

Life Matters: 6 “C’s” of Moral Discourse

New Theology Review 15 (May 2002): 48-59.

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One of the problems in establishing a common ground is the lack of evaluative criteria for moral discourse and dialogue for such hot-button issues. This article proposes six key evaluative criteria which can be applied to all of the various positions in the abortion debate, as well as other concrete moral issues. The article develops and tests each of these criteria, applying them to representative positions on both sides of the abortion debate and concludes by offering some concrete suggestions for better articulating a common ground position which must be used together in addressing concrete moral problems.

Life Matters: 6 “C’s” of Moral Discourse

Introduction

Life Matters. Life really matters, and in real life there are always many complex matters which are neither easily fully captured nor completely resolved in black and white terms. It was this double meaning that our pro-life group at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley hoped to capture when we adopted Life Matters as both the name of our organization and the focus of our efforts. While the Consistent Ethic of Life and the Common Ground initiative associated with the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin have won great respect from a wide cross-section of Catholics in the United States and beyond, nevertheless a persistent problem continues to frustrate both dialogue and action on a number of hot-button issues, such as abortion. We certainly found this to be the case for ourselves in advertising a recent talk given by Serrin Foster, the president of “Feminists for Life of America” (FLA, www.feministsforlife.org) which we co-sponsored along with the Respect Life Office of the Oakland Diocese. The women and men in our group chose to advertise the talk by distributing flyers to the students, faculty, and staff mailboxes, and this provoked an angry reaction from one individual. The double-sided flyer gave on the front side the basic facts of the date and time of the talk, along with Ms. Foster’s explicit invitation to dialogue with those who might hold pro-choice positions. The back side of the flyer employed a FLA poster of a picture of Susan B. Anthony and a quotation from one of her writings in which she

articulates her well-documented pro-life/anti-abortion position. The individual objected to this “use” of Susan B. Anthony, terming it “utterly offensive” and suggesting that many women on our campus would likewise be offended.

I suspect she was right, and therein lies a number of problems in addressing many concrete moral issues. It often seems that there are certain positions and counter-positions which cannot legitimately even be raised for serious discussion. One must simply join one side of the battle or the other. One of the problems may be the lack of evaluative criteria for the foundational moral discourse which hopes to address these contentious issues. Oftentimes it seems that no dialogue is possible because the positions already are so well-known and each side as already excommunicated the other from the arena of common discourse. Perhaps then the first pre-requisite for moving towards establishing a true common ground is to arrange for a cease-fire, and then to establish some ground rules for future exchanges. As a contribution to this process I would like to outline what might constitute viable ground rules for this sort of fruitful post-cease-fire dialogue. I propose “6 C’s”--a set of six key evaluative criteria for moral discourse which can be applied to virtually any concrete ethical issue, and which can be applied to the various positions in the abortion debate as well. If these criteria are better attended to we will be in a much stronger position for achieving not only a fuller understanding of the complexity of the issues as they actually exist, but also will find ourselves developing a stronger sense of dialogue within a genuine community, which in turn will greatly aid our search to respond to and resolve the manifold problems involved in our common ethical concerns.

The First “C”–Comprehensive

The First “C” (comprehensive) considers how we first frame the issue and grasp the moral problems or themes which face us. We need to ask if we are paying attention to all the morally relevant features of the issues, if we are giving sufficient weight to their complexity, and if our mode of response is adequate to the issue at hand. Thus, we might ask ourselves if there are certain aspects, features, sub-issues, etc. which we are ignoring, brushing aside, or condemning as “irrelevant.” Are we focusing on just one aspect of an issue, and failing to pay sufficient heed as to how this issue relates to other issues which we leave untreated? Is our mode of ethical discourse appropriate to engage all the relevant aspects of the issue, or does it tend to narrow the focus to just one theme?

As an example to illustrate this point, let us return to the moral issue of abortion. If we describe this moral issue “thinly” (to borrow the terminology inspired by the work of the well-known cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz) as a black and white issue of “pro-life” vs. “murderers of the innocent pre-born” then we have failed the evaluative test of the First “C” of comprehensiveness. For, in most cases abortion is seen not best simply as “murder” but often as a real failure in moral vision, or the cry of despair of a woman who feels trapped by any number of factors, or any number of combination of other aspects which seem to conspire to lead one to conclude (albeit “incorrectly” from the standpoint of objective morality) that the abortion of this particular fetus will be the lesser of evils, or even a positive good in its own right.

In the same way, our mode of moral discourse may set up the issue in such a way that either the conclusion is pre-arranged, or that crucial aspects of the problem will be factored out of the discussion. If the abortion debate (either “pro-life” or “pro-choice”) is cast in terms of a crusade or holy war that must be won at all costs, then the concomitant mode of discourse chosen

might be prophetic denunciation. But prophetic denunciation is a genre that tends to paint issues and the people involved in stark contrast: black or white, saint or sinner, liberator or oppressor. Similarly, an abstract discussion based in an analysis of objective moral principles may well fail to capture the actual stories of those confronted with an abortion choice, and thus runs the risk of being dismissed as out of touch with the concrete lives of those who are struggling with this issue.

In regards to comprehensiveness it is important in hotly disputed areas that not only is “our” side of the debate presented in a complete manner, but it is also incumbent on us to demand the same from those on the other side of the debate. For example, again in reference to the abortion debate we should note a certain tendency of the “abortion rights” advocates to collapse the complex and multi-faceted issues involved in public policy and abortion to a single issue of easy and legal access to abortion on demand as being the fundamental human right. This approach may be effective in swaying a certain segment of public opinion, but the comprehensive nature of truth often suffers in the bargain. Proponents on the other side of the debate are often guilty of much the same techniques and/or gross over-simplification of the abortion issue and killing of abortion providers has been justified even using just-war rhetoric—labeling both abortion providers and clinics as legitimate military targets. Adoption of this sort of approach, which some have labeled the “ethics of advocacy,” is characterized not only by a direct attack on the veracity of certain facts, but perhaps more often, results in a definite manipulation of which facts are “relevant” to the debate. If we are going to be fair in debate, and sincere in our efforts to seek the whole truth in a moral issue, then we must also be wary of our own attempts to paint over unwelcome or troubling aspects of that issue. An energetic commitment to comprehensiveness thus is indispensable to this task. An issue like abortion goes far beyond bumper-sticker analysis,

regardless of whether the bumper sticker proclaims a sentiment such as “It’s a child, not a ‘choice’!” or “Keep your rosary out of my uterus!”

The Second “C”–Comprehensible

Moving from “comprehensiveness” we must take pains that what we say and how we say it is also “comprehensible” to our given audience and/or dialogue partners. Thus, our next evaluative criterion, the Second “C” concerns the language used in the discourse. We must be attentive to how many different “languages” there are, and try to select a language, vocabulary, and mode of discourse that will be easily accessible and understandable by our audience, which in the case of the abortion debate is broad, diverse, ecumenical, and inter-religious. Moving beyond just a treatment of abortion for the moment, I would suggest that we must honestly admit that much of our traditional Roman Catholic moral theology is cast in philosophical concepts and technical jargon which speaks a language that is the native colloquial tongue of virtually no Catholic any longer, not to mention others. For example, Questio de abortu , the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith [CDF]’s “Declaration on Procured Abortion,” develops in a typical fashion with an introduction, a brief look at Scripture, then on to the “constant” Tradition of the Church, before moving to the consideration of the question from the point of view of "reason" and the natural law. A strong paradigm of "law" governs the whole Declaration, and while some "objections" are anticipated and replied to, nevertheless one might wonder if the objections have been taken seriously in all their complexity, and/or if the "replies" will be at all convincing to those to whom they are supposedly directed.

Calling abortion an intrinsic malum in se (an intrinsic evil in itself), involves a claim which will frankly not be understood accurately and completely by many. Even terms which seem straight-forward, such as “direct” and “indirect” can be both confusing and contested in the concrete (e.g., is the removal of the fetal implantation alone in an ectopic pregnancy a “direct” abortion?). We must keep in mind that all these terms have a rather precise meaning and depend on certain philosophical presuppositions and concepts which themselves are neither used widely or understood by the average person in the pew (or elsewhere!). If the issue were simply one of “non-understanding,” our task could be accomplished by sound pedagogical input. We must keep in mind that the final test of comprehensibility rests with the target audience, and not the speakers. In other words, in order to pass this Second “C” we must verify what we say is heard, understood, and makes sense to those to whom we are speaking (and not just to ourselves).

The Third “C”–Coherence

My third “C”–coherence (or consistency) might seem so self-evident that it needs no further comment, but experience shows otherwise. By coherence I mean something more than merely respect for the principle of non-contradiction. Briefly stated, this criterion looks internally for coherence in the the modes of argumentation, usage of moral sources, positions taken. For example, if great weight is attached to a certain moral source (whether it be the Magisterium, the Bible, human experience, or the natural law), then one would expect equal weight given to these same sources in other moral issues as well. Similarly, external consistency demands that the approach and judgments we are making in this issue carry over to similar issues, cases, and so on,

so that our whole approach and response to any given concrete moral issue would demonstrate both internal and external consistency across a wide range of related ethical concerns.

Let me illustrate this point by way of two anecdotes. The first occurred several years ago (before the 1995 publication of John Paul II's Evangelium vitae) at a convention for university and seminary professors on pro-life issues. The key-note speaker gave a talk which developed Joseph Cardinal Bernardin's metaphor of the seamless garment of Christ arguing that to be truly committed to a consistent ethic of life the pro-life lobby should expand its efforts to include efforts to overturn the death penalty in addition to fighting abortion. An open-mike session followed the address and the first interlocutor broke the in-house track record in her fifty-yard dash to the mike. "Ooohhh Nooooo!!" she cried, "We're talking here about innocent life!!"

My second anecdote comes from a recent gathering in which one of the participants expressed moral outrage at the destruction of the ancient colossal Buddha statues by the Taliban in Afghanistan, decrying it as "the very essence of evil." Certainly neither I nor anyone else in the room supported this demolition, and in a few moments the conversation changed topics and this same individual made reference to abortion on demand as such a self-evident basic human right that it could be employed as an empirical indication of whether one was not just pro-choice but pro-human. One position which resulted in the destruction of statues was described as the "essence" of evil, and the other which results in the destruction life was termed a moral right.

Both of these anecdotes betray a certain internal lack of coherence. Definitely it is true that abortion, the death penalty, and destruction of human cultural treasures are all different moral issues, but if we value life "from the moment of conception" as a sacred gift of God or the cultural expressions of humankind then we must continue to cherish and support that life from the

womb to the tomb. I would argue that Bernardin's consistent ethic of life position is an excellent example of what I mean by the criterion of coherence. I would add that coherence also relates to the First C of comprehensiveness. Coherence in response to a variety of related ethical issues helps to prevent us from falling into the trap of simplistic, single-issue answers, and can also act as a check to ensure that the approach we are taking to these issues is in fact comprehensive, i.e., at least in acknowledging the various factors that must be addressed if our issue is to be resolved. For example, pro-life efforts that do not demonstrate concrete support and respect for the child after its birth, in terms of care, housing, education, jobs for the parent(s)—in short, attention to the whole welfare of the child, and her care-providers—will strike many as a failure to genuinely respect life.

Addressing the coherence/consistency criterion will also necessitate real dialogue with a wide audience. As with the previous criterion of comprehensibility, judgment of whether we have successfully passed the coherence criterion will depend at least in part on how others perceive our position and arguments. Dialogue at this point may well reveal aspects of an issue that we have overlooked or neglected, or show an aspect of our position that we have failed to explain adequately in a comprehensible and comprehensive fashion.

The Fourth "C"—Credible

When moral discourse that is comprehensive in terms of the analysis of the relevant issues, comprehensible in its mode of exposition, and coherent and consistent in its response to related issues and concerns, then the test of the next evaluative criterion of "credibility" is rather more easily passed. For if our discourse meets these first three tests, then it should be ipso facto

credible in the sense of being "believable," i.e., that we could argue that a person of sound reason could logically hold this position. However, the Fourth C of credibility does bring some other crucial aspects of ethical discourse into sharper focus. Credibility certainly involves sincerity, reasonableness, and a lack of duplicity, but there is an important additional aspect of credibility as it relates to moral discourse. For example, the Magisterium has based much of its teaching on moral matters on the natural law, and in this regard has called itself an "expert" in humanity and thus mandated by God to pronounce on both moral principles and specific precepts of the natural law. For this type of claim to be truly credible, then, it would seem to require at least confirmation, if not antecedent input from other human "experts" in these given fields. An affirmation of expertise that cannot be verified through normal human means stretches the limits of genuine credibility. Thus, if we hope to be credible witnesses in areas of the abortion debate, not to mention the broader areas of sexual ethics, such as marriage, teenage sexuality, population issues, etc., our claims to expertise should be open to input, confirmation, testing, and/or debate from other recognized experts in these fields. To gain this credible expertise we will need perhaps to follow the widely-reported example of Milwaukee Archbishop Rembert Weakland and engage in genuine "listening sessions" with women and men that seek to understand how they perceive abortion as a moral issue.

In this regard too we should keep in mind that lived experience provides one dimension of expertise that is difficult to come by through other channels. This fourth criterion of credibility also points to what is likely to happen if there is a perceived reluctance or refusal to dialogue over these issues. Instead of strengthening one's credibility, rather the opposite reaction occurs.

Passing the credibility test requires that we treat counter-positions fairly and completely. Caricatures, especially if they vilify, are rarely credible, and we do a disservice to ourselves as well as those with whom we are seeking dialogue if we engage in, or leave unchallenged caricatures of any position. Since many points in the abortion debate are disputed, we must take care not only to state our own position clearly, but also to report accurately the counter-arguments and positions of those with whom we disagree. Vilification of those with whom we disagree, even on life or death issues, is seldom a very effective means of winning them over to our side of the debate! I mention this last point explicitly because frankly in certain contested areas of the abortion debate precisely this sort of mutual vilification seems to be more the rule rather than the exception. One good little rule of thumb to use in dealing with opposing arguments is to ask if their proponents would accept our rendition of their argument, and our recapitulation of the major points in dispute. If we can get this far in our dialogue, then we have come a considerable distance indeed.

The Fifth “C”–Convincing

Up to this point the criteria advanced of comprehensiveness, comprehensibility, coherence, and credibility have been somewhat academic in nature. Yet, effective discourse on concrete ethical issues such as abortion needs to be tested by a fifth criterion, namely, whether what is said is actually convincing: does it move one from a position of understanding and/or admission of credibility, to the posture of a committed embrace of the object of the argumentation? In short, does what is said convince me (and others), and especially in light of counter-arguments offered, of its truth in such a way that we are willing to change our lives to follow this teaching? This is

truly where the moral rubber hits the road, and yet we must candidly admit that it is on this fourth criterion where many of our failures in moral discourse occur.

Now of course we can simply posit any such failure to convince to the ignorance or ill-will of the listeners, but such a facile answer is both too simplistic and frankly just wrong-headed. In any event such an accusation will hardly do much effectively to change the status quo. So rather than trying to read into the hearts and minds of those we fail to convince by our moral discourse, it might be ultimately more efficacious to look once again at our first four “C’s” of comprehensiveness, comprehensibility, coherence and credibility, to ascertain if there might not be some deficiency on our part in regards to handling one or more of these basic criteria. Would the line of argumentation as presented honestly convince me if I had not already been predisposed to accept the conclusions in the first place? Why or why not?

This fifth criterion also widens our moral discourse in another important way, by bringing the affective dimension explicitly into the discussion. Hot-button issues often seem more emotional than rational, and if we hope to engage the issue in its entirety we must grapple with what makes this issue so highly charged. Reasons of the heart are usually more persuasive than those which speak only to the head, and thus our moral discourse must speak convincingly to the heart as well if we hope to move people to genuine conviction of our position. Attention to the affective dimension will also complement the cultivation of the virtues which will be necessary to carry out one’s convictions into practice.

Finally, we have to ask what our response might be in that case that even after we have taken great care in following these four C’s of comprehensiveness, comprehensibility, coherence, and credibility in devising an ethical discourse that is also convincing, and still we find ourselves

failing in our ultimate goal. “Winning” an argument cannot be the sole or ultimate criterion and we remember that even Jesus Christ failed to “convince” many of the people with whom he found himself in disagreement and controversy. Strategically we may have to try once again to recast our discourse so that it might become more persuasive. However, mere repetition of the same argument, with the volume amplified, or with the additions of sanctions of authority probably will be ineffective at best, and extremely counter-productive at worst. Coercion is not an ethical synonym for convincing! In cases such as these we would do well to recall that a truly convincing argument rests on the truth, and therefore is not a matter of majority acceptance, public opinion polls, and/or the reigning ethos of political correctness. We also must not discount that the possibility that our audience lacks the sufficient personal maturity, intellectual sophistication, or even sin and hard-heartedness to appreciate what we have to say.

The Sixth “C”–Christian

The five “C’s” I have just outlined are applicable to any coherent moral discourse, but if our ethics are to be truly catholic, then we need to include a sixth and final “C,” namely Christian. Now this may be such an obvious criterion that it could easily pass without explicit mention. Yet, there is an important methodological question hidden in the adjective. What makes our ethics “Christian”? Is it merely ethics that Christians hold? Thus, the adjective functions primarily to describe the adherents of the system, such as Irish, German, Republican or Democrat, without much essential interplay between the adjective and the noun it modifies? Or is there some deeper and more essential connection in which the adjective “Christian” functions normatively not only to describe, but also to determine in some sense the content of the ethics? I am arguing for this

latter position. This does not mean that Christians have some claim to “higher” moral knowledge or behavior which is not open to non-Christians, but rather simply the claim that Christians are bound to take seriously what I call the “sacred claim” of the story and message of Jesus Christ in a way which would not necessarily bind those who do not profess faith in him. This sacred claim can be very powerful because it speaks in a compelling way to our convictions, or what ought to convince us.

If my basic position is correct, as I believe in theory it is, then all of our moral discourse must take into account the Christian nature of our moral life, not only in terms of abstract theory, but in concrete applications to and responses of our daily lived moral lives. Specifically, there are a number of important themes our Christian ethics must seek to include and integrate into our holistic moral discourse. Space does not permit to elaborate these in detail, so I will content myself here with simply enunciating some of the key Christian theological themes which must find their way into our Christian moral discourse about concrete ethical issues. No doubt the number of these themes could be expanded but I would highlight the following ten interrelated themes: (1) God’s creation, which is essentially good; (2) God’s grace, which is the first, middle, and last word of our moral lives; (3) the reality of sin, to which we are subject, and in which we are all personally involved; (4) compassion and forgiveness, which mark the divine response to the dynamic of sin (as well as the requirement of humans to do as God does (cf. The Lord’s Prayer) and which, therefore leads necessarily to (5) conversion and reconciliation; (6) the Cross of Christ which stands as our paradigmatic symbol of who we are in relation to (7) redemption, which is the mystery of God’s salvific will for sinful humanity; (8) the resurrection of the body, which symbolizes the destruction of the power of sin and death, as well as our final “end” for which God

has created us; (9) eschatology, or the realization of both the present in-breaking of God's kingdom with its values into our human history as well as the ultimate promise of a truly brave new world yet to come; and (10) the Christian moral community of discipleship which is how we are called and initiated into our life in the Lord, and which is therefore not merely the locus, but also the focus for all aspects of our lives, including our lived expression of our sexuality.

Following up on this last point helps us to realize that in terms of the abortion debate, like every moral issue, the key question must in some essential way always involve this Christian call to discipleship. I would link this point to an anecdote related by a college ethics professor regarding a discussion between two students in class. One was a young woman who stated that she was pro-choice. However, when a fellow classmate asked her if she believed that Jesus would be pro-choice, she said "no," and then recognized that she would have to change her own view on permitting case-by-case abortions in non-life-threatening circumstances upon realizing that Jesus would not have condoned such a position. I am not arguing here that we adopt a WWJD (What would Jesus do?) approach to Christian moral reasoning; the problems and limitations of such a simplistic approach are well-known and require little additional discussion here. Christian discipleship does have a claim on our moral reasoning, and we must take both our discipleship identity and its concomitant moral claims more into account in our approach to ethical issues than we might have in the past. To return to my first anecdote of the woman who maintained that the key difference between abortion and capital punishment was "innocent" life, I would fault her not just for a lack of consistency, but for a theological failure to grasp the full Christian understanding of life. Life is sacred not because it is "innocent" but because it is God-given. Thus, both the unborn fetus and the death-row inmate have a claim to the sanctity of life. The pro-choice pro-

Buddha statue individual likewise seems to have missed the claims of the Christian criterion on these issues.

The Christian criterion reminds us that compassion, mercy, and forgiveness are not attributes reserved for Jesus alone, and so if we are truly disciples in His name, then we must practice daily these virtues in all aspects of our lives. While more could be said in spelling out the ramifications of each of the ten themes I enumerated in regards to the sixth "C" suffice it to say, though, in conclusion that the sixth "C" ("Christian") does not aim to replace or supersede the previous five "C"s, of comprehensiveness, comprehensibility, coherence, being credible and convincing, but is meant to be integrative as the organizing symbol of the whole of our Christian moral discourse.

Conclusion

If abortion can be discussed using rules for moral discourse which are agreed upon by most, if not all, parties to the debate, then we stand a much better chance at moving forward to establishing not only a common ground, but also we can begin to strategize realistically on responses in common to at least some of the myriad factors which make abortion such a pervasive reality in our society. If we can view abortion and all of the related problems which together drive individuals to choose this as a desperate remedy as a "social" problem calling us to corporate reflection, analysis, discernment and action, then this issue might be defused and actually become a common good project that brings us together and unites us, rather than polarizing and dividing us.

The whole process of engaging in the moral discourse suggested by my approach presumes a fundamental openness to what might be termed a seventh integrative and constitutive criterion of change and conversion which would run through each of the individual six criteria of comprehensiveness, comprehensibility, coherence, credibility, convincing and Christian. Change would be understood in the sense of becoming more complete, i.e., the facility of both adding voices, elements, points of view, etc., which had been neglected in the initial analysis, as well as subtracting and/or modifying other elements which have been found wanting due to a variety of factors (such as being incomplete and partial, or biased, slanted, or even false). This seventh criterion of change is grounded in a key aspect of the six criterion of being Christian: being truly Christian in our concrete lives means owning honestly our identification as a Pilgrim Church (cf. the primary metaphor used in Lumen Gentium). A Pilgrim Church is a Church of sinners on the way—on the way certainly to the fullness of the Kingdom yet to come, but a people always involved in the process of accepting the first command of Jesus’ Gospel message, namely to be converted (cf. Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:15). This communal process of deepening conversion recognizes that the authentic locus theologicus for moral theological discourse is the consensus fidelium of all the baptized believers who seek to discern the promptings of the Spirit in their lives, both individually and collectively, in their efforts to live out the Christian faith which sets them aside as the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Life matters because there are so many matters in life we must address.