

Feature Article: JAF4376

WHAT IF SUSAN COULDN'T SING? IDENTIFYING AND AVOIDING BAD PRO-LIFE ARGUMENTS

by Michael Spencer

This article first appeared in the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 37, number 06 (2014). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>.

On April 11, 2009, an obscure, frumpy, middle-aged Scottish woman appeared as a contestant on the TV program *Britain's Got Talent*. Susan Boyle marched nervously onto the stage before a panel of cynical judges and a live, mocking audience. As she prepared to sing her rendition of "I Dreamed a Dream" from *Les Misérables*, the camera scanned the audience, focusing briefly on one haughty young woman whose snickering face epitomized the contemptuous mood of many in attendance. This was Susan in the lion's den.

But then the music played, and with the first golden lyric from her mouth, this ordinary woman astounded the audience, silencing those who had prejudged her. Indeed, Susan could sing. Afterward, a shell-shocked judge, Piers Morgan, said, "Without a doubt, that was the biggest surprise I have had in three years." In that moment, Susan Boyle became a household name and an international sensation. All of a sudden, the world loved her, or so it seemed.

So what does any of this have to do with abortion? Actually, quite a lot. The cruel treatment Susan received raises a crucial question at the heart of the abortion debate: "What makes humans valuable?" Are we valuable because of what we can do (because we can sing?), or simply by virtue of the kind of thing we are? Many, including our Supreme Court, make the same mistake with respect to determining the value of the unborn that the audience made in determining the value of Susan Boyle: they confuse human value with human function. Instead of cherishing unborn human beings for the

kind of thing they are—full-fledged members of the human community—defenders of abortion value them only for what they have achieved (i.e., self-awareness, viability, etc.).

HUMAN VALUE

A well-defined line has been drawn in our cultural sand over the ontological nature and value of the embryo. Facing off at this line of demarcation are two diametrically opposed ways of viewing and valuing human beings. Popularly referred to as the pro-life view and the “pro-choice” view, philosopher Christopher Kaczor aptly refers to these contrary positions as the “endowment” and “performance” accounts.¹

The endowment account (the pro-life position), as Kaczor points out, teaches that “beings with endowments that orient them towards moral values, such as rationality, autonomy, and respect, thereby merit inclusion as members of the moral community.”² In other words, every human being, regardless of one’s utility or functional ability, has inherent moral worth simply by virtue of being a member of the human species. This view is nondiscriminating, inclusive, and tolerant. Our Founding Fathers recognized these God-given endowments and described them as the “self-evident” and unshakable foundation for human equality, motivating them to declare, “All men are created equal, and are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights” —most notably, the right to life.

Standing opposed to this position is the performance account (the abortion choice position), which insists that only certain human beings deserve respect and dignity, and only if and when they are possessed of specific subjective characteristics or functional abilities. According to this view, human value or worth is not intrinsic or “hard-wired” but rather is determined by one’s usefulness or desirability to others. The prejudicial malignancy of this view was subtly displayed by the audience on *Britain’s Got Talent*, but is thoroughly metastasized in elective abortion. The flaws in this view are many, but let me highlight two of them.

First, advocates of the performance approach cannot tell us why their chosen test for inclusion in the human community is value giving. Some of the favored contenders for determining human worth or personhood rights include self-awareness, rationality, sentience, viability, and “wantedness.” However, those who appeal to these tests for inclusion are incapable of offering compelling reasons to accept their preferred characteristic or attribute as the one that should be embraced by all others.

For instance, Australian philosopher and professor of bioethics at Princeton University, Peter Singer, asserts, “Human babies are not born self-aware, or capable of

grasping that they exist over time. They are not persons....The life of a newborn is of less value than the life of a pig, a dog, or a chimpanzee.”³ But why self-awareness? Why not something else, like viability or sentience?

This approach is tantamount to judging a beauty pageant where one’s beauty is in the eye of the beholder. One judge prefers blondes, another brunettes, but neither is capable of providing persuasive scientific reasons or sound philosophical arguments for why their personal preference should crown the queen. This whimsical approach may be sufficient for picking a beauty queen, but it is hardly an objective or morally responsible method for determining who should enjoy legal protection and who should be a candidate for the dumpster.

It is difficult to miss the presumption of Peter Singer and others who with him claim to know with certitude by which subjectively chosen “standard” we should rank human value. Regardless of the attribute posited, the moral softness of any chosen attribute (e.g., “self-awareness”) is laid bare by the fact that none is compelling enough to create a consensus among fellow champions of this view. If they are incapable of convincing one another, why should we be convinced?

Second, the performance account is elitist and intolerant. These are fighting words, to be sure, but it is difficult to deny their veracity. Slavery and racial segregation are pockmarks on our nation’s history. Today almost every apparent form of bigotry is condemned in the strongest possible terms. However, it seems much of this expressed indignation is precariously grounded, since the same thinking that once put blacks in leg irons now puts unborn children in garbage disposals. Like those who once viewed the black man as a “lesser human” simply because of his skin color, many today view unborn children with the same disdain simply because they do not function at the “acceptable” level for inclusion in the human community. Many who congratulate themselves for having moved beyond the bigotry of slavery now conveniently ignore or even defend the dismemberment, disembowelment, and decapitation of weak and vulnerable children in the name of “choice” simply because they do not measure up to the subjective test(s) the strong and powerful have arbitrarily established for them. This is hardly a picture of inclusivity or tolerance.

All of this demonstrates the fact that every generation has the astonishing ability to be repulsed by the moral crimes of those who came before them, while at the same time repeating those same offenses. Many nations have a long history of defining entire classes of people out of existence simply because they do not pass someone’s arbitrary test.

The performance tests are utterly incapable of providing a basis for human equality, since they are nothing more than mutable measuring sticks for calculating

human worth. Self-awareness, for example, does not come to every human being in the same degree or at the same time. As a result, Kaczor points out that the performance view not only divides us against one another but also against ourselves.⁴ After all, if our dignity is based on self-awareness, which comes in varying degrees, then the more or less I have of it, the more or less valuable I am judged to be. Furthermore, self-awareness is not a permanent condition, as it comes and goes depending on one's circumstances.

INTOLERANT TESTS

The minute society divides the room, or the womb, by subjective and mutable tests for consideration in the human community such as size, extent of development, or degree of dependency, the table legs are kicked out from under human equality, and innocent people are targeted for death. The ovens of Auschwitz and the American slave trade serve as our witnesses and so does elective abortion.

Our opponents often take offense at such comparisons, but the parallels are inescapable. Although those of us who subscribe to the endowment approach are routinely portrayed in the media and in Hollywood films as intolerant and hateful, the opposite is true. It is our view, not theirs, that provides the moral and philosophical framework for human equality. Their view put innocent men, women, and children in leg irons; our view let them out.

The frailty of the performance or functionalist view and its inability to justify the practice of abortion is evident. Unfortunately, however, it is not just defenders of abortion who make the mistake of confusing human function with human value; sometimes well-meaning pro-lifers do, too.

For example, consider the extremely popular pro-life defense, "Abortion is bad because we might abort the next Einstein or the person who might find a cure for cancer." The late conservative columnist Joseph Sobran once wrote, "After tens of millions of [abortion] 'procedures,' has America lost anything? Another Edison perhaps? A Gershwin? A Babe Ruth? A Duke Ellington? As it is, we will never know what abortion has cost us all." In other words, abortion is bad because we might abort someone who could benefit us.

To be fair, Sobran makes a good point: abortion has undoubtedly deprived us of countless intelligent and talented individuals who would have made our lives better with new inventions and entertaining home runs. However, abortion is not a moral injustice primarily because of what it costs us but because of what it costs those who are aborted. As Life Training Institute Vice President, Jay Watts, points out, "While there

are many things wrong with abortion, abortion is fundamentally wrong because it unjustly ends the life of innocent human beings.”

Pro-lifers who employ this line of defense become guilty of picking the philosophically empty pockets of the abortion-choice crowd that says only certain people matter and only if they benefit society in some meaningful way. This is their position, not ours. When human value is measured against the highly praised functional abilities of a Gershwin or some guy who hits homers, the unborn child loses—and, yes, so does all of society.

Whether those destroyed by abortion would have lived to become future inventors or merely future competitors in the Special Olympics is irrelevant. The pro-life position is tolerant and inclusive: Edison counts, and so does the embryo with an extra chromosome.

Arguing as Sobran does is not only philosophically weak but also tactically risky, since it invites our abortion-choice opponent to counterpunch with, “Sure, we might abort the next Gershwin, but abortion is a societal good because we might also abort the next Hitler. That would be a good thing, right?” Now we’re at an impasse. When defending innocent human lives against abortion, the best intentions aren’t enough: we need the best arguments.

AVOIDING BAD ARGUMENTS

Those who initially scorned Susan Boyle soon after congratulated themselves for their speedy character development. Days after her appearance, Piers Morgan confessed, “I think we owe her an apology because it was an amazing performance. As I said, we were all laughing at her when she started” (*CBS News*, April 17, 2009). Mr. Morgan has strained out a gnat and swallowed a camel. The apology owed Susan is not for wrongly assuming she couldn’t sing. It is for thinking she’s only valuable because she can sing. But what if Susan couldn’t sing? Would the mocking she endured have been justified in such a case?

Sadly, pop culture’s love for Susan Boyle is only skin-deep. Like a circus animal, she had to perform for us in order to earn our respect. She had to prove her value by entertaining us. This is precisely how our courts, and many in our society, treat unborn children. They are valuable only if we want them or if they might find a cure for what ails us. But if we are going to insist on confusing one’s value with one’s function, why stop at abortion? What prevents us from applying this same thinking to those outside of the womb who can’t sing or march to our drum? It’s time to move beyond the puerile

thinking of seventh grade and start valuing human beings for what they are and not what they can do.

With surgical skill, British journalist Tanya Gold took a scalpel to the hearts of many when she asked, “Is Susan Boyle ugly? Or are we?”⁵ As history teaches, ugly worldviews have ugly consequences. Susan Boyle and unborn children are both beautiful and valuable simply because they share a common human nature. As pro-life apologists, let’s center our message here.

All men are created equal, but all arguments are not. The unborn are worthy of life and of our very best arguments, so let’s not make the other side’s job easier by pirating from their defective worldview in order to defend ours. Given the fact that so much rests on our ability to argue well on their behalf, we do well to advance our most persuasive arguments and to avoid the bad ones. Granting the functionalist premises of our opponents will not make our case or refute theirs.

Michael Spencer is the Midwest director of training for Life Training Institute, an organization that equips Christians and pro-life advocates to make a persuasive case for life in the marketplace of ideas.

NOTES

- 1 Christopher Kaczor, *The Ethics of Abortion* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 93.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 160–61.
- 4 Kaczor, *The Ethics of Abortion*, 93.
- 5 Tanya Gold, “It Wasn’t Singer Susan Boyle Who Was Ugly on Britain’s Got Talent as Much As Our Reaction to Her,” *The Guardian*, April 15, 2009.