Pro-life and pro-choice advocates have both accused the other side of being similar to the defenders of slavery and/or Hitler. This essay seeks to clarify this debate by outlining the three main dimensions of reality as it is inhabited by human beings: the vertical axis (God and nature), the horizontal plane (sociality), and individual selfhood. These dimensions have corresponding political forms (monarchy, democracy, individualism) and they also serve to channel and rhetorically justify violence. “Re-enactment” is a better term than “analogy” when one understands that othering and violence are shape-shifting phenomena in human history.

Several pro-life advocates have argued that there is a real and substantive similarity between slavery, the Holocaust, and legalized abortion. Sociologist William Brennan, theologian James Burtchaell, and physician Jack Willke are three examples of that approach, among many others that could be mentioned.¹ These authors argue that slavery was based on dehumanizing blacks, the Holocaust was based on dehumanizing Jews, and abortion is based on dehumanizing unborn children. Prominent African-American leaders, such as Mildred Jefferson, Jesse Jackson, and Rosetta Ferguson have made an argument along these lines, connecting legalized abortion to the Dred Scott decision.² Pro-life feminists have also argued along these lines, including Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, who wrote:

Among the many horrors of the Holocaust, the most dangerous lay in the attribution to one person of the power to decide whether another should live or die. Even the slave system of the antebellum United States, which many evoke as an analogy for abortion, never granted masters such a power over slaves. That power severs the connection with, and recognition of, the other that, as Pope John Paul II has passionately argued, defines us as persons. Under the conditions of the Holocaust, the other became an object. The abortion culture allocates to a mother the power to decide that her own child is an object and authorizes her to do away with it.³

The common assumption at work in this style of argument is that it is possible to learn the moral lessons that history teaches, and the legalization

of abortion in modern culture arises out of a failure to learn those lessons appropriately.

Usually, pro-choice advocates simply ignore this line of argument. On those rare occasions when they respond, they say that such arguments are ridiculous and are a clear example of demonizing one’s opponents. They may use the phrase *reductio ad Hitlerum*, pointing to the phenomenon of employing an *ad hominem* argument that resorts to calling whoever you are arguing with a sympathizer with Hitler or fascism. There is historical amnesia at work here, however, because the same type of analogical argument was made by pro-choice advocates in the 1960s and 1970s, but in the opposite direction; this sort of argument, that restrictions on abortion “enslave” women, continues to be made up to the present day.4 Gloria Steinem published an essay in which she accused pro-life advocates of taking a stance that has parallels with Hitler’s philosophy, because both he and pro-life advocates are opposed to allowing women individual autonomy in reproduction.5 The fact that this sort of argument of historical analogy goes both directions is notable and important, because it highlights the reality that to a great extent the abortion debate is a contest over how to interpret the moral lessons that history teaches and apply them in our own age. In my view, the pro-life side has learned the moral lessons of history correctly, but our argument in that area needs to be made with much more philosophical sophistication than it has been in the past. In this paper my goal is to sketch the outlines of that more sophisticated version.

Imagine the following scenario. A pro-choice advocate reads a book such as Brennan’s *The Abortion Holocaust*; after finishing it, he or she says: “I think Brennan is right; there is a real, substantive analogy between slavery, the Holocaust, and abortion. But . . . I’m still pro-choice.” The complete implausibility of such a response proves that the pro-choice way of thinking simply *must* reject the legitimacy of the pro-life analogy. In other words, an interpretation of history lies at the structural foundation of both the pro-choice and pro-life positions; it is impossible to build a pro-choice edifice on top of the foundation of a pro-life interpretation of history.

That pro-life structural foundation needs to be articulated more carefully, more thoroughly, and with greater anthropological insight than it has been in the past. My effort along those lines relies on the idea of dimensional ethnography, which is the concept that there are three main dimensions of reality as it is inhabited by human beings: the vertical axis (traditionally called the Great Chain of Being), the horizontal plane (society, relationality), and individual selfhood. Many thinkers have analyzed these dimensions and how they interact in works of philosophy, history,
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Within the past several hundred years of Western history, we can see the dimensions at work as structural fields of human experience. The vertical axis, for example, formed the basis of monarchy as a political form and of the ideology of slave-holding. Persons of African descent were viewed as lower down on the Great Chain of Being in comparison with the ostensibly superior white Europeans. The American and French Revolutions, and then the delegitimizing of slavery, broke the back of the vertical axis and ushered in the age of horizontal democracy: “government of the people, by the people, and for the people.” During the twentieth century, however, the expansion of democracy as a political form metastasized into the horrific forms of collectivism that we know as Nazism, Stalinism, and Maoism. In the wake of those debacles, it was logical that the third main dimension, individual selfhood, would rise to the top and claim the new position of hegemony. In our age, individual autonomy is the trump card played to fend off the horizontal plane, which is now construed as a continual source of threat: “Those other people over there are trying to impose their morality on me and take away my individual freedom.”

Scholars sometimes use the term “othering” to describe immoral forms of human behavior. People are guilty of “othering” when they interpret some group or class of human beings as ontologically different from, and inferior to, those who are doing the interpreting. Slavery was a clear example of vertical axis othering and hundreds of books have described it as such in great detail. There are also many examples of horizontal plane othering in human history, when one group defines itself over against another group. It may be Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, Serbians and Muslims in the former Yugoslavia, Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, or Sunnis and Shites in the Middle East. Horizontal plane othering becomes a vector within which violence is channeled and rhetorically justified. If human culture shifts, and individual selfhood becomes the new dominant dimension, is the violence that arises from deep wells within the human psyche going to suddenly disappear? Of course not. Violence, as a means of managing the difficulties of life, and of fending off the call to personal growth, will remain as a constant. What will change with time, place, and culture, is the particular form that violence takes and the rhetorical strategies that will be employed to defend it. Violence is a theme with variations.

The pro-choice position is structurally built upon a failure to understand the truth that violence is a theme with variations. Abortion is our age’s chief form of violence; it arises out of the unrecognized practice of temporal othering. Those human beings who are older, and who are thus more developed neurologically, define themselves as persons; they define
those human beings who are younger, the embryos and the fetuses, as ontologically different from themselves; they are nonpersons, or merely potential persons. This temporal othering within the trajectory of the individual’s journey through time is supposed to justify the killing of those who are younger when their existence is not desired by those who are older, those who have power and hegemony.

Violence is a shape-shifting phenomenon in human history, which means that it is always easy for us as human beings to see and denounce the violence and injustice perpetrated by others; but we are not likely to recognize the most recent shift of shape which has entered into us and is now guiding our own actions while keeping us blind to what is actually going on. To put this in the crudest and most obvious way, it is easy for any college sophomore to read about the slave-owners and the Nazis and to think that if he or she had been alive then, he or she would not have done those terrible things. But the same college sophomore will enthusiastically support the concept of abortion rights without realizing that the structural othering on which such invented “rights” are based is the historical parallel, in a morphed form, of the rhetorical othering that animated slavery and the Holocaust.

For these reasons, the word “reenactment” is more accurate than the word “analogy.” Given that violence is a theme with variations, human history is the long, sad story of the same deep impulse to violence that began with Cain, reenacted over and over again in myriad forms. Human culture is Cainite in its structure, meaning that we always find ways of channeling our violence and justifying it in our own eyes. The only way that human culture could operate on a different basis and structure itself differently is if we gained the ability to see our own othering behavior and cease and desist in acting that way. But we seem not to have the psychological resources to do that on our own. We need a transcendent perspective, a breaking in of new light from above. The Christian tradition points, in its own humanly flawed way, to the reality that such light has already broken in in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the ultimate victim of violence who reveals to us what we are about as human beings. The gospels are thus the primary driver of social scientific insight in Western history, an observation developed thoroughly by René Girard.

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I find Richard Weaver’s outline of the main types of argument very useful as a general framework. Weaver says that there are arguments of definition, analogy, consequences, circumstances, and authority. In the abortion debate, the definition of personhood is obviously key, but the definitions
of words such as rights, freedom, justice, and equality are also immensely important. Arguments of analogy may draw historical parallels, such as slavery, or they may be fictional such as Judith Jarvis Thomson’s famous violinist. Arguments of consequences claim that the effects of policy or law X are either beneficial or harmful; for example, the pro-choice claim that if abortion is outlawed, then women will die in back alleys. Arguments of circumstances seek to apply peer pressure to make people conform to social changes: “How can you possibly hold that opinion? This is 2017.” Arguments of authority may draw on the Bible, or a famous philosopher, or influential figures such as Abraham Lincoln, Gandhi, Mother Teresa, or Martin Luther King, Jr. These are the five main forms that persuasive arguments take, according to Weaver.\footnote{7}

In this regard, the abortion debate can be compared to a chess match. The definition of the word “person” is like the king; it is the piece on which the outcome of the game depends. Justice Blackmun says in the text of Roe that “If this suggestion of personhood is established, the appellant’s case, of course, collapses, for the fetus’s right to life would then be guaranteed specifically by the [fourteenth] Amendment.” I am arguing in this paper, however, that arguments of historical analogy, or reenactment, or more broadly put, interpretations of the moral lessons that history teaches, are like the queen on the chess board. They are the most powerful piece. Hence, the great emphasis that Blackmun placed on constructing a historical narrative within the text of Roe to claim that he was granting to women a right that is in tune with the progressive advance of liberty in human history. The other arguments that are made in the abortion debate, such as “women will die in back alleys” or “those pro-lifers are always trying to impose their morality on others” are like the rooks, knights, and bishops. The women who are actually having the abortions, and their unborn children, are the pawns in this game. It is the intellectuals who are playing the pieces and employing the strategies.

I don’t mean to trivialize the issue of abortion with this simile; I mean to make the structure of the debate more visible. Arguments of definition—most centrally the definitions of “persons” and “rights”—are crucial, but in terms of persuasive impact it is the interpretation of history that is most salient.

My thesis is that the time period 1945–1970 was the crucial hinge point for the issue of abortion within Western culture. That period offered a golden opportunity for intellectuals in the Western world to actually learn the moral lessons that should have been learned from the horrific events of the World War II era. But those lessons were not learned. The intellectuals who pushed for the legalization of abortion were unwittingly
driving what I have called the shape-shifting of violent othering from the horizontal plane to hyper-individualism. But on the pro-life side, the lessons were not learned either. The assumption was that if the correct arguments were made about the definition of personhood, using either natural law concepts or scientific language, then that is all that would be necessary to stem the tide of abortion. What was not recognized is that the historical narrative arguments are the queen on the chess board, and the pro-life side lacked the philosophical sophistication to grasp this point clearly and develop the appropriate response. There were fragments, bits and pieces of insight, but they were too few and far between to constitute a coherent response to the flood of narrative power that came in with second-wave feminism and the sexual revolution. Some of these bits and pieces would be Richard Weaver’s *Ideas Have Consequences*, which predicted powerfully the nominalism that would drive the *Roe* and *Casey* decisions several decades later; George Parkin Grant’s *English-Speaking Justice*, which critiques *Roe* powerfully, but only in the wake of the decision, in 1974; and the writings of Eric Voegelin, which analyzed the failure of Western intellectuals to grasp the pneumopathologies that made Nazism and Stalinism possible—though Voegelin himself never said anything about abortion, even though he died in 1985. René Girard was developing his understanding of how violence against helpless scapegoats structures human culture, but his theory was fully fleshed out only after 1970, and the way it can be applied to the abortion debate is only being articulated now. By 1970 the pro-life battle had already been lost. The exact means of the defeat, whether it would be through legislative actions or judicial decisions, was merely a matter of contingent historical circumstances.

Even today, the necessary insights are still in scattered bits and pieces, such as Chantal Delsol’s important book *The Unlearned Lessons of the Twentieth Century*, in which she argues that the individualism of our day merely continues, in a morphed form, the utopian nightmares of the middle part of the last century. That was published in French in 2000. Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* is actually a powerful indictment of the legalization of abortion in the Western world, in that it unveils how the Nazis reduced the Jews to mere biological matter that could be killed with impunity; the reader just needs to take the next logical step and see his message as a summary of what *Roe v. Wade* accomplished in the womb. That book was published in Italian in 1995.

To sum up, I am arguing that pro-life advocates are being naïve and ineffective if they simply repeat arguments about the definition of personhood over and over again. What is needed is a more sophisticated interpretation of history that draws on anthropological insights into the
process of identity formation through mental acts of othering, as those acts are shaped by the vertical axis, the horizontal plane, and individual selfhood. We need to focus on the time period 1945 to 1970, and come to understand, at a very deep level, the subtle contours of the failure of the Western world to learn the moral lessons that ought to have been learned from Nazism and Communism. Only then will we grasp how the era of the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” could have fallen into the abyss of child sacrifice in which we are now sunk.

Notes

1. Brennan, The Abortion Holocaust; Burtchaell, Rachel Weeping; Willke, Abortion and Slavery. In the Bibliography for this article, see DeMarco and Wiker, Architects of the Culture of Death; Dyer, Slavery, Abortion, and the Politics of Constitutional Meaning; King, How Can the Dream Survive If We Murder the Children?; Neusner, “Israel’s Holocaust”; Powell, Abortion; Rieff, My Life Among the Deathworks; and Sernett, “Widening the Circle.” For even more, see the bibliography in Bellinger, Jesus v. Abortion.


4. Lader, Abortion; Koppelman, “Forced Labor Revisited.”


6. Bellinger, The Trinitarian Self, provides an overview of such thinkers.

7. Weaver, Language Is Sermonic, 21–24; Weaver, “A Responsible Rhetoric.”

8. In an important essay by Bernadette Waterman Ward and in Bellinger, Jesus v. Abortion.

9. The excellent book by Daniel K. Williams, Defenders of the Unborn, tells the story of this loss.

10. See Bellinger, Jesus v. Abortion, 274–280.

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King, Alveda. How Can the Dream Survive If We Murder the Children?: Abortion Is Not a Civil Right! Bloomington, Ind.: AuthorHouse, 2008.


