

Cell Wars

Albert R. Jonsen, Ph.D.*

On September 11, our second day of infamy, I was in Davos, Switzerland, delivering a lecture to an international conference. The topic was the ethics of stem cell research. As CNN displayed the horrors of that day, we learned that another kind of cell, the clutch of international terrorists, was our enemy. One war against stem cell research had been waged in the United States; another war against terrorist cells was about to be mounted. The fact that this short word “cell” spanned two issues of moral moment, and the fact that I have spent my career as a professor of ethics, spurred me to reflection on the very nature of morality. Perhaps I have spent years teaching something I really did not understand.

Apart from the word “cell,” meaning in its original Latin “storeroom,” and then a small chamber for a monk or a prisoner, and then the membrane-enclosed cytoplasm out of which all organisms are built, and then, in recent years, a group of revolutionaries and subversives, what might the organic cells about which I was lecturing and the cadre of terrorists who blasted our security have in common as morally meaningful? The organic cell is so tiny as to be invisible to the naked eye; the terrorist cell is also invisible. The organic cell has great power: its complex metabolism can build and sustain an elephant and a human person. The terrorist cell is also powerful: its conspiracy can blast out of existence massive structures and out of balance the equilibrium of a nation. Yet organic cells and terrorist cells are radically different. What joins them in our moral concerns? Why should I be able to speak about the moral issues raised by the stem cell and the moral issues raised by terrorism?

I begin with the horrors of September 11. We saw before our eyes the instant incineration of some 4,000 lives, a sight never seen by any human ever before. Neither Nature’s fickle force nor negligent accident did this, but rather the deliberate intent of human will. We saw that day what the martyred German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer once called “the depths of evil.” He was referring to the Nazi evils that crushed his own life and that of millions of European Jews and other innocent victims. The

* Albert R. Jonsen is Emeritus Professor of Ethics in Medicine at the University of Washington. He was a Visiting Professor of bioethics at Yale University from 1999-2000.

horrors of that genocide soon came to be known as The Holocaust. The events of September 11 were also a "holocaust," a word that appears in Greek literature and in the Greek Septuagint version of the Hebrew bible to designate a sacrificial offering consumed entirely by fire. Although vastly different in scale, the Nazi Holocaust and this contemporary holocaust both manifest evil so deep that no justification or excuse can free them from utter condemnation. Of course, the Nazis believed that their goal of racial purity justified their destruction; of course, the Islamic terrorists believe that their defeat of the Great Satan renders their destruction praiseworthy. But is not reason revulsed by these rationales? Here the first task of the moral philosopher is engaged: How are we to think about moral relativism? Can we simply glance at the horrors of those two holocausts and say that if Nazis and Taliban think they were good, they must be so? Are there not evils so deep that human moral judgment must condemn them? If there are not, all the work of ethics is relativistic and ultimately meaningless.

Turn to the other cell, the stem cell, infinitesimal origin of our total organism. Microbiologists identify the embryonic stem cell as the chamber of cytoplasm vitalized by a nucleus of chromosomes that exists only for a few days after fertilization or cloning. They are at that point the cells of no particular tissue or organ but are ready to become all tissues and organs once implanted in a womb. Only recently have scientists discerned that these very early cells could be preserved in their primal state and then prepared to become particular tissues and organs that can be transplanted into those whose tissues and organs need repair. In order to do this, however, the evolving embryo will be stopped in its evolution toward a fetus and a baby, and its cells will be diverted to therapeutic use for others. This ending of embryonic life has been called murder, equivalent to the killing of a child or a person. The research promising repair of neural cells, liver cells, and heart cells is a moral evil because it originates with the deliberate murder of a human being. This is a violation of the sanctity of life. Yet is not the salvage of human life from the ravages of damaged neural or islet cells an acknowledgment of the sanctity of life?

Pastor Bonhoeffer's words about the depths of evil come from a sentence that opens one of the most eloquent passages of the martyred theologian's writings:

One is distressed by the failure of reasonable people to perceive either the depths of evil or the depths of the holy. With the best of intentions they believe that a little reason will suffice them to clamp together the parting timbers of the building. They are so blind that in their desire to see justice done to both sides they are crushed between the clashing

forces. Bitterly disappointed at the unreasonableness of the world, they see that their efforts must remain fruitless and they withdraw resignedly from the scene or yield unresistingly to the stronger party.¹

“The depths of evil or the depths of the holy.” These are the words that have lingered in my mind for decades as I attempted to study and teach ethics. Bonhoeffer is speaking, in this passage, not of ordinary people, to whom it might well apply, but rather of “ethicists,” those philosophers and theologians who make it their life’s vocation to instruct ordinary people about the good and the right, or if not to instruct, at least to clarify what right and good might mean in a confusing world.

Western philosophical and theological thought has given much attention to ethics, from Socrates to the Stoics, from Jesus to Augustine and Aquinas, from Moses to Maimonides, from Hume and Locke, Kant and Hegel, to James, Dewey, and Rawls. How much deep thought about the meaning and value of human life in society! Yet, when we put down the words of these deep thinkers and turn to practical life, we improvise an ethic to fit the needs of persons in particular times and places. This improvisation is the work of reason, seeking to understand how to stay alive and flourish in humane conditions.

Ethics is an improvisation, much like the improvisation allowed to the pianist or violinist in the classical sonata. “Improvisation,” says a dictionary of music, “is the invention of music at the time it is being performed...on the spot, without being written down.”² This is, of course, the way most music has been made through human history and it is the way much of the best jazz is made today. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as composers perfected the concerto form for orchestra and solo instrument, they often allowed the soloist an opportunity to show technical skill by departing from the composer’s notation and playing freely for some time. These “cadenzas” usually came just before the end of the first movement, following the statement of themes and their recapitulation, so that the pianist might pick up the melodies already established in the notated score and modify them in harmony, rhythm, modulation of key, and phrasing. The pianist now becomes an improvisationist, allowed to depart from the notation of the composer’s score, but still restrained within certain limits as he or she creates music extemporaneously.

Melodies, while varied, are still heard; keys are modulated but not forgotten. The sounds of the improvisation must, in some definite way, echo the sounds of the score. Haydn, it is said, was once so dismayed by a soloist’s liberties that he loudly remarked at the end of the cadenza, “welcome home, Mr. Dubourg.” Improvisation allows the virtuoso to stray, wander, and explore, but not too far from home. It departs from the

composition and must return to it and, indeed, even as it flows from the artist's virtuosity, it must remain at least remotely true to the composer's inspiration. Improvisation is, I am told, a difficult art and, while Mozart and the other great composers left cadenzas to their performers, they also wrote them themselves, and today most pianists play the composer's cadenza rather than improvise.

I think that practical ethics is very much like musical improvisation. In a realm of practical life, whether it is medicine, familial or sexual association, commerce, or politics, certain great themes, articulated by the great thinkers and felt by the populace, are heard: Medicine must care for the sick, families must nourish children, business must be honest, politics must seek peace and the common welfare. But once these themes are heard, a multitude of practical problems must be faced, for which the themes, while inspiring, are insufficient. Those problems must be solved by careful study and creative responses to the particular shape of the problems. While the improvisations have taken different forms over the centuries, they stay remarkably close to the themes that can be heard from morality outside medicine: put most succinctly by the Roman Jurisprudents, "live honestly, hurt no one and give to each what is due." It is unquestionably true that some improvisations have been more successful than others.

Yet these improvisations are, in Bonhoeffer's phrase, "the work of little reason." They are devised by reason working on the problem; they are implemented by reason recognizing the situations in which restraint is required. They work well when the building, again to recall Bonhoeffer's image, is in good condition: little reason holds the timbers together effectively enough. Yet, when the timbers are parting, under storm or in earthquake, little reason begins to fail. The improvisations are created for ordinary times; they manage the difficulties that disrupt the tenor of ordinary times. But when ordinary times are torn asunder, little reason, which seeks to do justice to all parties, can no longer hold the building together. The ethics of ordinary times, the improvisations of little reason, are insufficient. As is often the case with reason, it does not break totally, but becomes twisted. The same terms that in ordinary times provide sensible advice for the management of problems take on meanings that justify outrageous departures from that sensible advice. People who espouse principles find themselves proclaiming the same principles to do the opposite things they did in ordinary times. And, of course, they say that these are not ordinary times.

So, under stress, the intricate improvisations of a particular ethic, medical, clerical, or political, are twisted and stretched until the building

comes apart. That is, the activity which that ethic preserved no longer looks at all as it should: politics exploits the people, religion enslaves them, and medicine kills them. It is now that Bonhoeffer's principal thesis must appear: The failure of reasonable people to perceive either the depths of evil or the depths of the holy. "The depths of evil or the depths of the holy"—terrifying words at both ends. The depth of evil generates terror before the destruction of all that gives familiar stability to life, the abyss that opens when the ordinary is smashed in every respect. Terror that comes when life is at every moment in peril; when love's bonds are ripped apart. The depth of the holy is the *Mysterium Tremendum*, the words philosopher Rudolf Otto used to describe the Divine Presence: a mystery that makes humans tremble, not in fear, but in exaltation and ecstasy. How peculiar that Bonhoeffer neglects the common metaphor: heights of the holy and depths of evil. Yet, in saying "depths of holy and depths of evil," he emphasizes the most paradoxical of metaphysical and psychological realities: While the holy and the evil may be polar opposites, we humans too often confuse them. In principle, we revere the one and despise the other, yet in our decisions and actions we mix them horribly.

Still, we must perceive them and consistently attempt to keep them distinct. I think that Bonhoeffer wished to tell us that the improvised ethics of little reason, useful as it is in ordinary times, has sustaining strength only if surrounded by a vivid perception of what lies beyond the problems of ordinary times. The perception of the depth of evil and the depth of the holy is the external force that supports the interior bindings of the ethics of little reason and sustains it under pressure. Without this perception, the improvised ethics are impotent. Yet, how do we perceive the depths of evil and the depths of the holy? These seem incommensurable. We see depths of evil, or approaches to it, so very often: the killing fields of Cambodia and Bosnia, the slaughters in Rwanda, the starvation in Somalia, the bombings in Ulster, Tel Aviv, and Oklahoma City, and now the tragedy of the twin towers; even the smaller horrors of blasting a Birmingham Sunday School, or gunning down fellow high-school students. Are these not visions of the depths of evil? But are there not other depths of evil in the political and economic world that we ignore and which do as much harm to life and the world as these horrors?

We do not often see visions of the depths of the holy. Perhaps we saw those depths in the courage of the New York police and firefighters at Ground Zero, in the superhuman efforts to save lives, in the tiny panegyric paragraphs about the victims that appear daily in the *New York Times*. When we do glimpse the depth of the holy, in the face of a saint or the courage of a savior of the imperiled, it seems so quickly erased by the magnitude of

evil around it. And, as I noted, our inability to keep distinct the depths of evil and the holy makes recognition of the true lineaments of both perilously difficult.

How can “reasonable people...perceive the depths of the holy and the depths of evil” when we seldom can see either clearly? Might we not excuse ourselves due to our congenital blindness or myopia? I think not. It is, I believe, in the very improvisations of little reason at which we are so competent that we can glimpse, if we are alert, the forces of the holy and of evil. While in ordinary times, we may debate with great seriousness the adequacy of these improvisations, an alert ethicist will constantly glimpse behind these arguments the possibility of evil and holiness. We rarely converse directly about such things and rarely press our debates to those further fields. Indeed, when we do, someone is likely to accuse us of extremism. Still, even without explicit exploration, we must be constantly alert to the drift of our improvisations. They may move, almost imperceptibly, away from the themes that inspire them and, almost without our noticing, become parodies of what they had been created for. The themes that ultimately must inspire our morality are the constant work of reason and sensibility to counter human impetuosity, lethargy, and selfishness. Evil will always be with us, but it must be repudiated without compounding evil and thus must be fought with reason and sensibility. The sanctity of life will draw us, but it must be embraced without fanaticism, irrationality, and insensitivity.

Our war against terrorist cells will engage evil and the holy. We will be forced to ask how we can repel evil and still sustain the holiness of freedom and humaneness. Our war about the stem cells must recognize that we deal with the beginnings of human life, and thus the sanctity or holiness of all human life, and our moral ingenuity will be stressed to effect the good of healing without doing evil. The two cell wars are not, in essence, very different.

References

1. DIETRICH BONHOEFFER, ETHICS 4 (1962).
2. THE HARPERCOLLINS DICTIONARY OF MUSIC 194 (Christine Ammer ed., 1995).

