

THE REVENGE OF CONSCIENCE

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Things are getting worse very quickly now. The list of what we are required to approve is growing ever longer. Consider just the domain of sexual practice. First we were to approve sex before marriage, then without marriage, now against marriage. First with one, then with a series, now with a crowd. First with the other sex, then with the same. First between adults, then between children, then between adults and children. The last item has not been added yet, but will be soon: you can tell from the change in language, just as you can tell the approach of winter from the change in the color of leaves. As any sin passes through its stages from temptation, to toleration, to approval, its name is first euphemized, then avoided, then forgotten. A colleague tells me that some of his fellow legal scholars call child molestation "intergenerational intimacy": that's euphemism. A good-hearted editor tried to talk me out of using the term "sodomy": that's avoidance. My students don't know the word "fornication" at all: that's forgetfulness.

The pattern is repeated in the house of death. First we were to approve of killing unborn babies, then babies in process of birth; next came newborns with physical defects, now newborns in perfect health. Nobel-prize laureate James Watson proposes that parents of newborns be granted a grace period during which they may have their babies killed, and in 1994 a committee of the American Medical Association proposed harvesting organs from some sick babies even before they die. First we were to approve of suicide, then to approve of assisting it. Now we are to approve of a requirement to assist it, for, as Ernest van den Haag has argued, it is "unwarranted" for doctors not to kill patients who seek death. First we were to approve of killing the sick and unconscious, then of killing the conscious and consenting. Now we are to approve of killing the conscious and protesting, for in the United States, doctors starved and dehydrated stroke patient Marjorie Nighbert to death despite her pleading "I'm hungry," "I'm thirsty," "Please feed me," and "I want food." Such cases are only to be expected when food and water are now often classified as optional treatments rather than humane care; we have not long to go before joining the Netherlands, where involuntary euthanasia is common. Dutch physician and author Bert Keizer has described his response when a nursing home resident choked on her food: he shot her full of morphine and waited for her to die. Such a deed by a doctor in the land that resisted the Nazis.

Why do things get worse so fast? Of course we have names for the process, like "collapse," "decay," and "slippery slope." By conjuring images—a stricken house, a gangrenous limb, a sliding talus—they make us feel we understand. Now, I am no enemy to word-pictures, but a civilization is not really a house, a limb, or a heap of rocks; it cannot literally fall in, rot, or skid out from underfoot. Images can only illustrate an explanation; they cannot substitute for one. So why do things get worse so fast? It would be well to know, in case the process can be arrested.

The usual explanation is that conscience is weakened by neglect. Once a wrong is done, the next wrong comes more easily. On this view conscience is mainly a restraint, a resistance, a passive barrier. It doesn't so much drive us on as hold us back, and when persistently attacked, the restraining wall gets thinner and thinner and finally disappears. Often this explanation is combined with another: that conscience comes from culture, that it is built up in us from outside. In this view the heart is malleable. We don't clearly know what is right and wrong, and when our teachers change the lessons, our consciences change their contents. What once we deemed wrong, we deem right; what once we deemed right, we deem wrong.

There is something to these explanations, but neither can account for the sheer dynamism of wickedness—for the fact that we aren't gently wafted into the abyss but violently propel ourselves into it. Nor, as I will show, can either one account for the peculiar quality of our present moral confusion.

I suggest a different explanation. Conscience is not a passive barrier but an active force; though it can hold us back, it can also drive us on. Moreover, conscience comes not from without but from within: though culture can trim the fringes, the core cannot be changed. The reason things get worse so fast must somehow lie not in the weakness of conscience but in its strength, not in its shapelessness but in its shape.

II

Whether paradoxical or not, the view of conscience I defend is nothing new; its roots are ancient. In one of the tragedies of Sophocles, the woman Antigone seeks to give her dead brother a proper burial, but is forbidden by the king because her brother was an enemy of the state. She replies to the tyrant that there is another law higher than the state's, and that she will follow it because of its divine authority. Not even the king may require anyone to violate it. Moreover, it requires not only forbearance from evil but active pursuit of the good: in this case, doing the honors for her brother.

Antigone's claim that this higher law has divine authority can easily be misunderstood, because the Greeks did not have a tradition of verbal revelation. The mythical hero Perseus had never climbed any Mount Sinai; the fabled god Zeus had never announced any Ten Commandments. So, although the law of which Antigone speaks somehow has divine authority, she has not learned it by reading something like a Bible, with moral rules delivered by the gods. Nor is she merely voicing the customs of the tribe—at least not if we are to believe Aristotle, who seems a safer authority on the Greeks than our contemporary skeptics. Instead she seems to be speaking of principles that everyone with a normal mind knows by means of conscience. She seems to be speaking of a law written on the heart—of what philosophers would later call the natural law.

Now by contrast with the pagan Greeks, Jews and Christians do have a tradition of verbal revelation. Moses did climb the mountain, God did announce the commandments. One might think, then, that Jews and Christians wouldn't have a natural law tradition because they wouldn't need it. But just the opposite is true. The idea of a law written on the heart is far stronger and more consistent among Jews, and especially Christians, than it was among the pagans. In fact,

the very phrase "law written on the heart" is biblical; it comes from the New Testament book of Romans. Judaism calls the natural law the Noahide Commandments because of a rabbinic legend that God had given certain general rules to all the descendants of Noah—that is, all human beings—long before he made His special covenant with the descendants of Abraham. In similar fashion, Christianity distinguishes between "general revelation," which every human being receives, and "special revelation," which is transmitted by witnesses and recorded only in the Bible. General revelation makes us aware of God's existence and requirements so that we can't help knowing that we have a problem with sin. Special revelation goes further by telling us how to solve that problem.

The natural law is unconsciously presupposed—even when consciously denied—by modern secular thinkers, too. We can see the presupposition at work whenever we listen in on ethical debate. Consider, for example, the secular ethic of utilitarianism, which holds that the morally right action is always the one that brings about the greatest possible total happiness. Arguments against utilitarianism by other secularists often proceed by showing that the doctrine yields conclusions contrary to our most deeply held moral intuitions. For instance, it isn't hard to imagine circumstances in which murdering an innocent man might make all the others much happier than they were before. Utilitarianism, seeking the greatest possible total happiness, would require us to murder the fellow; nevertheless we don't, because we perceive that murder is plain wrong. So instead of discarding the man, we discard the theory. Here is the point: such an argument against utilitarianism stakes everything on a pre-philosophical intuition about the heinousness of murder. Unless there is a law written on the heart, it is hard to imagine where this intuition comes from.

The best short summary of the traditional, natural law understanding of conscience was given by Thomas Aquinas when he said that the core principles of the moral law are the same for all "both as to rectitude and as to knowledge"—in other words, that they are not only right for all but known to all. Nor is it true, as some suppose, that he was referring only to such formal principles as "good is to be done," for he speaks for the greater part of the tradition when he expressly includes such precepts as "Honor thy father and thy mother," "Thou shalt not kill," and "Thou shalt not steal." These, he says, are matters which "the natural reason of every man, of its own accord and at once, judges to be done or not to be done." To be sure, not every moral principle is part of the core, but all moral principles are at least derived from it, if not by pure deduction (killing is wrong and poison kills, so poisoning is wrong), then with the help of prudence (wrongdoers should be punished, but the appropriate punishment depends on circumstances). Our knowledge of derived principles such as "Rise up before the hoary head" may be weakened by neglect and erased by culture, but our knowledge of the core principles is ineffaceable. These are the laws we can't not know.

Ranged against this view are two others. One simply denies that the core principles are right for all; the other admits they are right for all, but denies they are known to all. The former, of course, is relativism. I call the latter mere moral realism—with emphasis on "mere" because natural law is realistic, too, but more so.

Not much need be said here about relativism. It is not an explanation of our decline, but a symptom of it. The reason it cannot be an explanation is that it finds nothing to explain. To

the question "Why do things get worse so fast?" it can only return "They don't get worse, only different."

Mere moral realism is a much more plausible opponent, because by admitting the moral law it acknowledges the problem. Things are getting worse quickly—plainly because there isn't anything we "can't not know." *Everything* in conscience can be weakened by neglect and erased by culture. Now if mere moral realists are right, then although the problem of moral decline may begin in volition, it dwells in cognition: it may begin as a defect of will, but ends as a defect of knowledge. We may have started by neglecting what we knew, but we have now gone so far that we really don't know it any more. What is the result? That our contemporary ignorance of right and wrong is genuine. We really don't know the truth, but we are honestly searching for it—trying to see on a foggy night—doing the best that we can. In a sense, we are blameless for our deeds, for we don't know any better.

All this sounds persuasive, yet it is precisely what the older tradition, the natural law tradition, denies. We do know better; we are not doing the best we can. The problem of moral decline is volitional, not cognitive; it has little to do with knowledge. By and large we do know right from wrong, but wish we didn't. We only make believe we are searching for truth—so that we can do wrong, condone wrong, or suppress our remorse for having done wrong in the past.

If the traditional view is true, then our decline is owed not to moral ignorance but to moral suppression. We aren't untutored, but "in denial." We don't lack moral knowledge; we hold it down.

III

Offhand it seems as though believing in a law we "can't not know" would make it harder, not easier, to explain why things are so quickly getting worse. If the moral law really is carved on the heart, wouldn't it be hard to ignore? On the other hand, if it is merely penciled in as the mere moral realists say—well!

But this is merely picture thinking again. Carving and penciling are but metaphors, and more than metaphors are necessary to show why the suppression of conscience is more violent and explosive than its mere weakening would be. First let us consider a few facts that ought to arouse our suspicion—facts about the precise kind of moral confusion we suffer, or say we suffer.

Consider this tissue of contradictions: Most who call abortion wrong call it killing. Most who call it killing say it kills a baby. Most who call it killing a baby decline to prohibit it altogether. Most who decline to prohibit it think it should be restricted. More and more people favor restrictions. Yet greater and greater numbers of people have had or have been involved in abortions.

Or this one: Most adults are worried about teenage sex. Yet rather than telling kids to wait until marriage, most tell kids to wait until they are "older," as we are. Most say that premarital sex between consenting adults is a normal expression of natural desires. Yet hardly

any are comfortable telling anyone, especially their own children, how many people they have slept with themselves.

Or this one: Accessories to suicide often write about the act; they produce page after page to show why it is right. Yet a large part of what they write about is guilt. Author George E. Delury, jailed for poisoning and suffocating his wife, says in his written account of the affair that his guilt feelings were so strong they were "almost physical."

As to the first example, if abortion kills a baby then it ought to be banned to everyone; why allow it? But if it doesn't kill a baby it is hard to see why we should be uneasy about it at all; why restrict it? We restrict what we allow because we know it is wrong but don't want to give it up; we feed our hearts scraps in hopes of hushing them, as cooks quiet their kitchen puppies.

As to the second example, sexual promiscuity has exactly the same bad consequences among adults as it has among teenagers. But if it is just an innocent pleasure, then why not talk it up? Swinging is no longer a novelty; the sexual revolution is now gray with age. If shame persists, the only possible explanation is that guilt persists as well.

The third example speaks for itself. Delury calls the very strength of his feelings a proof that they did not express "moral" guilt, merely the "dissonance" resulting from violation of an instinctual block inherited from our primate ancestors. We might paraphrase his theory, "the stronger the guilt, the less it matters."

Clearly, whatever our problem may be, it isn't that conscience is weak. We may be confused, but we aren't confused that way. It isn't that we don't know the truth, but that we tell ourselves something different.

IV

If the law written on the heart can be repressed, then we cannot count on it to restrain us from doing wrong; that much is obvious. I have made the more paradoxical claim that repressing it hurls us into further wrong. Holding conscience down doesn't deprive it of its force; it merely distorts and redirects that force. We are speaking of something less like the erosion of an earthen dike so that it fails to hold the water back, than like the compression of a powerful spring so that it buckles to the side.

Here is how it works. Guilt, guilty knowledge, and guilty feelings are not the same thing; men and women can have the knowledge without the feelings, and they can have the feelings without the fact. Even when suppressed, however, the knowledge of guilt always produces certain objective needs, which make their own demand for satisfaction irrespective of the state of the feelings. These needs include confession, atonement, reconciliation, and justification.

Now when guilt is acknowledged, the guilty deed can be repented so that these four needs can be genuinely satisfied. But when the guilty knowledge is suppressed, they can only be

displaced. That is what generates the impulse to further wrong. Taking the four needs one by one, let's see how this happens.

The need to confess arises from transgression against what we know, at some level, to be truth. I have already commented on the tendency of accessories to suicide to write about their acts. Besides George Delury, who killed his wife, we may mention Timothy E. Quill, who prescribed lethal pills for his patient, and Andrew Solomon, who participated in the death of his mother. Solomon, for instance, writes in the *New Yorker* that "the act of speaking or writing about your involvement is, inevitably, a plea for absolution." Many readers will remember the full-page signature advertisements feminists took out in the early days of the abortion movement, telling the world that they had killed their own unborn children. At first it seems baffling that the sacrament of confession can be inverted to serve the ends of advocacy. Only by recognizing the power of suppressed conscience can this paradox be understood.

The need to atone arises from the knowledge of a debt that must somehow be paid. One would think such knowledge would always lead directly to repentance, but the counselors whom I have interviewed tell a different story. One woman learned during her pregnancy that her husband had been unfaithful to her. He wanted the child, so to punish him for betrayal she had an abortion. The trauma of killing was even greater than the trauma of his treachery, because this time she was to blame. What was her response? She aborted the next child, too; in her words, "I wanted to be able to hate myself more for what I did to the first baby." By trying to atone without repenting, she was driven to repeat the sin.

The need for reconciliation arises from the fact that guilt cuts us off from God and man. Without repentance, intimacy must be simulated precisely by sharing with others in the guilty act. Leo Tolstoy knew this. In *Anna Karenina* there comes a time when the lovers' mutual guiltiness is their only remaining bond. But the phenomenon is hardly restricted to cases of marital infidelity. Andrew Solomon says that he, his brothers, and his father are united by the "weird legacy" of their implication in his mother's death, and quotes a nurse who participated in her own mother's death as telling him, "I know some people will have trouble with my saying this but it was the most intimate time I've ever had with anyone." Herbert Hendin comments in a book on the Dutch affair with euthanasia, "The feeling that participation in death permits an intimacy that they are otherwise unable to achieve permeates euthanasia stories and draws patients and doctors to euthanasia." And no wonder. Violation of a basic human bond is so terrible that the burdened conscience must instantly establish an abnormal one to compensate; the very gravity of the transgression invests the new bond with a sense of profound significance. Naturally some will find it attractive.

The reconciliation need has a public dimension, too. Isolated from the community of moral judgment, transgressors strive to gather a substitute around themselves. They don't sin privately; they recruit. The more ambitious among them go further. Refusing to go to the mountain, they require the mountain to come to them: society must be transformed so that it no longer stands in awful judgment. So it is that they change the laws, infiltrate the schools, and create intrusive social-welfare bureaucracies.

Finally we come to the need for justification, which requires more detailed attention. Unhooked from justice, justification becomes rationalization, which is a more dangerous game than it seems. The problem is that the ordinances written on the heart all hang together. They depend on each other in such a way that we cannot suppress one except by rearranging all the others. A few cases will be sufficient to show how this happens.

Consider sexual promiscuity. The official line is that modern people don't take sex outside marriage seriously any longer; mere moral realists say this is because we no longer realize the wrong of it. I maintain that we do know it is wrong but pretend that we don't. Of course one must be careful to distinguish between the core laws of sex, the ones we can't not know, and the derived ones, which we can not know. For example, though true and reasonable, the superiority of monogamous to polygamous marriage is probably not part of the core. On the other hand, no human society has ever held that the sexual powers may be exercised by anyone with anyone, and the recognized norm is a durable and culturally protected covenant between man and woman with the intention of procreation. Casual shack-ups and one-night stands don't qualify.

Because we can't not know that sex belongs with marriage, when we separate them we cover our guilty knowledge with rationalizations. In any particular culture, particular rationalizations may be just as strongly protected as marriage; the difference is that while the rationalizations vary from culture to culture, the core does not. At least in our culture, such sexual self-deceptions are more common among women than men. I don't think this is because the female conscience is stronger (or weaker) than the male. However, sex outside marriage exposes the woman to greater risk, so whereas the man must fool only his conscience, she must fool both her conscience and her self-interest. If she does insist on doing wrong, she has twice as much reason to rationalize.

One common rationalization is to say "No" while acting "Yes" in order to tell oneself afterward "I didn't go along." William Gairdner reports that according to one rape crisis counselor, many of the women who call her do so not to report that they have been raped, but to ask whether they were raped. If they have to ask, of course, they probably haven't been; they are merely dealing with their ambivalence by throwing the blame for their decisions on their partners. But this is a serious matter. Denial leads to the further wrong of false witness.

Another tactic is inventing private definitions of marriage. Quite a few people "think of themselves as married" although they have no covenant at all; some even fortify the delusion with "moving-in ceremonies" featuring happy words without promises. Unfortunately, people who "think of themselves as married" not only refuse the obligations of real marriage but demand all of its cultural privileges; because rationalization is so much work, they require other people to support them in it. Such demands make the cultural protection of real marriage more difficult.

Yet another ruse is to admit that sex belongs with marriage but to fudge the nature of the connection. By this reasoning I tell myself that sex is okay because I am going to marry my partner, because I want my partner to marry me, or because I have to find out if we could be happily married. An even more dangerous fudge is to divide the form of marriage from its

substance—to say "we don't need promises because we're in love." The implication, of course, is that those who do need promises love impurely; that those who don't marry are more truly married than those who do.

This last rationalization is even more difficult to maintain than most. Love, after all, is a permanent and unqualified commitment to the true good of the other person, and the native tongue of commitment is precisely promises. To work, therefore, this ruse requires another: having deceived oneself about the nature of marriage, one must now deceive oneself about the nature of love. The usual way of doing so is to mix up love with the romantic feelings that characteristically accompany it, and call them "intimacy." If only we have these feelings, we tell ourselves, we may have sex. That is to say, we may have sex—if we feel like it.

Here is where things really become interesting, because if the criterion of being as-good-as-married is sexual feelings, then obviously nobody who has sexual feelings may be prevented from marrying. So homosexuals must also be able to "marry"; their unions, too, should have cultural protection. At this point suppressed conscience strikes another blow, reminding us that marriage is linked with procreation. But now we are in a box. We cannot say "therefore homosexuals cannot marry," because that would strike against the whole teetering structure of rationalizations. Therefore we decree that having been made marriageable, homosexuals must be made procreative; the barren field must seem to bloom. There is, after all, artificial insemination. And there is adoption. So it comes to pass that children are given as a right to those from whom they were once protected as a duty. The normalization of perversion is complete.

V

When ordinary rationalization fails, people revert to other modes of suppression. We often see this when an unmarried young woman becomes pregnant. Suddenly her conscience discovers itself; though she was not ashamed to lift her skirts, she is suddenly ashamed to show her swelling belly. What can she do? Well, she can have an abortion; she can revert to the mode of suppression called "getting rid of the evidence." Once again conscience multiplies transgressions. But she finds that the new transgression is no solution to the old one; in fact now she has something even more difficult to rationalize.

Think what is necessary to justify abortion. Because we can't not know that it is wrong to deliberately kill human beings, there are only four options. We must deny that the act is deliberate, deny that it kills, deny that its victims are human, or deny that wrong must not be done. The last option is literally nonsense. That something must not be done is what it means for it to be wrong; to deny that wrong may not be done is merely to say "wrong is not wrong," or "what must not be done may be done." The first option is hardly promising either. Abortion does not just happen; it must be performed. Its proponents not only admit there is a "choice," they boast of it. As to the second option, if it was ever promising, it is no longer. Millions of women have viewed sonograms of their babies kicking, sucking their thumbs, and turning somersaults; whatever these little ones are, they are busily alive. Even most feminists have given up calling the baby a "blood clot" or describing abortion as the "extraction of menses."

The only option even barely left is number three: to deny the humanity of the victims. It is at this point that the machinery slips out of control. For the only way to make option three work is to ignore biological nature, which tells us that from conception onward the child is as human as you or me (does anyone imagine that a dog is growing in there?)—and invent another criterion of humanity, one that makes it a matter of degree. Some of us must turn out more human, others less. This is a dicey business even for abortionists. It hardly needs to be said that no one has been able to come up with a criterion that makes babies in the womb less human but leaves everyone else as he was; the teeth of the moral gears are too finely set for that.

Consider, for instance, the criteria of "personhood" and "deliberative rationality." According to the former, one is more or less human according to whether he is more or less a person; according to the latter, he is more or less a person according to whether he is more or less able to act with mature and thoughtful purpose. Unborn babies turn out to be killable because they cannot act maturely; they are less than fully persons, and so less than fully human. In fact, they must be killed when the interests of those who are more fully human require it. Therefore, not only may their mothers abort, but it would be wrong to stop the mothers from doing so. But look where else this drives us. Doesn't maturity also fall short among children, teenagers, and many adults? Then aren't they also less than fully persons—and if less than fully persons, then less than fully humans? Clearly so, hence they too must yield to the interests of the more fully human; all that remains is to sort us all out. No, the progression is too extreme! People are not that logical! Ah, but they are more logical than they know; they are only logical slowly. The implication they do not grasp today they may grasp in thirty years; if they do not grasp it even then, their children will. It is happening already. Look around.

So conscience has its revenge. We can't not know the preciousness of human life—therefore, if we tell ourselves that humanity is a matter of degree, we can't help holding those who are more human more precious than those who are less. The urge to justify abortion drives us inexorably to a system of moral castes more pitiless than anything the East has devised. Of course we can fiddle with the grading criteria: consciousness, self-awareness, and contribution to society have been proposed; racial purity has been tried. No such tinkering avails to change the character of our deeds. If we will a caste system, then we shall have one; if we will that some shall have their way, then in time there shall be a nobility of Those Who Have Their Way. All that our fiddling with the criteria achieves is a rearrangement of the castes.

Need we wonder why, then, having started on our babies, we now want to kill our grandparents? Sin ramifies. It is fertile, fissiparous, and parasitic, always in search of new kingdoms to corrupt. It breeds. But just as a virus cannot reproduce except by commandeering the machinery of a cell, sin cannot reproduce except by taking over the machinery of conscience. Not a gear, not a wheel is destroyed, but they are all set turning in different directions than their wont. Evil must rationalize, and that is its weakness. But it can, and that is its strength.

VI

We've seen that although conscience works in everyone, it doesn't restrain everyone. In all of us some of the time, in some of us all of the time, its fearsome energy merely "multiplies

transgressions." Bent backwards by denial, it is more likely to catalyze moral collapse than hold it back.

But conscience is not the only expression of the natural law in human nature. Thomas Aquinas defined law as a form of discipline that compels through fear of punishment. In the case of human law, punishment means suffering the civil consequences of violation; in the case of natural law it means suffering the natural consequences of violation. If I cut myself, I bleed. If I get drunk, I have a hangover. If I sleep with many women, I lose the power to care for anyone, and sow pregnancies, pain, and suspicion.

Unfortunately, the disciplinary effect of natural consequences is diminished in at least two ways. These two diminishers are the main reason why the discipline takes so long, so that the best that can be hoped for in most cultures is a pendulum swing between moral laxity and moral strictness.

The first diminisher is a simple time lag: not every consequence of violating the natural law strikes immediately. Some results make themselves felt only after several generations, and by that time people are so deeply sunk in denial that even more pain is necessary to bring them to their senses. A good example of a long-term consequence is the increase of venereal disease. When I was a boy we all knew about syphilis and gonorrhea, but because of penicillin they were supposed to be on the way out. Today the two horrors are becoming antibiotic-resistant, and AIDS, herpes, chlamydia, genital warts, human papilloma virus, and more than a dozen other sexually transmitted diseases, most of them formerly rare, are ravaging the population. Other long-term consequences of violating the laws of sex are poverty, because single women have no one to help them raise their children; crime, because boys grow into adolescence without a father's influence; and child abuse, because although spouses tend to greet babies with joy, live-ins tend to greet them with jealousy and resentment. Each generation is less able to maintain families than the one before. Truly the iniquities of the fathers—and mothers—are visited upon the children and the children's children to the third and fourth generation.

The second diminisher comes from us: "Dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good," we exert our ingenuity to escape from the natural consequences of breaking the natural law. Not all social practices have this effect. For instance, threatening drunk drivers with legal penalties supplements the discipline of natural consequences rather than undermining it. Nor is the effect always intended. We don't devise social insurance programs in order to encourage improvidence, though they do have this result. It isn't even always wrong. It would be abominable to refuse treatment to a lifelong smoker with emphysema, even though he may have been buoyed in his habit by the confidence that the doctors would save him. But to act with the *purpose* of compensating for immorality is always wrong, as when we set up secondary school clinics to dispense pills and condoms to teenagers.

Here is an axiom: We cannot alter human nature, physical, emotional, or spiritual. A corollary is that no matter how cleverly devised, our contrivances never do succeed in canceling out the natural consequences of breaking the natural law. At best they delay them, and for several reasons they can even make them worse. In the first place they alter incentives: People with ready access to pills and condoms see less reason to be abstinent. In the second place they

encourage wishful thinking: Most people grossly exaggerate their effectiveness in preventing disease and pregnancy and completely ignore the risks. In the third place they reverse the force of example: Before long the practice of abstinence erodes even among people who don't take precautions. Finally they transform thought: Members of the contraceptive culture think liberty from the natural consequences of their decisions is somehow owed to them.

There comes a time when even the law shares their view. In *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, which reauthorized the private use of lethal violence against life in the womb, the Supreme Court admitted that its original abortion ruling might have been wrong, but upheld it anyway. As it explained, "For two decades of economic and social developments, people have organized their intimate relationships and made choices that define their views of themselves and their places in society in reliance on the availability of abortion in the event that contraception should fail. . . . An entire generation has come of age free to assume [this] concept of liberty." To put the thought more simply, what we did has separated sex from responsibility for resulting life for so long that to change the rules on people now would be unfair.

Naught avails; our efforts to thwart the law of natural consequences merely make the penalty more crushing when it comes. The only question is whether our culture will be able to survive the return stroke of the piston.

To survive what is bearing down on us, we must learn four hard lessons: to acknowledge the natural law as a true and universal morality; to be on guard against our own attempts to overwrite it with new laws that are really rationalizations for wrong; to fear the natural consequences of its violation, recognizing their inexorability; and to forbear from all further attempts to compensate for immorality, returning on the path that brought us to this place.

Unfortunately, the condition of human beings since before recorded history is that we don't want to learn hard lessons. We would rather remain in denial. What power can break through such a barrier?

The only Power that ever has. Thomas Aquinas writes that when a nation suffers tyranny, those who enthroned the tyrant may first try to remove him, then call upon the emperor for help. When these human means fail, they should consider their sins and pray. We are now so thoroughly under the tyranny of our vices that it would be difficult for us to recognize an external tyrant at all. By our own hands we enthroned them: our strength no longer suffices for their removal: they have suspended the senate of right reason and the assembly of the virtues: the emperor, our will, is held hostage: and it is time to pray.

Nothing new can be written on the heart, but nothing needs to be; all we need is the grace of God to see what is already there. We don't want to read the letters, because they burn; but they do burn, so at last we must read them. This is why the nation can repent. This is why the plague can be arrested. This is why the culture of death can be redeemed. "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before thee . . . a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise."