The Language of the Culture of Death:  
When Word Games Take Lives  
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In his latest encyclical, *The Gospel of Life*, Pope John Paul II makes an eloquent plea for the creation of a culture of life to displace the ever encroaching culture of death. This paper focuses on one of the major elements powering the culture of death: the degrading language directed against society’s weakest individuals both before and after birth. The terminology underpinning the culture of death consists of an all encompassing vocabulary of dehumanization that engulfs the most defenseless of today as well as throughout history.

**Semantic Warfare Against the Vulnerable**

The following set of semantic classifications provides a comprehensive framework for detecting and analyzing a host of pejorative expressions invoked to devalue individuals and groups now and in times past: deficient human, subhuman/nonhuman, lower animal, parasitic creature, infectious disease, inanimate object, waste product, and nonperson. These demeaning designations have been and continue to be so extensively resorted to that they constitute a veritable war of words.

Any war, semantic or otherwise, requires an identifiable enemy upon whom to impose the derogatory classifications. At one time or another almost every imaginable racial, ethnic, religious, age, and social group has suffered the consequences of linguistic abuse, ranging from discrimination to outright annihilation. The groups selected for analysis in this study include some of the most oppressed on record: the unborn (unwanted human lives before birth in contemporary society), the dependent and disabled (mainly young children, people with disabilities, debilitated patients, and the elderly), women (past and present), those exterminated in the Nazi Holocaust (primarily Jews, but also Gypsies, “asocials,” the handicapped, Poles, and others), the victims of Soviet tyranny (peasants, religious groups, “deviationists,” and others), African Americans (especially enslaved blacks before and during the Civil War), and Native Americans (North American Indians on the frontier).

*Deficient Human.* Although those placed under this category are officially acknowledged as members of the human species, it is an ambiguous and questionable status fraught with constant scrutiny and endless qualifications. The imposition of such words as “stupid,” “defective,” “inferior,” “unfit,” “potential life,” and “lives not worth living” are intended to consign those so labeled to the margins of the human race. The image persistently projected is that of hopelessly flawed
human beings whose lives are considered so insignificant that they can be exploited at will, or are so devoid of value that their very existence is placed in severe jeopardy.

Today unborn humans are viewed as at best “only potential life” and severely disabled people as “lives not worth living.” Down through the ages, women were frequently characterized as a “defective” and “inferior sex,” Jews and others in the Third Reich as “inferior” life unworthy of life, and peasants in the Soviet Union as a “stupid, turgid people.” Black people in the pre-Civil War American South were regarded as a “subordinate and inferior class of beings” incapable of independent existence, and Indians on the frontier as an “inferior” breed destined to disappear with the coming of white civilization.

Subhuman/Nonhuman. For some perpetrators, the deficient human classification is not demeaning enough because those relegated to this status are still granted recognition, at least implicitly, as members of the human race. In a realm of massive oppression, acknowledgement of even a semblance of humanity is often considered too risky. Extensive victimization, therefore, requires stripping away all vestiges of humanity from the victims and reducing them to totally “subhuman” or “nonhuman” creatures existing entirely outside the human community.

Contemporary abortion and euthanasia proponents often call their respective victims “not human,” “subhuman,” “only human forms,” and “nothing.” The expressions “not human” and “nothing” comprise mainstays in the longstanding war of words against women. Images of Jews as “not human,” “subhuman,” and “nothing” furnished a semantic foundation for racial genocide in Nazi Germany. The designation “not human” was imposed on farmers who resisted the Soviet collectivization of agriculture. Acceptance of slavery was helped along by perceptions of African Americans as “not human” and “subhuman.” Portrayals of Native Americans as “not human” and just human “shapes” supplied a rationalization for their extermination on the frontier.

Lower Animal. A commonly employed method of removing undesired individuals completely from membership in the human race is to re-classify them as a species of “lower animals.” Animal analogies are meant to denigrate the victims in two basic ways: the victims are reduced to the insignificant level of primitive animals whose fate is of no consequence, or they are portrayed as dangerous, wild beasts that need to be subdued, hunted down, or destroyed.

Today’s abortion and euthanasia defenders compare the expendable preborn and born to “lower animals.” For millennia, women have been referred to as “domestic animals.” The Nazis relegated disabled people to entities “far down in the animal kingdom” and Jews to “experimental animals.” Marxists labeled Russian peasants as “beasts of burden.” Slaveholders viewed African Americans as “work animals.”
ordained to serve white civilization. Native Americans were commonly referred to as “an untamable carnivorous animal” that was doomed to extinction.

**Parasitic Creature.** Another degrading metaphor involves dehumanizing the unwanted to the despicable level of such parasitic entities as “parasites,” “vermin,” and “lice.” The two most frequent parasitic qualities attributed to undesired human beings are their total dependence on the host and the threat they pose to the survival of the host. The fact that the parasite is an alien organism differing markedly from the host serves as a convenient pretext for depicting vulnerable human beings as a repugnant species with no rightful claim to membership in the human family.

Currently, unborn humans are depicted as “parasites” in women’s bodies and debilitated patients as “parasites” on the health care system. Women have been persistently portrayed as “parasites” on men, Jews as “parasites in the body of other peoples,” Kulaks as “parasites” on the Soviet economy, African Americans as “parasites” in need of bondage for survival, and Native Americans as “vermin” requiring eradication.

**Infectious Disease.** Likening human beings to “infectious diseases” ranks among the most degrading uses of metaphor. In many instances, people suffering from real illnesses have borne an enormous brunt of the disease-infested rhetoric. For the most part, however, the malignant metaphors have nothing to do with real diseases; they are aimed at perfectly healthy human beings whose main deficiency is being unwanted. Disease analogies are intended to project an ominous image of undesired, vulnerable humans as dangerous “epidemics” and “contagions” that threaten the health and life of those who count—the wanted segments of society.

Today, unwanted pregnancy is defined as an “infection,” a “venereal disease,” and an “epidemic,” while troublesome patients are viewed as “diseases” and forms of “pathology.” Down through the years, women have been equated with “plagues” and “contaminations.” The Nazi nomenclature is replete with images of Jews as a “pestilence,” “plague,” and “syphilis.” Soviet propagandists reduced their victims to “diseases,” “epidemics,” and “contagions.” Images of black people as a “contagion” and “pestilence” were widely circulated in the American South before and after the Civil War. North American Indians were linked with the spread of “syphilis,” “contagions,” and “pestilences.”

**Inanimate Object.** The semantic transformation of undesired humans into inanimate objects—mere things with no semblance of personality, humanity, consciousness, or vitality—comprises one of the most radical and pervasive forms of denigration. In this process of extreme objectification, the perpetrators view their victims as insignificant “matter” and “material,” or mere “property,” “possessions,” “merchandise,” and “commodities” to be used, exploited, and disposed of.
Contemporary portrayals feature the unborn as “property” of the woman and “material” for fetal research, and nursing home patients as discardable “objects.” For centuries, rape was defined in law, not as violence against the woman, but as “trespass against” another man’s “property.” The targets of Nazi genocide were processed as “merchandise” for shipment to the death camps where they were exploited as “experimental material” in terminal research projects and “raw material” in the I.G. Farben factories at Auschwitz. Prisoners in the Soviet Gulag became “raw material” for death-inducing work projects. Slaveowners defined African Americans as “a species of property” for slave labor and “articles of merchandise” for public auction. Native Americans have been frequently relegated to the status of “anthropological specimens” and “museum pieces.”

Waste Product. Equating human beings with noxious “waste matter” places them at the lowermost depths of the subhuman scrap pile. Such terms as “garbage,” “trash,” “rubbish,” “debris,” and “refuse” have been invoked against victims at all phases of the human life cycle. The oppressors consider garbage designations as especially apt characterizations because many victims share the same ultimate fate as real waste matter: disintegration through incineration.

The epithets “garbage,” “refuse,” “debris,” and “rubbish,” are regularly imposed on today’s unwanted before and after birth. Women’s bodies have been commonly referred to as “sewers” for the emptying of “refuse.” Nazi word distorters labeled Jews “garbage,” “rubbish,” and “trash,” for disposal in crematory ovens. People, groups, and ideas viewed with disfavor by the Soviet regime were consigned to “garbage,” “debris,” “rubbish,” and “refuse,” on history’s “garbage heap.” African American culture was once maligned as “a heritage of organic and psychic debris” and slaves as “refuse.” Native Americans on the frontier were equated with “garbage” and accused of reducing the environment to a vast “red wasteland.”

Nonperson. Among the expressions constructed to devalue human lives, the term “nonperson” is the most devastating epithet of all because it alone has been enshrined into law and a legal nonperson is an entity devoid of basic rights, including, in many instances, the most fundamental right, life itself. Nonperson is fast becoming the designation of choice for devaluing human beings before and after birth. It has inaugurated a new litmus test for survival: no longer is one’s humanity a sufficient basis for meriting the right to life. One must also be a person, and the definition of personhood required for existence is an increasingly elitist one whereby growing numbers of individuals are declared expendable and consigned to the rightless category of “legal nonpersons.”

In 1973 the United States Supreme Court in its Roe v. Wade decision ushered in the modern era of legal nonpersonhood by maintaining that “the unborn have
never been recognized in the law as persons in the whole sense” and ruling that “the word ‘person,’ as used in the Fourteenth Amendment, does not include the unborn.” Today the word “nonperson” is increasingly invoked to devalue debilitated patients after birth. Through much of history women as a class have been treated as “less than persons” before the law. A 1936 German high court decision “refused to recognize Jews living in Germany as ‘persons’ in the legal sense.” The designation “unperson” served as a weapon for erasing from public records people purged by the Soviet regime. According to the Dred Scott and other court decisions, slaves were defined as “non-citizens” and “nonpersons” under the law. The longstanding assaults on Native American territories and lives by federal agencies and state governments were based on a perception of the Indian as “not a person within the meaning of the Constitution.”

A table, “The Semantics of Oppression,” containing specific examples of the above disparaging classifications and accompanying documentation can be found on pages 6 and 7 of my new book, Dehumanizing the Vulnerable: When Word Games Take Lives. This table reveals at a glance the startling similarities among the demeaning expressions and their pervasive scope. Dehumanizing the Vulnerable also includes an extensive analysis of these and other degrading designations as well as insights on how to counteract them.

Characteristics Associated with Linguistic Warfare

To better understand the nature and scope of semantic warfare, several features common to the degrading stereotypes need to be underscored.

1. The Ideological Foundations of Name-Calling. The dehumanizing designations do not suddenly appear out of the blue in a random, chaotic fashion. Instead, behind almost every widespread proliferation of name-calling is some kind of deliberate, systematically constructed ideology; that is, a philosophy, a social theory, or a set of interrelated ideas, concepts, and myths that generate and sustain the dissemination of pejorative rhetoric. Few have probed the significance of malevolent ideology with keener insight than Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. He writes:

   Ideology—that is what gives evildoing its long-sought justification and gives the evildoer the necessary steadfastness and determination. That is the social theory which helps to make his acts seem good instead of bad in his own and others’ eyes, so that he won’t hear reproaches and curses but will receive praise and honors....Thanks to ideology, the twentieth century was fated to experience evildoing on a scale calculated in the millions.

Throughout history a host of ideologies have furnished the theoretical sparks for igniting scores of inflammatory designations accompanied by aggression on a
monumental scale. “The Great Chain of Being,” an imposing theory which ranked the world’s races according to a hierarchy of worth, was invoked to justify atrocities against Indians and Blacks during the 1800s. The myth of Aryan Supremacy generated an extensive nomenclature of defamation that had its most disastrous impact in the Third Reich. The dogma of reproductive freedom is deployed to justify the tyranny of killing human lives inside the womb.

These ideologies, whatever their benevolent guise, share one essential ingredient: they are based on a constricted, elitist definition of the human race. And it is this deplorable notion that has fueled and continues to fuel the unrelenting litany of pejorative expressions directed against vulnerable individuals today and in the past.

2. The Falsity of the Degrading Words. Phillip Knightley, a close observer of wartime propaganda, concluded that when war comes the first casualty is the truth. Consequently, a feature common to any war of words, whomever the victims, is the patent falsehood of the designations concocted. The words fabricated not only degrade the victims, but also totally falsify their human nature. Massive oppression is largely dependent upon a reckless game of playing fast and loose with words.

A typical example of how recklessly abortion proponents manipulate language in order to devalue preborn life comes from Dr. Garrett Hardin:

Whether the fetus is or is not a human being is a matter of definition, not fact; and we can define in any way we wish...It would be unwise to define the fetus as human...unwise ever to refer to the fetus as an “unborn child.”

The sheer arbitrariness in Hardin’s admonition to make words mean anything one wishes is strikingly comparable to Humpty Dumpty’s oration on linguistic abuse delivered to Alice in Wonderland. When Alice challenged Humpty Dumpty’s definition of glory as “a nice knock-down argument,” he replied:

“When I use a word...it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”
Thus, in abortionland as in wonderland, he who controls words, controls thoughts. And eventually language corrupts thought itself.

3. The Prestige of the Players Responsible for Creating the Destruction-Inducing Vocabulary. The lies and deceptions spawned by this deadly game of verbal engineering take on enhanced credibility when its leading players are respected individuals and institutions.

Throughout history, prominent people and organizations rank among the most steadfast purveyors of degrading terminology. The United States Supreme Court in the Dred Scott decision of 1857 defined black people as “articles of property and merchandise.” One of America’s greatest historians, Francis Parkman, equated Indians with “leeches” and “contagions.” Nobel Prize-winning scientist Francis H. Crick asserted that “no newborn infant should be declared human until it has passed certain tests regarding its genetic endowment and that if it fails these tests it forfeits the right to live.” Such revelations are not intended to detract from the monumental achievements of these individuals and institutions, but to demonstrate that even they became agents of the prevailing rhetoric. Society’s weakest and most defenseless individuals have much more to fear from the relentless name calling issuing from the so-called best and brightest than the occasional outbursts of epithets coming from mobs in the streets.

Semantic Gymnastics: A Strategy of Linguistic Corruption

All three characteristics of the dehumanizing designations—their draconian, ideological foundation, their blatant falsity, and the respectability of their purveyors—are incorporated in a prophetic editorial, “A New Ethic for Medicine and Society,” that appeared in the September 1970 issue of California Medicine (CM).

The editorial begins by proposing the ideology needed to bring about the public acceptance of abortion—a quality of life ethic which involves violating and ultimately destroying the Judeo-Christian ethic of “intrinsic and equal value for every human life regardless of its stage, condition, or status,” and replacing it with an ethic in which “relative rather than absolute values” are placed “on such things as human lives.” It is this elitist ideology that is powering today’s culture of death. In the practical order, it too often translates to mean the quality of life for some at the expense of life for others.

The CM editorial then advocates a linguistic strategy of “semantic gymnastics” a blatant form of lying about the nature of preborn humans as a means of degrading them in order to justify their destruction. A major principle underlying semantic gymnastics is identified as “avoidance of the scientific fact, which everyone really knows, that human life begins at conception and is continuous whether intrauterine or extrauterine until death.” The editorial equates the strategy of obscuring the
humanity of the unborn with a major mental disturbance, but concludes that "this schizophrenic sort of subterfuge is necessary because while a new ethic is being accepted the old one has not yet been rejected."^65

Finally, the CM editorial stresses the importance of utilizing prestigious individuals and organizations as indispensable sources for transforming the big lie about intraterine life into the new truth: "The very considerable semantic gymnastics required to rationalize abortion as anything but taking a human life would be ludicrous if they were not often put forth under socially impeccable auspices."^66 Not too long ago anyone who went around calling human beings, either before or after birth, "nonhuman," "animals," "parasites," "diseases," "inanimate objects," "waste products," or "nonpersons," would have been deemed deranged. Today, however, when these ludicrous expressions of semantic gymnastics are put forth under the socially impeccable auspices of medicine, academia, the law, or the media elite, they are embraced as gospel. What had once been the undisputed "scientific fact, which everyone knows, that human life begins at conception" has been reduced to the suspect status of an outmoded, sectarian bias. Thanks to the awesome power of semantic gymnastics in the hands of prestigious ideologues, no longer does everyone know that human life begins at conception.

**Conclusion**

The foregoing analysis points to the need for a major transformation in language, perception, and thought. Such a transformation will involve:

1. Exposing the draconian ideology powering the culture of death.

2. Highlighting the absurdity of the degrading language and showing how it is based on the most extreme falsehoods. The Holy Father replies to this type of linguistic abuse by insisting that "no word has the power to change the reality of things" and emphasizing the urgent need "to call things by their proper names."^67

3. Challenging those prestigious individuals and institutions responsible for manufacturing and disseminating the demeaning rhetoric to a vast audience.

4. Revealing the insidious impact of the derogatory labels on victims and perpetrators alike. Just as environmental impact statements indicate the devastating effects of chemical pollutants on people and the environment, semantic impact statements are needed to demonstrate how profoundly verbal pollutants contaminate the public conscience by desensitizing so many people to the plight of society's most defenseless individuals and groups.

5. Documenting the extraordinarily close kinship between the dehumanizing designations of the present and the past. Contemporary proponents of abortion, euthanasia, fetal research, and other threats to human life must be continually confronted with the alarming revelation that the words they are using against the unwanted unborn and born are, in many instances, the exact same words invoked against some of history's most reviled peoples. The degrading terminology of
today thus ranks with the most extreme forms of name-calling in the annals of inhumanity.

6. Replacing the language of dehumanization with a positive, life-affirming language of humanization in which all human lives are respected and protected despite their status, condition, or stage of development. Exposing the pernicious nature of denigrating language and substituting life-affirming terminology will not alone put an end to massive oppression, but they are essential steps toward such an important goal. Words celebrating the sacredness of all human lives, especially the most defenseless individuals, comprise a basic ingredient in Pope John Paul II’s compelling, evangelical call for building a new and enduring culture of love and life.

The purpose of historical inquiry is not merely to learn about the past, but also to learn about the present from the past. The comprehensive set of degrading classifications furnishes an indispensable framework for a better understanding of what happened down through the ages and how it relates to what is happening now. Heightened awareness of these past and present linguistic parallels provides an essential perspective for recognizing and challenging present-day threats to human life, before and after birth, as constituting an unconscionable repetition of some of history’s most horrendous atrocities.

Only when we draw lessons from the past, and apply them to the present, can there be hope for the future.

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Notes


Mifflin, 1943), 304.


64. *Ibid.*