



HOME RENAISSANCE FOUNDATION
RENEWING THE CULTURE OF THE HOME

Home Renaissance Foundation

Working Papers

Number 42

Vulnerability

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Paper delivered at the HRF Experts Meeting

New York, November 29th, 2012

Perhaps I should start by saying I am out of my depth today: a would-be philosopher among sociologists, social workers and economists; a theoretician among very practical people; a theorist facing what might seem the purely practical problems of the relationship between work and home; a compiler of arguments about the obviously related topic of vulnerability with only limited experience of the practical difficulties of protecting those vulnerable whether physically, emotionally, or morally (though I am a father of four as well as a philosopher). Yet vulnerability is certainly a fundamental aspect of human nature and therefore necessarily related both to moral psychology and the pursuit of moral truth, hence to virtue and vice, since ethics is essentially a practical discipline - and I certainly would not approve as philosophical the attitude of an Oxford teacher of ethics as recorded by the British politician Denis Healey in his excellent political autobiography: the philosopher concerned was widely known for seducing his female students and when challenged as to why he did not practice what he preached, replied: "Whoever heard of a signpost going the way it pointed."¹ It may be one of the merits of *ancient* society that such an armchair account of the job of a philosopher would never have had a hearing, let alone the chance to secure a post in a prestigious department of philosophy. If you did not practice what you preached, whatever it might be, you could not be taken seriously.

¹ Healey (1989), p.

Be that as it may, I think I can offer some sort of defense for speaking, indeed for attempting to speak philosophically and to offer some sort of conceptual, even at times phenomenological analysis of my subject: all practice and practices depend on theories and assumptions, though many such assumptions are held uncritically, which could mean that they are untrue, or at least half-truths, where the missing half, if it would be identified, might change the story considerably. So the philosopher may be of some use in trying to bring some of this theory and of these assumptions, as it were, out of the darkness and into the light where they may be scrutinized. But in engaging in this process he must also be aware of the risk that he may add new theories and uncritical assumptions of his own. Nevertheless, the risk will seem worth taking, for philosophy is always risky, not least in that it may induce people to do things that are not only very stupid, but actually toxic, not only for others but also – and perhaps more fearfully – for those who practice them. The late great philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe was once asked by a BBC interviewer what her colleagues in Oxford spent their time doing. To which question, after some hesitation, she replied that probably most of them spent most of their time corrupting the youth.²

And the risk is worth taking not least because some of the practices and attitudes I would like to scrutinize and analyze may, I think, be incoherent; the same person may be caught believing p and $\text{not-}p$ at the same time. The likelihood of this happening is particularly strong and hence serious in our own culture, where it has been frequently observed that we live in a world in which substantially, if not exclusively, we possess in our heads an amalgam of views from many disparate and incompatible sources: Judaism, Christianity,

² Rist (2014), p.17

Darwinism, Marxism, Freudianism, perhaps a dash of Buddhism, all flavored with some sort of Nietzschean hermeneutic of suspicion, not only of others and the views of others, but, if we are lucky, of ourselves. I might speak of unpacking our assumptions, or perhaps of deconstructing them, but I would prefer the former expression, because the latter inevitably carries with it the suggestion that those who propose some thesis or other will always have some hidden agenda - whether consciously or unconsciously - normally with the intention of manipulating others. And doubtless this is sometimes - even often - the case, but importantly not always. Remember that the habitual liar does not always lie: a fact which frequently misleads historians, philosophers and other humanists.

Though it is difficult to know where best to start (though perhaps it will become clearer as we go along whether I have started in the right place), it may be helpful first to ask the ill-formed question "Is vulnerability a good or a bad thing?" And perhaps a measure of clarity may be obtained by distinguishing between physical and moral vulnerability, and then beginning with greater attention to physical vulnerability. Of course, everyone is physically vulnerable to a considerable extent: I shall be hurt whether I am 4, 40 or 80 if someone hits me on the head with a baseball bat, though the eighty-year old may stand less chance of surviving the attack than the forty-year old, and therefore may seem more vulnerable. And that would seem to imply that he needs more protection, that his old age should be respected. Or does it? Or perhaps more immediately, why does it, if it does? Is it simply the case that we *feel* worse if we see a defenseless person being assaulted than if we see it happening to someone more capable of looking after himself? Feelings in this case may be important, but I hope at least it can be recognized

that that is not all there is to it. For feelings can be manipulated (or trained, or however one might want to put it). It would seem that Nazi concentration camp guards had no bad feelings about abusing the old and weak if they could persuade themselves, or be persuaded, that these people were not human, that they should be stamped out like rodents, as a moral, even almost as a physical danger to society.

In that example can be recognized one of the weaknesses of so-called moral-sense theories in ethics: their advocates assume that they know, because they have been brought up in a comparatively “decent” society, that they will “naturally” have the right kind of feelings.³ But it is not difficult to ask which feelings are naturally right. Plato had already recognized the difficulty, observing only partially with tongue in cheek that “decent” people, as mere conventionalists, are like social insects – bees or ants – and will be reincarnated as such the next time round, while Thomas Aquinas and many others have noted that it is of little help to appeal simply to conscience (let alone, I might add, to a moral sense), but only to a well formed conscience.⁴ And who is to know whether a conscience is well or ill formed. The problem is made clearer if we reflect on the fact, noted with particular emphasis by Augustine (and in effect denied by Descartes) that we cannot be trusted to recognize our own motives by introspection; we are always liable to be too generous to ourselves, and even if we are not, there is the problem of how we can know that we are not.⁵ Perhaps we do indeed need some sort of standard (other than the conventions on which moral-sense theorists rely) before we decide to trust our

³ Some of the historical proponents of this theory include 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson, David Hume and Adam Smith (1723–1790). Some of the contemporary thinkers include Michael Slote, Justin D’Arms, Daniel Jacobson, and Jesse Prinz.

⁴ Rist (2015), p. 8

⁵ See *De Libero Arbitrio* and *The Confessions* as well as *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

moral sense. Doubtless you remember the American tale of the man who has qualms of conscience because he hides a black from a pursuing lynch-mob

When we are confronted with examples of physical (or indeed any other kind of) vulnerability, we have, roughly speaking, two options: we can either manipulate, abuse or ignore the vulnerable to our own supposed advantage, or we can try and reduce their vulnerability. If we select or prefer the first option, we find ourselves more or less living in the natural state envisaged in the “wicked doctrines of Mr. Hobbes”, in which we are in effect engaged, or liable to be engaged, in a war of all against all, in a world in which it is natural for the strong to oppress and manipulate the weak, though, for Mr. Hobbes, only if it seems rational to do so – and in Hobbes’ de facto world it is not rational to do so if by so acting we compromise our quest for self-preservation. Indeed, to follow our natural liberty always to impose ourselves on those weaker than ourselves is likely, in his view, to diminish our chances of survival, so we are rationally constrained to make deals, contracts, by which we accord certain liberties to others provided that such concessions promise a greater chance of survival for ourselves.⁶

David Hume spotted some of the important weaknesses in all this: observation seems to suggest that the claim that we always pursue self-preservation is false; not only do some willingly give their lives for others, but somehow, as a result, perhaps, of the experience of living with others – man may be a social animal, to some degree, after all – we feel a certain sympathy for them (Rousseau called it “pity”); we empathize with them. Nevertheless, following Hutcheson, Hume erred in supposing that this natural feeling could be converted into a moral sense theory, not least because other experiences of

⁶ See *Leviathan*.

society may induce quite different feelings, and our moral sense will thus tend, without reflection and proper formation, to produce results either apparently wicked or, as we have seen, merely conventional.⁷

Hume thought that decent people know roughly which conventions to follow – a mistake frequently made by our contemporaries who rely on a diminished Christian inheritance to explain why, for example, Jew-baiting is “simply wrong”, though their broader theories tell them that the notion of being “simply wrong” is unintelligible: their attitude has been developed, of course, at least in part, to diminish the possibility of the development of an argument that sexual acts between consenting adults could be “simply wrong”. It is not only in theology that strange and often mistaken beliefs arise from below the belt, or, as a well-known actress put it – in the seventies, I think – as a result of thinking from between her legs

Nevertheless, Hume does provide a challenge: is it possible to be other than conventional – and that would include being conventional, for example, about human rights as well as about vulnerability, indeed about the rights of the vulnerable? Kant thought he had an answer: without at least immediate recourse to theistic premises he thought we could determine, if we think about moral behavior in an impartial manner (from behind a veil of ignorance, that is, in Rawls’ more contemporary version, of knowledge about our own class, sex, religion, race, social status, etc.) we can identify, by our power of practical reasoning, the rational course to adopt, not least but not only towards the vulnerable.⁸ But Kant’s solution, and that of others who follow him, fails: first because he should have learned from Hume that even if a course of action is

⁷ See *Treatise of Human Nature*. See also Rawls (1999), p. 118.

⁸ See *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*.

rational we have no moral obligation to follow it – only a seemingly prudential obligation dependent on our own interests, or our own happiness. Yet Kant specifically excludes such “eudaimonistic” concerns from the moral life.⁹ And there is a second point, also effective against Kant, though no immediate help in dealing with Hobbes and other contractarians past or present: namely that it would be wholly irrational in the days of our wider knowledge to follow what would seem the rational course in the days of our ignorance. Real people do not – indeed cannot – live behind a veil of ignorance, or even imagine what it would be like to live behind such a veil, any more than they can capture or recapture what it would be like and what they would “feel” in a state of nature, though some guesses would seem to be better than others.

If a Kantian answer to Hobbes is blocked by Hume, where does that leave the physically vulnerable and any other possible victims of manipulation or abuse? In a world of growing individualism, in no very good shape. It is interesting to notice that the concept of a minor has largely disappeared from contemporary ethical writings, except sometimes, though often selectively, in the work of certain feminists. We are all, at whatever age, supposed to be more or less atomic individuals, not social by nature but only by contract, Hobbesian or other. But minors are clearly not in a position to make contracts with full consent. It is true that they are usually – though often unthinkingly – said to have rights, but in a non-theistic world rights must depend on the power of the claimant, however acquired, not only to claim the right itself but to enforce his claim against others. And although children are supposed regularly to have rights, they normally lack the power to enforce them. That difficulty may lead to desperate or demagogic proposals to make the rights of

⁹ *Ibid.*

citizenship, such as the right to vote, available at a lower and lower age; sorites-style arguments are sometimes misused to promote such notions (if I can vote at 18, why not a week earlier, then a week earlier?, etc.): which has the additional advantage for dodgy opinion-formers that the young and uneducated are normally able to be influenced irrationally in a manner beneficial to those who are paid to do the influencing.

A good example of this can be recognized in the case of smoking, where the manufacturers seem to aim (or to try to aim) at an ever more junior group of potential consumers. Young girls and women can be especially targeted, often very successfully, since smoking is supposed to put them up at the top table along with the bosses, even if in fact they have no chance of reaching such dizzying heights.

Such examples of how to abuse the vulnerable in a rights-context, especially where individualism is king - I once set my students to write an essay on the topic "Every student has the right to get drunk" - serve to show that the problem of physical vulnerability is a part of the widest possible study of virtue and vice, and connected to the fact that much modern thinking supposes, in the wake of such as Dworkin, that a moral structure can be built on rights, held to be "trumps", as a foundational concept. Thus those who can claim their rights (or have them claimed by others if others want to do that) stand a chance of being legally granted them. But the physically vulnerable, whether in virtue of being pre-born, minors, or too old to be able to look after themselves, can easily be eliminated from the rights-based universe: and they are indeed widely so eliminated. The killing of most unborn children - who can be taken to represent the most vulnerable section of society - is normally carried out for no better reason than the convenience of someone else. And in

a world of individualism, why should there be any genuinely moral objection to that? We are, in that reality, right back in Hobbes' world, though we may conceal that disturbing fact by using rights-terminology to explain mere self-seeking, whether more or less explicable and perhaps even at times justifiable.

There is no way out of this situation if we persist in abandoning the older notion that it is not rights - what I can claim for myself if I (or for my group) have the strength - that is basic in moral thinking; what is basic is what I ought to do, whether for myself or for others, and particularly for certain groups of more or less unprotected others, so that ethics, as Socrates used to put it, is concerned with how I should make my soul as good as possible, that is, how I should become virtuous. That is not to suggest that human rights (even for the vulnerable) do not exist, merely that they cannot be prior in ethical reasoning. John Locke is the most important ancestor of contemporary rights-theory, though his premises, which are theistic, are now abandoned, while his conclusions are taken to be self-evident.¹⁰ But an honest atheist knew better: Jeremy Bentham described rights in the world as he saw it as nonsense on stilts, and in his universe, as we are regularly finding out, they seem indeed to be merely indefensible assumptions - and not only assumptions but fundamental axioms often advanced by people who will tell you that there are no fundamental axioms anyway, and certainly not in public life.¹¹ But again Bentham knew better: he was a philanthropist who tried to do much for the vulnerable in his own day, but when asked why he did so, he replied that he just liked doing that sort of thing. As I have intimated already, many people are morally superior to the theories to which they believe they subscribe.

¹⁰ See Locke (1689)

¹¹ For a more detail presentation of his argument see *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*.

What we seem to have discovered so far is that if we reject Hobbesian attitudes towards the physically vulnerable, we may be at a loss to defend any alternative. Sometimes a specious answer (philosophically dependent on Kant, and I leave aside how he tried, inadequately in my view to defend it) is adduced to resolve the difficulty: we say that persons must always be treated as ends and never as means, that is, that they should not be manipulated; advantage should not be taken of them, at least if they are particularly vulnerable. You may have noticed the oddness of atheists talking about the sanctity of human life. But here comes the catch: let us suppose that persons should not be abused, physically or in any other way. But who or what then is a person? Not, clearly, something that possesses rights in virtue of that possession, but the other way round: persons (but perhaps not only persons, or in some extended sense of the word "persons") possess rights. So if we can exclude apparent persons from the set of "persons", we are free to abuse them - though we would not need to use the word "abuse", any more than we use it if we have to have a pet cat or dog "put down.

So the question - vital for the vulnerable - is whether being a person is a state in which you are conceived, or whether it is something you may acquire at a particular stage in your life - perhaps by being able to do something or other - and perhaps lose at a later stage when for whatever reason you are no longer able to do it. So it matters who is to be respected *qua* vulnerable, also who is to decide the question, and by what criterion he or she is to make the decision. It is not difficult to see that here we have questions of life and death.

If I can be a little controversial at this point I should like to draw your attention to a further highly significant matter which arises from the obvious

fact that questions about how to treat the vulnerable are matters of life and death. One controversial aspect of this is that in Western society we are beginning to see how our attitudes to the vulnerable affect not, obviously, sexual differences, but gender differences: that is, differences which arise not from our biological and more specifically genital make-up but from the way we socialize that make-up in the construction of so-called gender differences: that is, how we think that persons of different sex should comport themselves in society in the light of revised expectations about appropriate male and female behavior. For it seems to me that whereas in the past the notion of being female entailed the belief that women would be more likely to be caring than men, the contempt for the vulnerability of the unborn tends to produce a quite different picture of what a woman is supposed to be like in a social context: no longer a carer but a virago, willing, or at least consenting, to be the executioner of her own vulnerable children: and if of such, then of who else? And her revised attitude cannot but effect - and for the worse - that of those men who believe that her contempt for the weak is admirable or at least easy to explain and defend.

From that piece of political incorrectness, such as is appropriate for a philosopher, I now return to more strictly conceptual issues, indeed to point out that the course of our present discussion has brought us to a question at the heart of contemporary philosophy: we need to ask whether it is possible to reconcile the scientific view of each human individual as merely accomplishing a number of identifiable events in the universe - in accordance with what has been called the view from nowhere - with the first person approach - pioneered by Augustine, especially in his *Confessions* - which would seem to be necessary if we are to accord value to any individuals, not least to oneself, and hence

allow for the possibility of virtue and vice as they have been traditionally discussed by moral philosophers, as I have noted, since the time of Socrates. The same question can also be posed at a more immediately personal level: then it becomes, "Does anything matter in the long run". Clearly this is a question which arises in an especially acute form for those with little chance of living much longer (and I have heard people in such circumstances comment that "Nothing matters now": which implies that the question can be powerfully posed by people in a situation of extreme vulnerability). And perhaps that is most likely to be where one would meet it in "real life". Yet we should notice that very recently a well known philosopher has written a book of more than one thousand pages on the question of whether anything matters, and has concluded that "ultimately" nothing much does.

At the risk of digressing even further from immediately practical questions, I should like to pursue this a little further; perhaps the problem arises from some confusion over the use and implications of the word "matters". For it might be possible to begin to restate Anselm's argument for the existence of God as follows: If anything matters, God exists; but it matters whether or not God exists; therefore God exists. The point of such a suggestion is that the view from nowhere might seem the only non-self-deluding option if and only if God does not exist - but if God does exist, then persons (obviously including the vulnerable) matter. In fact, it may be the case - certainly historically it was the case - that the very notion of a "person" is otiose, confused or unintelligible without the existence of God. What we now call "persons" would then be nothing other than individual members of the human species: nothing more, nothing less. And any apparent value they might have would be something that someone allows them to possess, at least from time to time,

and on specific conditions. And what man gives, man can take away; what a law allows, a law can also forbid.

What I am trying to suggest is that without God the concept of a person can do no moral work; historically indeed the notion that each of us is a human person derives from the claim that we are, somehow or other, constructed in the image and likeness of God. So theoretically the existence or non-existence of God makes an enormous difference to the worth of all of us, and especially of the vulnerable, though – behaviors often being better, as we have noted already, than accounts of them given by individual agents – one could not and should not deny that many of those who help the vulnerable do not understand the necessary logical basis of beliefs to which they wholeheartedly subscribe.

But let us now put our feet back more firmly on the earth: if we recognize that people are vulnerable – and now I want to think about moral or spiritual vulnerability as well as the physical variety to which I have paid rather more attention thus far – what attitude should we have towards them even if we allow that they need to be helped? Then a secondary question arises: can it happen that we have to harden ourselves, to make us somehow less vulnerable – some might talk about “tough love” – to promote in ourselves, that is, a state which might be detrimental to ourselves as moral agents, or at least to some possible accounts of what we should strive to be like?

From time to time philosophers, especially the Stoics, have argued that physical vulnerability is unimportant; we should be concerned only with the moral state of others, and *a fortiori* of ourselves. Thus we should recognize that other people are vulnerable but that we should not allow concern for such vulnerability to promote undue distress (perhaps in a more modern context one

might think of “burning out”) in ourselves. Thus the Stoic Epictetus – who has recently become a favorite of some who have found themselves having to endure hard and unjust conditions of imprisonment – used to advise his students, if they had young children, to remind themselves each time they put their child to bed and kissed him goodnight that “Perhaps he will die tomorrow”.

The aim of this being to avoid damaging one’s own serenity, we should ask whether serenity (or how much serenity) is a desirable goal, pursued at the price of apparent callousness. To find the right answer to this may be harder than it would seem: nurses who become too emotionally involved in the fate of those in their care may be less able to give the help needed, and may even be more likely to suffer a nervous breakdown and thus unable to help anyone at all. Yet we all know the answer to the question which has been used to subvert Kantian duty: given their equal skills, if we are in hospital we would presumably choose to be nursed by someone who acted as a friend rather than as a duty-driven assistant.

So what I am wondering now is how to answer the question in what sense one should make oneself less vulnerable to the sufferings of others if one is going to be able to assist those others. And the nurse or other socially-minded individual may also face a very different temptation: I came across cases of this when I was involved with a well-known organization concerned with helping the disadvantaged in the third-world. Some of our employees had to be almost forced to accept a reasonable wage; they would argue that they should not be taking funds from the desperate: the result of their concern, however, was often the inability to continue, the “burn-out” to which I referred above. I suspect that Augustine would have regarded their attitude as tainted

by a more sophisticated form of pride, or at least a lack of humility: the primary source of vice in his assessment of the matter: “I must be better than my fellow-workers and be willing to do more for less”. But showy virtue is not necessarily virtue, and in this case we may *learn* something from the Stoics (as well as from more obviously Christian sources): when asked how to live the ascetic life, Epictetus told someone to go out into the desert, get very thirsty, take a sip of water, then spit it out – then tell no-one what he had done! I do not recommend this, but Epictetus certainly had a point!

Let me now return to my original question: whether being vulnerable is a good thing. There are several reasons why there are senses in which it is – and these reasons are not necessarily reasons not to help people to be, in certain respects, less vulnerable. The first is that properly understood being vulnerable enables us to understand the vulnerability of others; the second is an expansion of the first: that it enables us to realize that others, and ourselves, are human and no more than human. Only God could be invulnerable – and there is a sense in which the Christian God has chosen not to be: such being a mark for Christians of his extraordinary capacity for love – and so attempts to make ourselves invulnerable, as those of the Stoics, are recognizable as attempts make us out to be divine in a less than adequate sense of the word. Indeed to be divine is precisely what, in a pantheistic world, the Stoics believed themselves to be: as one of them put it, the only difference between Zeus and me is that he lives longer, our quality of life and the kind of life we live being thus identical.

The third advantage of remaining vulnerable is that it enables us to retain the essentially human capacity to regret. Edith Piaf’s song “Je ne regrette rien” (echoed by a British Chancellor of the Exchequer after a disastrous run on the

pound) has happily only a limited point of reference, that is, to events in Piaf's love-life, real or imaginary. For it is part of what Augustine called "this darkness of social life" that we are – and must be if we are to stay honest with ourselves – confronted regularly with choices all of which we would rather not have to make, but one of which we must make – and our possible choices in such situations will normally include the equally regrettable choice of doing nothing at all. But in such situations one does what one can: the disappearance, through hardening and excessive invulnerability, of the power to regret, would indicate not that we have become better people, but that we have developed a carapace, a thick shell round our behavior which would help us lose sight of the necessarily tormenting nature of making moral decisions in cases where we not only may seem to lack the ability to do the right thing, but where we do not even know what the right thing is – not to speak of the correct motivation for doing it.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle identified what he called "equity" as the proper behavior and attitude in specific cases where an equitable decision is the rectification of a just law.¹² And that "just" is important; the law really is just, but it cannot always tell us what to do or how to evaluate in specific cases.¹³ So that although we may be more or less just men and women, we will often be unable to determine how to act justly. The advantage of rules is that they point us in the right direction, not that they always tell us what to do – unless, of course, they are such that we think we have good reason to obey them even if we do not understand why what they prescribe is right. But

¹² *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1137b.

¹³ *Ibid.*

surely that too indicates a situation of which we should rightly and inevitably feel regret.

Finally - at last, some of you may think - I want to ask how these reflections about vulnerability may impinge on what in a sense I should have been discussing all along: the relationship between professional work and the responsibilities of life in the home. Much of what I say at this point will probably seem obvious if not banal, but perhaps there are aspects of the significance of human vulnerability which have largely escaped such practical discussions but are very relevant to them. And although it might seem anachronistic to consider the attitudes of men and women - to a degree - separately in this context, it may rather be a piece of wisdom which, for less than excellent reasons, many of us will not want to have known about. But in practical life not wanting to know things is as important, indeed in many cases, more important - and more dangerous - than mere ignorance. People didn't want to know about Hitler and the Nazis until war was the only moral option; some of us think that not wanting to know the truth about Islam is dangerous in not dissimilar ways.

Be that as it may, I want to return more immediately to the question of minors, of children - and expand somewhat more practically what I have already said. The problem of how to balance children with the demands of professional life can perhaps best be approached by looking at the so-called right of everyone to have a child, in some way or another. For in fact no-one has such a right, though of course it is good to have children. Even so, however, they are not fashion accessories to go with every successful woman; if they were that, they could be discarded more at less at will (as in effect they are more or less in many divorce settlements). Yet if they are human, they

have as much right to be considered as anyone else, which means they will demand sacrifices on the part of others. These sacrifices will affect both parents, but in different ways. For it is especially good for the child to spend a lot of time with its mother in the early years. That will produce strains, but the child cannot just be sacrificed, let alone in effect be discarded.

Far more thought should therefore be given to enabling women to return to the workforce (especially the professional workforce) after their late thirties. Nevertheless, if people are not willing to endure sacrifices in this area, they should not have children. This implies, in my book, that they should neither marry nor treat marriage as some sort of *iurata fornicatio* (legalized fornication), there being little moral difference between marriage and regular fornication when children are deliberately excluded. And similar considerations affect the marriage relationship itself. Unfortunately, I heard recently of a German woman who got divorced because, if single, she could pursue her academic career more apparently successfully - which she managed to achieve, bring now the holder of a prestigious Chair.

One thing I want to avoid in these closing remarks, however, is promoting anything which would seem to require the exclusion of family-oriented women from public life: not only for the obvious reason that they may well have much to contribute, but for wider reasons relating even more fundamentally to the common good; since if such women are active only in the home, they leave the public square open only to anti-family females. Certainly if there had been more family-oriented women in a number of Western legislatures in the last half-century, abortion laws would be far less liberal now than they normally are. For now most women opposed to abortion are compelled to speak from the sidelines while the lawmakers defer to the anti-family women with whom they

normally rub professional shoulders, ignoring other female voices. And as I implied in an earlier part of this talk, hardened women, brutalized by killing their own children, are then able to emerge - to the delight of most of the mass-media - as the voice of modern woman. Sometimes, in seeking to avoid such a false impression, more compassionate women will have to compromise, to take decisions in the management of their lives which they will regret, but the ability to regret is, I argued, one of the virtues of being human, and to suffer it may at times be the only way to contribute to the common good in our apparently orderly but in fact revolutionary contemporary society. Revolutions are not always and obviously violent, though there may be more or less hidden violence, and to attempt to promote killing the unborn - and soon the very young, etc. - is certainly a good deal too violent for my taste already.

Inevitable compromises, regretted decisions: these are all part of the current battle to support the common good. And women are in the front line of the battle: not only because they may suffer in their moral and spiritual lives if they yield to the dominant culture of our age, but because in many of the matters which this conference is invited to consider, they tell the men, directly or indirectly, what to do. Unfortunately, if women in general give up concern for the vulnerable, we can identify many reasons why men will follow suit. Given a chance, as many philosophers have known, humans love to exploit one another, so in thinking about vulnerability we need to look as hard as we can for ways to encourage a culture which inhibits them from doing so. Hobbes certainly got that right. My personal view is that that culture will have to be Christian in spirit if not in name, and that without a God something like the Christian God, human beings will soon realize that the world, as Hobbes

observed, can be expected to be (or soon become) a horrible place, especially for the vulnerable, and for all of us insofar as we are all vulnerable.

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