

THE CLAMOUR AND THE SILENCE

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The focus of this essay

We can truly feel for women who find themselves in a terrible predicament for which they think abortion is the only way out. That situation is *not* what I am addressing in this short article.

We can also sympathise with good and decent people who have become victims of a culture that is not given to thinking deeply, is impressionistic and easily led. Contributing factors to this culture include the pressing demands of family life and work leaving little time for careful reading, reflection and processing information; bombardment by headlines and sound-bites that can diminish people's ability to concentrate for more than a few minutes at a time; the gradual dumbing down that comes from relentless light entertainment and trivialisation. In this context, it is easy to be carried along by second-hand opinions, superficial impressions and misinformation.

This is the context in which people can talk about abortion as if it didn't involve the taking of a life. In our country we have even passed legislation based on that assumption. It is a long time since the sciences established that the embryo is a human life in its own right, not just a part of its mother's body – already her child's body! On top of the pressures already mentioned, people's sympathies are more easily directed towards the people they see than to the embryos they don't see, and "what the eye doesn't see the heart doesn't grieve over". However, that is not quite true: the reality of post-abortion trauma suggests there was at least an oblique awareness that a child was involved.

This unthinking and non-scientific culture is also a problem, and closer to the problem I am addressing.

A sharp incongruity

But there is a deeper problem, involving views that are doctrinaire and even anti-scientific. It involves the highly politicised and much publicised clamour for a so-called right to choose abortion for whatever reason, even just personal convenience. There is dramatic incongruity in the fact that people who have the most to say about an individual's "right to choose" never seem even to mention those who are most affected by abortion - the ones whose lives are being terminated (whether by dismemberment or by medication). The silence is as stunning as the clamour.

Is this incongruity due to simple ignorance of well-established scientific data? Or is it due to wilful ignorance, through fear of what the truth might be? Or, something deeper still and more dangerous? I make no judgement of the people involved. But the incongruity they are caught up in involves denial, which is never healthy: and that *is* the subject of this article.

The individual's "right to choose" has become a kind of stand-alone value, so absolute that it trumps every other consideration. The act of choosing means more than what is chosen. According to a statement by the U.S. Supreme Court, "at the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life".

So where does this cult-like status of the individual's freedom come from? Can choice make something right regardless of all else? Does democratic majority over-ride the need to enquire any further? How come public service media feel entitled to give "pro-choice" such one-sided publicity?

The incongruity is rooted in an understanding of freedom that goes back a long way. A main achievement of classical liberalism was its vindication of the rights, equality and freedom of individuals, over against the authoritarianism, class privilege and obscurantism of earlier times. This required restricting the role of the State to maximising the conditions that enable individuals, with all their diversity, to live together with dignity, equality and freedom. (This now includes allowing for subsidiarity, partnerships and ‘power sharing’.)

Less positive consequences arose when the status of individuals came to be expanded in far-reaching ways – to meet social, cultural and economic interests. Both right-wing and left-wing movements would expand the status of the individual beyond that promoted by the Enlightenment. Francis Fukuyama traces these developments further back to Jean-Jacque Rousseau for whom autonomy meant the recovery of one’s authentic inner self by escape from the social rules that imprisoned it; (*Liberalism and its Discontents*; Profile Books 2022, p. 51).

Right-wing movements pushed the rights of individuals in favour of greater market freedom. State regulations, social welfare legislation and the redistribution of wealth, were not in their interests. They still push in the direction of unregulated markets and unregulated exploitation of resources, regardless of the inequalities that this causes. Not to mention the highly developed techniques for brainwashing developed by right-wing media in USA – and their success in generating doubt, fear, falsehood and anger.

Left-wing movements pushed in the direction of ever-expanding claims for personal autonomy and self-actualisation, over against various social norms and traditions. They, too, resent legislation that restricts personal choice and freedom. For some, self-actualisation repudiates anything that appears to limit that ‘inner self’ Rousseau spoke of. E.g.

“The gender paradigm sees ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ as exercises of social power. Our bodies are blank slates; they do not carry any intrinsic meaning, and we should use technology to overcome any supposedly ‘natural’ limits that impinge on our autonomy”. (Prof. Abigail Favale PhD, Interview in *The Catholic World Report*, July 12, 2022).

Favale’s critique obviously refers to the ideology of gender fluidity, with its gratuitous spurning of any ‘natural limits’ - using technology/medication if necessary to remove them. This would make sexual identity and gender identity simply matters of personal choice. But the critique applies also to the question being addressed here: abortion – at any stage of pregnancy – comes to be thought of only as the means we use to remove an obstacle to complete personal freedom.

Further, if personal freedom is the basis of a person’s rights and personal worth, this is bad news for those whose ability to exercise their freedom is still developing or diminished by age or illness.

Alas, however, freedom that is not bound by ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ or any of the order inherent in nature, is ultimately freedom for make-believe - because the world is not like that.

“Human beings are not free-floating agents capable of reshaping themselves in any way they choose; this only happens in online virtual worlds... Our experience of the world is increasingly mediated by screens that allow us to easily imagine ourselves in alternative realities or as alternative beings. ... The real world, however, continues to be different: wills are embedded in physical bodies that structure and also limit the extent of individual agency...” (Fukuyama, 153)

In other words, our true self is not some inner self waiting to be liberated from every requirement of nature or society; our true self is our whole self in right relationships with all else.

Not the heirs of classical liberalism

The liberal agenda benefits us all where it fosters the development of personal responsibility, moving away from social patterns and leadership styles that were more typical of feudal societies, and that prolonged over-dependence on others.

The problem is with the excesses and exaggerations of individualism. The further these movements slip away from reality into the realms of subjectivism, the more they begin to look like a return to the obscurantism that classical liberalism would have spared us by its respect for the reality of an objective world, the importance of scientific method, and acknowledgement of objective truth and knowledge.

To regard objective reality and truth as “exercises of social power” which inhibit one’s “inner self” implies willingness to accept unreality and untruth. And so, the difference between right and wrong becomes just a matter of public opinion. In debate with Abraham Lincoln, Stephen Douglas argued for the primacy of democratic choice over whatever the choice led to. Lincoln’s response was that there were more important principles at stake than democracy, namely the premise that “all are created equal” – and on that premise, slavery was wrong, whatever about any democratic majority; (Fukuyama, p. 123). (President Biden could learn from his predecessor.)

Classical liberalism was right to affirm the rights, equality and freedom of individuals. But, ironically, it is precisely these values that are put in jeopardy by exaggerated claims made in the name of individual rights and personal autonomy. All the more because, unlike classical liberalism which promoted tolerance, the more extreme left and right-wing ideologies have become intolerant, even aggressive, in pursuing the interests of the self.

Of course, if there is no meaning to life and the universe beyond what the individual decides to make of it, then there is no point in talking about a common good to which the individual has any obligation.

Right-wing movements need to learn that “if economic freedom to buy, sell, and invest is a good thing, that does not mean that removing all constraints from economic activity will be even better.” (p. 154).

The left needs to learn that “if personal autonomy is the source of an individual’s fulfilment, that does not mean that unlimited freedom and the constant disrupting of constraints will make a person more fulfilled.” (p. 154)

The pursuit of exaggerated claims has been facilitated by the widespread assumption that what we *can* do with nature, we *may* do. However, perhaps that kind of thinking has had its hour. A new ecological awareness cogently reminds us that there are purposes built into nature, including human nature, that cannot be ignored with impunity; that everything is connected; and that there is still a difference between using nature and abusing it.

And, in real life there are life-giving ways of relating and caring that completely transcend individualism’s narrow horizons.