pro-life paradox. But where exactly does it go wrong?

One key supposition in the pro-life paradox is that all humans who die before the age of reason certainly go to heaven. However, many Christian theologians, indeed most Christian theologians over the centuries, reject this presumption that infants and prenatal human beings who die certainly go to heaven.

St. Augustine taught that unbaptized infants go to hell where they receive the lightest punishment possible because they have only original sin and no actual sin.⁵ St. Jerome, St. Gregory the Great, and St. Anselm agreed. If these theologians are right, then abortionists not only kill the unborn, but they also consign them to hell. The only way infants can avoid hell is if they are born.

St. Thomas Aquinas proposed a second option in which infants who die without having been baptized enjoy a natural happiness, which he called limbo, that differs from heavenly supernatural happiness.⁶ St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Bonaventure, and Bl. Duns Scotus held similar views. If these theologians are right, then abortionists

3. *Ibid.*, 535.

4. *Ibid.*, 538.

5. International Theological Commission (ITC), *The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die without Being Baptized* (January 19, 2007), nn. 16–18.

6. Thomas Aquinas, *De malo* 5.3; and *Summa theologiae* suppl. III.69.6.

not only deprive human beings in utero of earthly life, they also ensure that they will not have heavenly life. Although the natural happiness of limbo is possible, the only way infants can go to heaven is if they are allowed to be born.

A third option is that we simply do not know with certainty what happens to unbaptized children who die before the age of reason, but we can hope that somehow they are saved. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,

As regards *children who have died without Baptism*, the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God, as she does in her funeral rites for them. Indeed, the great mercy of God who desires that all men should be saved, and Jesus' tenderness toward children which caused him to say: "Let the children come to me, do not hinder them," allow us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without Baptism. All the more urgent is the Church's call not to prevent little children coming to Christ through the gift of holy Baptism.⁷

This view was also expressed by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1980 as well as by the International Theological Commission in 2007.⁸ It is important to note that the Catechism speaks of hope, which differs from presumption.⁹ Hope concerns the good of salvation that is possible but difficult to obtain. By contrast, presumption assumes that salvation is a good that is not just possible to obtain but certain to happen. If the view expressed in the Catechism is correct, then it is presumptuous to assume with certainty that all unbaptized infants go to heaven, though we may hope that they do.

A fourth prominent view of who is saved also causes the pro-life paradox to collapse. Avery Cardinal Dulles notes that "Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Gregory Nazianzen, and Gregory of Nyssa sometimes speak as though in the end all will be saved."¹⁰ Dulles points out that in more recent times Edith Stein, Karl Rahner, Jacques Maritain, Richard John Neuhaus, and most famously Hans Urs von Balthasar defended the possibility that everyone escapes the pains of hell. If everyone escapes the pains of hell, then killing children before or after their birth deprives them of their lives on earth but is irrelevant to preventing their eternal damnation.

If Augustine, Aquinas, the Catechism, or von Balthasar is correct, then Thomas's pro-life paradox collapses. But let us assume for the sake of argument that all four of these theological options are mistaken. Would Thomas's case then be justified?

The work of Aquinas can shed some light on this question. According to the *Summa theologiae*, baptism of water, blood, or desire is necessary in order to have eternal life. Consequently, Aquinas asks, "Whether children of Jews or other unbelievers be baptized against the will of their parents?"¹¹ He answers that they should not,

7. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1261, original emphasis.

8. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Pastoralis actio*, On Infant Baptism (October 20, 1980), n.13, *AAS* 72 (1980), 1144; and ITC, *Hope of Salvation*, n. 5.

9. Christopher Kaczor, *Thomas Aquinas on Faith, Hope, and Love: Edited and Explained for Everyone* (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University, 2008). 119–123.

10. Avery Dulles, "The Population of Hell," *First Things*, May 2003, <https://www.firstthings.com/>.

11. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* III.68.2 ad 3 and III.68.10.

even though their eternal salvation is at stake, because it is contrary to natural justice to usurp the role of parents in governing their own children, including determining whether or not their children are to be baptized. If it is contrary to justice to baptize someone else's children, it is an even more obviously an act contrary to justice to intentionally kill an innocent human being. The right to life is the most basic and fundamental natural right.

In the very next article, Aquinas considers the question, "Whether a child can be baptized while yet in its mother's womb?" Aquinas considers the objection, "Further, eternal death is a greater evil than death of the body. But of two evils the less should be chosen. If, therefore, the child in the mother's womb cannot be baptized, it would be better for the mother to be opened, and the child to be taken out by force and baptized, than that the child should be eternally damned through dying without Baptism." This objection pithily summarizes the heart of Thomas's pro-life paradox.

Aquinas critiques this objection by citing the Pauline principle, "We should 'not do evil that there may come good' (Romans 3:8). Therefore it is wrong to kill a mother that her child may be baptized. If, however, the mother die while the child lives yet in her womb, she should be opened that the child may be baptized."¹² The same reasoning applies to the case of intentionally killing a child in utero in order to secure his or her eternal life (though it is extremely hard to believe that abortions are actually undertaken for the purpose of securing heavenly happiness for the child). The Pauline principle that Aquinas articulates is absolutely fundamental:

It often happens that man acts with a good intention, but without spiritual gain, because he lacks a good will. Let us say that someone robs in order to feed the poor: in this case, even though the intention is good, the uprightness of the will is lacking. Consequently, no evil done with a good intention can be excused. "There are those who say: And why not do evil that good may come? Their condemnation is just" (Rom 3:8).¹³

Of course, this principle is not unique to Aquinas. In *Veritatis splendor*, Pope St. John Paul II emphasizes its fundamental importance in the entire Christian tradition:

In teaching the existence of intrinsically evil acts, the Church accepts the teaching of Sacred Scripture. The Apostle Paul emphatically states: "Do not be deceived: neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the Kingdom of God" (1 Cor 6:9–10).

If acts are intrinsically evil, a good intention or particular circumstances can diminish their evil, but they cannot remove it. They remain "irremediably" evil acts; *per se* and in themselves they are not capable of being ordered to God and to the good of the person. "As for acts which are themselves sins (*cum iam opera ipsa peccata sunt*), Saint Augustine writes, like theft, fornication, blasphemy, who would dare affirm that, by doing them for good motives (*causis*

12. Ibid., III.68.11 obj. 3 and III.68.11 ad 3.

13. Thomas Aquinas, "In duo praecepta caritatis et in decem legis praecepta," *Opuscula theologica* 2.1168, quoted in John Paul II, *Veritatis splendor* (August 6, 1993), n. 78.

bonis), they would no longer be sins, or, what is even more absurd, that they would be sins that are justified?”

Consequently, circumstances or intentions can never transform an act intrinsically evil by virtue of its object into an act “subjectively” good or defensible as a choice.¹⁴

An intrinsically evil act should never be done, even for the most noble of purposes, such as securing heaven for someone.

Now a different question arises. Is abortion an intrinsically evil act? In the words of John Paul II,

Given such unanimity in the doctrinal and disciplinary tradition of the Church, Paul VI was able to declare that this tradition is unchanged and unchangeable. Therefore, by the authority which Christ conferred upon Peter and his Successors, in communion with the Bishops—who on various occasions have condemned abortion and who in the aforementioned consultation, albeit dispersed throughout the world, have shown unanimous agreement concerning this doctrine—I declare that direct abortion, that is, abortion willed as an end or as a means, always constitutes a grave moral disorder, since it is the deliberate killing of an innocent human being.¹⁵

Given this teaching, if we accept the Pauline principle, Thomas’s case for a pro-life paradox collapses.

For the sake of argument, let us consider a consequentialist view that no acts are intrinsically evil acts and that we should do whatever act maximizes the likelihood of salvation of the greatest number of people. Would it follow from this assumption that we should kill prenatal human beings to ensure that they automatically get to heaven? An affirmative answer would be unwarranted. After all, consequentialism is not just about maximizing the good for one person, but must concern itself with the greatest good for the greatest number of persons. Even if aborting a prenatal human being would ensure that he or she attains eternal salvation, it may still be wrong to kill the child because it does not bring about the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Some people, such as St. Francis Xavier, St. John Paul II, and St. Teresa of Calcutta, cooperate with God to aid the salvation of many people. If any of these great saints had died prior to undertaking their important works of evangelization, the salvation of many other people would have been endangered. In contemplating killing a child, we cannot exclude the possibility that we are depriving the world of a future great saint who would have aided in the salvation of many other people. So even a consequentialist view that seeks to maximize the likelihood of salvation for the greatest number of people does not justify the pro-life paradox.

Moreover, the pro-life paradox erroneously assumes that the only good that really matters is eternal life. Christians takes the life and teachings of Jesus as their fundamental guide to what matters. But the example of Jesus suggests that Christ does not simply and only care about the good of souls, but also cares about other

14. John Paul II, *Veritatis splendor* (August 6, 1993), n. 81.

15. John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae* (March 25, 1995), n. 62.

goods. In healing the blind, Jesus points to the importance of vision. In raising the dead back to life, Christ underscores the value of biological human life. In turning water into wine, the Son of Mary emphasizes the importance of marriage and social celebration. Most of all, Jesus consistently cares for rather than kills the weak and vulnerable in his society, whether it is the woman caught in adultery, the Samaritan at the well, or the leper cast out of the human community. In trying to ensure that every human being is protected by law and welcomed in life, Christian pro-life advocates are following the example of Jesus in caring for the vulnerable and defenseless.

Furthermore, Christians are called to love all human beings without exception, not just those who might go to heaven after being killed in utero. Abortionists have souls too, and Christians are called to care about them as well. Even if abortion were not intrinsically evil, it is clearly and obviously contrary to the teachings and disciplines of the Church. For this reason, John Paul II notes in *Evangelium vitae*,

The Church's canonical discipline, from the earliest centuries, has inflicted penal sanctions on those guilty of abortion. This practice, with more or less severe penalties, has been confirmed in various periods of history. The 1917 Code of Canon Law punished abortion with excommunication. The revised canonical legislation continues this tradition when it decrees that "a person who actually procures an abortion incurs automatic (*latae sententiae*) excommunication." The excommunication affects all those who commit this crime with knowledge of the penalty attached, and thus includes those accomplices without whose help the crime would not have been committed. By this reiterated sanction, the Church makes clear that abortion is a most serious and dangerous crime, thereby encouraging those who commit it to seek without delay the path of conversion. In the Church the purpose of the penalty of excommunication is to make an individual fully aware of the gravity of a certain sin and then to foster genuine conversion and repentance.¹⁶

The penalty of excommunication is intended to stimulate repentance, prompt a change of heart, and lead to a reformation of life. In imitation of Jesus, Christians are called to love every human being, every sinner, and to work and pray for the salvation of all people. To celebrate the work of abortionists is at cross-purposes with the call to help them live in harmony with God's Church.

In sum, the pro-life paradox is no paradox if fundamental Christian teachings are kept in mind. Against the teachings of Augustine, Aquinas, and the Catechism, the pro-life paradox presumes that all infants automatically go to heaven. Against the teaching of Scripture and the Church, the pro-life paradox assumes that one may do evil so that good may come of it. Against the example and teaching of Jesus, the pro-life paradox implicitly assumes that the only good that matters is eternal life. The argument made by Dan Thomas shows no concern for the souls of abortionists who incur automatic excommunication from the Church. In sum, for anyone who accepts any of these basic Christian teachings, the pro-life paradox is no paradox at all.

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16. Ibid.