

The Myth of the Right to Life - Part I

By Sam Vaknin

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I. The Right to Life

Generations of malleable Israeli children are brought up on the story of the misnamed Jewish settlement Tel-Hai ("Mount of Life"), Israel's Alamo. There, among the picturesque valleys of the Galilee, a one-armed hero named Joseph Trumpeldor is said to have died, eight decades ago, from an Arab stray bullet, mumbling: "It is good to die for our country." Judaism is dubbed "A Teaching of Life" - but it would seem that the sanctity of life can and does take a back seat to some overriding values.

The right to life - at least of human beings - is a rarely questioned fundamental moral principle. In Western cultures, it is assumed to be inalienable and indivisible (i.e., monolithic). Yet, it is neither. Even if we accept the axiomatic - and therefore arbitrary - source of this right, we are still faced with intractable dilemmas. All said, the right to life may be nothing more than a cultural construct, dependent on social mores, historical contexts, and exegetic systems.

Rights - whether moral or legal - impose obligations or duties on third parties towards the right-holder. One has a right AGAINST other people and thus can prescribe to them certain obligatory behaviours and proscribe certain acts or omissions. Rights and duties are two sides of the same Janus-like ethical coin.

This duality confuses people. They often erroneously identify rights with their attendant duties or obligations, with the morally decent, or even with the morally permissible. One's rights inform other people how they MUST behave towards one - not how they SHOULD or OUGHT to act morally. Moral behaviour is not dependent on the existence of a right. Obligations are.

To complicate matters further, many apparently simple and straightforward rights are amalgams of more basic moral or legal principles. To treat such rights as unities is to mistreat them.

Take the right to life. It is a compendium of no less than eight distinct rights: the right to be brought to life, the right to be born, the right to have one's life maintained, the right not to be killed, the right to have one's life saved, the right to save one's life (wrongly reduced to the right to self-defence), the right to terminate one's life, and the right to have one's life terminated.

None of these rights is self-evident, or unambiguous, or universal, or immutable, or automatically applicable. It is safe to say, therefore, that these rights are not primary as hitherto believed - but derivative.

The Right to be Brought to Life

In most moral systems - including all major religions and Western legal methodologies - it is life that gives rise to rights. The dead have rights only because of the existence of the living. Where there is no life - there are no rights. Stones have no rights (though many animists would find this statement abhorrent).

Hence the vitriolic debate about cloning which involves denuding an unfertilized egg of its nucleus. Is there life in an egg or a sperm cell?

That something exists, does not necessarily imply that it harbors life. Sand exists and it is inanimate. But what about things that exist and have the potential to develop life? No one disputes the existence of eggs and sperms - or their capacity to grow alive.

Is the potential to be alive a legitimate source of rights? Does the egg have any rights, or, at the very least, the right to be brought to life (the right to become or to be) and thus to acquire rights? The much trumpeted right to acquire life pertains to an entity which exists but is not alive - an egg. It is, therefore, an unprecedented kind of right. Had such a right existed, it would have implied an obligation or duty to give life to the unborn and the not yet conceived.

Clearly, life manifests, at the earliest, when an egg and a sperm unite at the moment of fertilization. Life is not a potential - it is a process triggered by an event. An unfertilized egg is neither a process - nor an event. It does not even possess the potential to become alive unless and until it is fertilized.

The potential to become alive is not the ontological equivalent of actually being alive. A potential life cannot give rise to rights and obligations. The transition from potential to being is not trivial, nor is it automatic, or inevitable, or independent of context. Atoms of various elements have the potential to become an egg (or, for that matter, a human being) - yet no one would claim that they ARE an egg (or a human being), or that they should be treated as such (i.e., with the same rights and obligations).

The Right to be Born

While the right to be brought to life deals with potentials - the right to be born deals with actualities. When one or two adults voluntarily cause an egg to be fertilized by a sperm cell with the explicit intent and purpose of creating another life - the right to be born crystallizes. The voluntary and premeditated action of said adults amounts to a contract with the embryo - or rather, with society which stands in for the embryo.

Henceforth, the embryo acquires the entire panoply of human rights: the right to be born, to be fed, sheltered, to be emotionally nurtured, to get an education, and so on.

But what if the fertilization was either involuntary (rape) or unintentional ("accidental")

pregnancy)?

Is the embryo's successful acquisition of rights dependent upon the nature of the conception? We deny criminals their loot as "fruits of the poisoned tree". Why not deny an embryo his life if it is the outcome of a crime? The conventional response - that the embryo did not commit the crime or conspire in it - is inadequate. We would deny the poisoned fruits of crime to innocent bystanders as well. Would we allow a passerby to freely spend cash thrown out of an escape vehicle following a robbery?

Even if we agree that the embryo has a right to be kept alive - this right cannot be held against his violated mother. It cannot oblige her to harbor this patently unwanted embryo. If it could survive outside the womb, this would have solved the moral dilemma. But it is dubious - to say the least - that it has a right to go on using the mother's body, or resources, or to burden her in any way in order to sustain its own life.

Sam Vaknin is the author of Malignant Self Love - Narcissism Revisited and After the Rain - How the West Lost the East. He is a columnist for Central Europe Review, PopMatters, and eBookWeb , a United Press International (UPI) Senior Business Correspondent, and the editor of mental health and Central East Europe categories in The Open Directory Bellaonline, and Suite101 . Visit Sam's Web site at <http://samvak.tripod.com>

The 10 Myths of Successful Selling

By John Mitchell

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Myth #1 You should close early and often

Myth #2 Sell features to get a higher price

Myth #3 There's no methodology to selling - it's pure art

Myth #4 Objections are a sign of customer interest

Myth #5 Open questions are better than closed questions

Myth #6 You can't teach a person to sell

Myth #7 You have to understand the difference between wants and needs

Myth #8 Great products sell themselves

Myth #9 Making a benefit statement is the best way to open a sales call

Myth #10 All customers make up their minds in the first 4 minutes

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John Mitchell is President and CEO of Inclusive, a company providing sales and marketing outsourcing in the UK and USA. He was a top performer in IBM sales for 5 consecutive years; Chief Marketing Officer of a Fortune 500 company; and CEO of a NASDAQ listed consulting company. John has written for the London Economist and has been guest lecturer at NYU, London Business School and Swiss Banking School.

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