



## Verbal Engineering and the Swaying of Public Conscience

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Over the years, a number of unjust laws have come to be replaced by more just ones. Laws overturning the practice of slavery, for example, were a significant step forward in promoting justice and basic human rights in society. Yet in very recent times, unjust and immoral laws have, with increasing frequency, come to replace sound and reasonable ones, particularly in the areas of sexual morality, bioethics and the protection of human life. Whenever longstanding laws are reversed, and practices come to be sanctioned that were formerly forbidden, it behooves us to examine whether such momentous legal shifts are morally coherent or not.

Concerns about moral coherence have always influenced the crafting of new laws, as they did in 1879 when the State of Connecticut enacted strong legislation outlawing contraception, specified as the use of "any drug, medicinal article or instrument for the purpose of preventing conception." This law, like the anti-contraception laws of various other states, was in effect for nearly 90 years before it was reversed in 1965. It codified the longstanding dictate of the public conscience that contraception was harmful to society because it promoted promiscuity, adultery and other evils. It relied on the nearly

universal sensibility that children should be seen as a blessing to society, and that, in the words of Joseph Sobran, "a healthy society, however tolerant at the margins, must be based on the perception that sex is essentially procreative, with its proper locus in a loving family."

Such a view had been remarkably deeply engrained in Western society for millennia, and interestingly, until as late as the 1930's, *all* Protestant denominations agreed with Catholic teaching condemning contraception. Not until the 1930 Lambeth Conference did the Anglican church, swayed by growing societal pressure, announce that contraception would be allowed in *some* circumstances. Soon after, the Anglican church yielded entirely, allowing contraception across the board. Since then, every major Protestant denomination has followed suit, even though their founders, including Luther, Calvin and Wesley, had all unhesitatingly condemned contraception, and insisted that it violated the right order of sexuality and marriage. Today, it is only the Catholic Church which teaches this traditional view.

How is it that modern times have seen such a striking reversal of this ancient view of the moral

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unacceptability of contraception? How is it that our age continues to witness a seemingly endless stream of legislative activity that promotes contraception through exorbitant government funding initiatives in nearly every major country of the world, with American taxpayers providing, for example, more than \$260 million of Planned Parenthood's total income for 2004? Can something almost universally decried as an evil in the past suddenly become a good, or is such a legislative reversal not indicative of a significant misuse of law, and of a collective loss of conscience on an unprecedented scale?

Whenever widespread social engineering of this magnitude occurs, it is invariably preceded by skillful verbal engineering. The late Msgr. William Smith observed that the argument about contraception was basically over as soon as modern society accepted the deceptive phrase, "birth control" into its vocabulary. "Imagine if we had called it, 'life prevention,'" he once remarked. The great Gilbert Keith Chesterton put it this way:

"They insist on talking about Birth Control when they mean less birth and no control,"

and again:

"Birth Control is a name given to a succession of different expedients by which it is possible to filch the pleasure belonging to a natural process while violently and unnaturally thwarting the process itself."

Fast on the heels of such seismic cultural shifts over contraception was even more radical legislation allowing abortion-on-demand. Since the early 1970's, such legislation has effectively enabled the surgical killing of 1 billion human beings worldwide who were living in the peaceful environment of a womb. Here too, sophisticated verbal engineering was necessary, since nobody could reasonably expect the abortion ethic to advance by saying, "Let's kill the kids." Many things simply cannot be achieved when it is clear to everyone what is going on; obfuscation is essential.

The growing child in the womb was thus recast as a "mass of tissue" or a "grouping of cells." The abortion procedure itself was re-described as "removing the product of conception" or "terminating a pregnancy" or simply, "the procedure." Those who were "pro-choice" obfuscated as to

what the choice was really for. As one commentator put it, "I think a more realistic term would be 'pro-baby killing'."

Euphemism, of course, has a serious reason for being. It conceals that which we fear. It is defensive in nature, eradicating from language and thinking those matters that people prefer not to deal with directly. Careful thinking and sound legislative efforts, meanwhile, must abstain from euphemism and obfuscation, while insisting on truth and moral coherence.

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