

The Sauna

It seemed much hotter than the 180 degrees suggested by the thermometer. The beads of water left from my shower were replaced almost immediately by beads of sweat. The low watt bulb at one end of the sauna emitted enough light to accommodate just one reader at a time. Many could sweat, but few could read. The only other opportunity was for talk.

I should mention the fact that talking is one of my favorite things. I get in the sauna as much to talk as to relax. The heat provides the only restraint on conversation. Discussions are short and civil in the sauna. Nobody has the extra energy to be too animated in the presentation or defense of his ideas. Sentences are shorter too, because everybody wants to get as much said (and heard) as possible before having to get out and cool off. Discussions get straight to the point and do not meander. It is the perfect forum for unleashing new ideas or refuting old ones with great efficiency. And so it was yesterday.

I had entered the sauna while Max Crapslapper was responding derisively to a pro-life editorial he had read in the newspaper. In particular he was taking the writer to task for his belief in the sanctity of human life.

Joe Dolt was always as good as his name. He wanted to know what “sanctity” meant. Bart Hardfarter proceeded to explain that Christians used to believe that man was “created in a god’s image” and was therefore sacred to him. “It’s just a way of making human life seem like it has some value. It makes us look good or feel important or something,” he said. “But I don’t buy it.”

“It’s a defense mechanism,” added Junger Frankenfreud. “It keeps people from coming to grips with their real surroundings.”

Joe, who never really understood very much, couldn’t see what was wrong with the notion. He couldn’t see anything wrong with *any* idea, simply because he never tried to pin down its implications or put it together with other ideas. For Joe, an idea is nothing more than an opinion, isolated from all other ideas and equally strange. The more profound an idea is, the less likely Joe is to pursue it. This explains why the only ideas with which he is thoroughly familiar involve basketball and mealtimes.

“Like that Polly Klasse garbage,” Max added. “How could her life be so sacred? It didn’t keep her from getting killed did it? So now she’s dead. Killin’ her murderer won’t bring her back. If killin’ a person is wrong, isn’t killin’ two people twice as bad? Where is the ‘sanctity’ there?”

“Besides, how can people who believe this ‘sanctity’ crap support capital punishment. It seems to me that putting a human being to death demeans humanity and devalues human life. And all that business about the death penalty deterring crime . . .”

By now I could no longer remain silent. I knew that Bart was beyond reach, but poor Joe hadn’t a clue. He was likely to go out and start taking people’s lives if he thought it didn’t matter, or that he might be doing somebody a service.

“How else can you put a value on human life?” I asked. “There is no other way to objectively put a value on it. Oh, yeah, someone who hires a “hit man” may value another man’s life at \$5,000 or so, but the victim probably would not agree with the assessment. You can’t assess the value of a human life by comparing it to money or to possessions or even to time. The only objective value

for one human life is another human life.

“We all agree that our life is the most important thing we have and that, deprived of it, there is nothing else we can enjoy in the sense that it makes our death worthwhile to us. It is strictly fair and impartial to claim that in the eyes of God and before the Bar of Justice, one life can be measured for its value only against another human life.”

Bart Hardfarter broke in with a snort. “Give me a break! We’re just a conglomerate of atoms evolved to self awareness. We’re here for a moment, by chance and random operations, then we’re stripped of our consciousness and our atoms are spit back into chaos. Who cares if anyone is put to death or not? He’ll die sooner or later anyway won’t he? They can smoke Davis *for fun* for all I care. His life ain’t no more sacred than hers.

“But I agree with Max that it’s pretty silly to make one meaningless conglomerate pay for killin’ another meaningless conglomerate. It isn’t like it’s going to change things. And where do we come up with these notions of punishment and justice anyway? Like any of it matters. If the earth falls from its orbit and spirals into the sun and becomes a little trail of vapor, who cares?”

By now Joe was again nodding in ignorant agreement. He was like a leaf in the wind, moved to and fro by every breath.

“Well,” I answered, “on the evolutionary hypothesis, of course there is no meaning because there is no superior being to value it. That is one of the dangers of holding the evolutionary position. You cannot base society, or anything else, on evolution. If evolution really produced everything, I think we should give it another chance to produce something better than this cosmic joke we call mankind. Why wait for the earth to spiral into the sun? Push the button and end it!

“On the other hand, if there is a God, He would be the basis of law and values. He would define justice. If God values man and man is created in His image, that may explain why man values man. Otherwise why should he? For example, it is only because a man *does* value his own life, even if he does not value the lives of others, that the death penalty deters crime.

“Now of course there are a few for whom the threat of the death penalty does not deter crime, but even they value their own lives, or they wouldn’t try to keep their crimes from being discovered.”

Max snorted and rolled his eyes. “Haven’t you read the statistics and reports showing that the death penalty doesn’t deter crime?” he asked. “It seems to me that those who favor the death penalty have not come to grips with this fact.”

“Well,” I responded, “in the first place. nobody seriously argues that we ought to have the death penalty simply because it deters crime. We ought to have it because it is the only possible way of ensuring justice and properly valuing human life. But make no mistake, the death penalty *does* deter crime. Just ask a prisoner to double cross a mafia figure who is known to have killed an enemy or two in his time. His fear of dying will keep him straight in regard to the other crooks.” The mention of these reports annoyed me a little. I couldn’t believe that they were still circulating.

“But your ‘statistics and reports’ in this case provide a good example of the liberal media with an ax to grind,” I continued. “It is a subjective application of reportorial skills that sets out to prove that the death penalty does not deter crime by going to state penitentiaries and interviewing convicted criminals. But by definition *nothing* deterred them, *because they were not deterred*. They committed the crimes without regard for possible punishment of *any* sort. The media concludes that because the threat of the death penalty didn’t deter those who *committed* murder that the death penalty does not function as a deterrent *at all*. Their ‘logic’ boils down to the proposition that

because the threat of the death penalty didn't deter *all* murders, it therefore will not deter *any* murders.

"If you want to see people who have been deterred from committing crimes, you do not look for them among those who *have* committed crimes, but among those who *haven't*. To find people who have been deterred from criminal activity by the threat of a penalty, you must talk to those who do not commit crimes. Such people are not found in prisons but on our city streets."

Max and Bart got out of the sauna to cool off in a cold shower. "Don't you think it is inconsistent for someone who is against abortion to be for capital punishment?" Junker asked, changing the focus of the discussion. "You would allow little globs of protoplasm to live and develop, but kill real people. It is the sort of double standard we have tried for years to explain."

"No. Junker," I answered, "it is the very sanctity of life and a better understanding of it, which demands that which you call a double standard. In reality, it is you who are inconsistent. How can it be O.K. to kill innocent babies and let murderers live? The babies are fully human from conception. Any geneticist will tell you so. It is true that they are not viable, but that is no argument against either their life or their humanity. If it were, then your Aunt Sally became inhuman when she had her stroke. If the occupants of America's wombs are inhuman because they cannot fend for themselves, then so are the occupants of America's nursing homes. The difference is that we have an industry dedicated to protecting the aged, whereas the newest industry is dedicated to the destruction of the prenatal."

"The truth is that only by playing psychologist or lawyer and defining the unborn as somehow less than human, can you view the "sanctity of life" position as an inconsistency. After all, the baby did not ask to be conceived and has been unable to do anything deserving of death. But the murderer has done everything in his power to deserve the death penalty."

Bart returned awkwardly from his shower. After he was settled, I continued. "Only by psychologizing away the belief in God and the notion of the sanctity of human life can you entertain such modern nonsense as we accept today. If one believes in evolution, it is necessary to see that man is objectively meaningless. If one believes that man has no objective meaning, it is easy to abort babies. Your most obvious inconsistency lies in over valuing the murderer. In a Godless universe where there is no meaning and where unborn babies are expendable for the slightest whim, why should the death of a convicted criminal concern us? It is simply for the sake of appearances. We cling to the false notion that we are decent and *forgiving* (as opposed to decent and *just*) and therefore meaningful, by having a concern for murderers. Having denied God and the sanctity of life, we are now responsible for producing our own meaning even though there is no objective basis for doing so." I was getting hot enough to get out of the sauna now and was beginning to think about a cold shower myself. "Is it not ironic that our subjective side demands what we cannot ourselves objectively produce?" I added.

Earl Hurlburger, who had been listening silently, now joined in. "So your belief in the sanctity of life explains why you are against abortion and for the death penalty? How does any of that help women? They may have been raped or been the victims of incest. Don't their lives have sanctity? Shouldn't they be allowed abortion because their lives are sacred too?" he asked.

"Of course their lives are sacred," I answered. "But that does not justify abortion. The notion of sanctity demands that lives be taken only for capital crimes. 'A life for a life' so to speak. But whom did the unborn baby deliberately harm? Justice presupposes sanctity, and in human terms

there is no justice in punishing the innocent for the crimes of the guilty. If Bart here commits a murder and is caught and convicted, you wouldn't want Max to be put to death for it, would you? So if a woman is raped, we are right to be outraged at the trespass of the sanctity of her life. We should have a keen sense of rage; but it should not be directed at the innocent. We should punish the guilty, not the innocent. Destroying an unborn baby because it is the result of some man's crime cannot in any sense be called just. To do justice demands that we punish the man responsible, whether rapist or abuser. But by this we should understand that no "slap on the wrist" is adequate for the ordeal through which the victim was dragged.

Max, who had just returned from the shower, asked "What if the mother's life is at risk? Isn't her life sacred?"

"As for the mother whose life is at risk, of course she should be allowed an abortion if that is what she must have. But abortions have *always* been available to prevent the death of the pregnant woman. The law has *never* insisted that women complete their pregnancies when doing so put their lives at risk. The rub here is not that abortion was ever unavailable to such women, but that they were available only at the doctor's discretion, *not on demand*. The subjective reasons provided by psychologists were rightly not considered health hazards. There had to be a clear and objectively identifiable physical problem for a doctor to perform an abortion. Such cases were accompanied by great sorrow, for something sacred. something human, something pregnant with meaning had been lost."

"We often feel sadness under similar circumstances," Earl noted. "We don't have to like abortion. We just need to recognize that a woman should have the right to determine what goes on within her own body. Her rights define her life as having meaning."

"I know that is the wisdom of the moment," I responded, "but again, it is a different kind of meaning. It is relativistic meaning. It is the kind of meaning we must *invent* because we don't think there is any *real* or absolute meaning. It is the kind of meaning one group gains at the expense of another group. Just as the strong enhance their status at the expense of the weak, so rapists and abusers enhance theirs at the expense of women. Does it make sense then for women to enhance their status at the expense of the most helpless of all people, the unborn? No, what you are talking about is not *meaning*, but relativism and group aggrandizement. It is based upon the notion that there is no inherent meaning in the universe and therefore no sanctity to life."

"As for a woman's right to control her body, we should point out that the proper exercise of that right is *before* conception, *not after*. She exercises her right when she decides either to have or to forgo sexual relations. Once she is pregnant, such an exercise of her "rights" is an infringement on what ought to be the baby's rights. It is not the woman whose rights are disregarded here, but those of the prenatal person. The unborn baby's life is also sacred and cannot be counted as just one more meaningless "bit of protoplasm."

"I think you have completely overstated your case," Earl replied. "We are not meaningless, either at the level of humanity or at the level of the individual. We simply do not need the idea of 'sanctity' to be meaningful. We, as human beings, value ourselves. We are not meaningless even if we are unborn babies. An unborn baby is only meaningless if its mother does not value it."

"Oh, but we are meaningless," Bart responded. "He's right about that. 'Cause no matter how we may value ourselves, born or unborn, that is just subjective self serving. Cosmically speaking, we *are* meaningless. The point is that if the earth exploded tomorrow, who would care? Of course

you can respond by saying that ‘we’ would care, but that is silliness. After ‘we’ are gone, even we will no longer care. And therefore, beyond our present search for creature comforts and the indulgence of our personal preferences, there is no reason why even *we* should care.”

Junker seemed mildly amused. “You cannot base ‘meaning’ on cosmic, or even external, entities,” he said. “You must anchor meaning to the human psyche. Whether or not there is anything such as “sanctity,” is a purely psychological question. Meaning, like justice, is nothing more than what we decide it is. Justice and meaning alike are just what people want them to be.”

“But then,” Max replied, “Adolph Hitler’s notion of sanctity may be right. We may need to purify the Aryan race and exterminate the Jews and Gypsies. Or perhaps only Asians are sacred. Or maybe only the poor.”

I left them discussing how they could define the sanctity of life on a subjective basis and started for the shower. Earl followed me out, mumbling something to the effect that all this “God talk and sanctity stuff, sounded too puritanical to him.” Then he asked how a society “could work if everybody believed such nonsense.”

I pointed out that the only societies which had ever “worked” for very long had held man in high regard. Furthermore, the culture of the puritans was probably the highest ever produced in sociological terms. I noted that without the notion of the sanctity of human life, the West, which for centuries had been based upon the notion, was as surely doomed to continued disintegration and degradation as Russia had been. “Russia” I pointed out, “had deliberately fashioned itself the great Godless society, the great destroyer of everything sacred.”

Earl, clutching tight to his humanism, reminded me that “man is on his own in the cosmos and there is no help for him except that which he provides himself.”

“That is fine for you, if you can do no better,” I responded. “But what about poor Joe in there? He doesn’t understand that either you believe in an absurd universe and life without meaning, or you believe in an orderly universe and the sanctity of life. But you can’t believe in an absurd universe brought about by time and chance and then bitch about despair, injustice, and the vagaries of life. Human life is either sacred or it is meaningless. If it is sacred, we should serve it and preserve it and do it justice. If it is meaningless why should we care about anything? The sniper in the tower is no worse than the philanthropist, the child molester no worse than Billy Graham.”

“So you’re admitting that there is no objective reality to your position, only that society will function better if it believes your way?” Earl asked.

“No.” I said. “That is precisely your understanding of things. You are the pragmatist. For your crowd, all the reality a notion needs is popular consent. After all, you’ve been evolutionists and psychologists for all these years, basing your ever changing notions on nothing more than wishful thinking. That is why you cannot conceive that there may be more to things than meets the eye.”

The water felt good, but I only partially enjoyed it. I wondered how Joe Dolt was going to manage with so many conflicting ideas surrounding him. Such a welter of inconsistencies could logically result only in the adoption of one set of ideas and implications or the other. But knowing Joe, I was sure that his massive ignorance would compromise and inadvertently implement as many of these conflicting implications as possible.