

# We Are All Gods

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ABSTRACT: This paper outlines the concept of dimensional anthropology, which maintains that the three main dimensions of reality as it is inhabited by human beings are: (1) the vertical axis [God and nature], (2) the horizontal plane [society], and (3) individual selfhood in time. This schema is used to classify important thinkers, describe political structures, interpret modern culture, and analyze the abortion debate. Sin is, at root, the refusal of human beings to inhabit these dimensions in their complexity and richness; sin is an artificial narrowing of human consciousness that overemphasizes a particular dimension. Slavery overemphasized the vertical axis, Marxism the horizontal plane, abortion the role of individual autonomy. The paradox revealed by dimensional anthropology is that the pro-choice position is both too big and too small at the same time; it puffs up the individual to god-like status while shrinking the circumference of moral concern down to narcissism.

THERE ARE THREE MAIN DIMENSIONS OF REALITY as it is inhabited by human beings. There is the *vertical* axis of God and nature, traditionally called the Great Chain of Being, the *horizontal* plane of human social relations and individual human selfhood in time. In higher education, the dimensions are studied in various fields. The vertical axis is studied in such disciplines as physics, geology, chemistry, biology, zoology, anthropology, and religion. Applied fields include engineering, medicine, and sacred ministry. The horizontal plane is studied in areas such as sociology, political science, criminal justice, and economics. Its applied fields include social work, law, business, and education. The personal dimension is studied in disciplines like psychology, philosophy, and literature. The applied fields here include counseling and creative writing.

This outline is, of course, highly simplified and schematic. In practice, many fields consider multiple dimensions at the same time. History, for

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example, is hard to place in a cubby hole precisely because it is so complex. The dimensions named here are fields within reality that can also be described through the use of clusters of words. The vertical axis evokes words such as *hierarchy, monarchy, spirit and matter, divine law and natural law, master and slave, love of God, the eternal and the temporal, natural evil*. The horizontal plane evokes words such as *democracy, diversity, equality, solidarity, a mob mentality and scape-goating, love of neighbor, moral evil*. The trajectory of individual selfhood evokes words such as *inwardness, individualism, imagination, free will, narcissism, autonomy, love of self, growth in virtue, temptation to (individual) evil*.

These lists are not exhaustive, of course, just suggestive. “Dimensional anthropology” as a concept is simply a way of focusing our attention persistently on the idea that human personhood unfolds at the dynamic intersection of these dimensions. Personhood, looked at in this way, functions more like a verb rather than a noun. Personhood so considered is an event, a process, a trajectory, within the ever-flowing river of time.

Dimensional anthropology is not my original idea, of course. This is a summary of ideas that are part of the Western intellectual tradition. The Bible refers to the created world and to the love of God, self, and neighbor. The theological tradition flowing out of the Bible contains many reflections on these dimensions. The philosophical works of Plato and Aristotle also contain such thoughts. They have set the agenda for philosophical thinking for two millennia. It has been common to speak, in the Western tradition, of human beings in terms of body, soul, and spirit. If we add in the social plane, then we have a more complete picture. In our time, references to individuals, society, nature, and God form the warp and woof of thousands of books and essays. Martin Luther King Jr.’s sermon “The Dimensions of a Complete Life” is one example of this. He referred to the height of life, which is the person’s relationship with God, the length of life, which is the person’s journey through time, and the breadth of life, which is the person’s set of social relationships. On a high philosophical level, we might consider the writings of Eric Voegelin. They use dimensional anthropology as a core concept, with *God, nature, society, and man* as the key terms. Philosopher and literary critic Kenneth Burke also employed dimensional anthropology in his analysis of a “grammar of motives” (vertical), a “rhetoric of motives” (social), and a “symbolic of motives” (individual experience). There is also the recent work of theological

anthropology by David Kelsey entitled *Eccentric Existence*.<sup>1</sup> Anyone who looks at the table of contents of that lengthy book will clearly see that the three dimensions that I have been summarizing are the structuring principle of the vision. Behind all of these recent authors we can hear an echo of Kierkegaard's three spheres of existence, the aesthetic (individual), the ethical (social), and the religious (vertical).

I have found dimensional anthropology to be a very fruitful way of interpreting the world of thought and the so-called "real world" of human behavior. I can elucidate this point by asking this question: What can one do with dimensional anthropology?

*Interpreting particular thinkers.* Thomas Aquinas, for example, is commonly thought of as a vertical axis thinker by his emphasis on the hybrid nature of human beings, who exist in between God and nature. This is certainly an emphasis in Thomas, though he was very aware of all of the dimensions. His *Summa theologiae* begins with God and creation, considers the human person psychologically, and treats the individual and social virtues very extensively. Scientific thinkers such as Copernicus, Newton, Darwin, and Einstein have attempted to improve our knowledge of the lower part of the vertical axis, which represents the cosmos outside of human personhood. Karl Marx is clearly a horizontal plane thinker who believes that he knows how social problems can be solved. More recently, René Girard has put forward a vision of social psychology that views the modern notion of "autonomy" as an illusion.<sup>2</sup> In reality, Girard argues, we are products of our social environment through the mechanisms of mimetic desire. Some thinkers focus on individual selfhood, such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud. Twentieth-century psychology, in general, tends to be very individualistic in the wake of Freud. This trend has prompted some authors to attempt to correct that perceived overemphasis by advocating "social constructivism." In *Feminism and Christian Ethics*, for instance, Susan Parsons attempts to survey the diverse terrain of feminist thought.<sup>3</sup> She employs three categories to describe the main

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<sup>1</sup> David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Susan Parsons, *Feminism and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996).

possibilities that feminists have explored: the liberal paradigm, which emphasizes individual rights, the social constructivist paradigm, and the naturalist paradigm, which finds “natural” differences between men and women. My overall point here is that the dimensions of reality are structuring principles for human thought, along the lines of the parable of the blind men and the elephant.

*Describing political principles: monarchy, democracy, individual rights.* When we reflect on possible schemes for organizing the political life of human beings, there are three main possibilities that present themselves. There is monarchy, which is a vertical axis structuring principle. Power flows from the top down. In Western culture, the age of monarchy gave way to the age of democracy in the wake of the American and French revolutions. The *Roe v. Wade* decision, in my view, sought to accomplish another major revolution in the political order by lifting up individual selfhood as a trump card sort of principle, while demoting democracy to a secondary level by claiming that it is simply a mask for the majority tyrannically to impose its will on a minority.

*Interpreting modern culture.* One can use dimensional anthropology to describe various possibilities that are open to people within modern culture. Some people subscribe to some form of scientific reductionism, which maintains that the lower part of the vertical axis is the sum total of reality. Some people are fundamentalists. This approach arises out of an attempt to ascend the vertical axis and claim that one has a sure grasp on the will of God. One then descends down to the world to denounce and/or kill those whom one regards as infidels, as the 9/11 hijackers did, or as the killers of abortion doctor do. Another option is to overemphasize the horizontal plane and adopt a collectivist ideology such as Nazism, Stalinism, or Serbian nationalism. For collectivists, the lives of individuals have no dignity and value that must be respected and protected. The other main possibility, which is particularly popular in our time, is to overemphasize individualism. Here, the individual self is presumed to be an isolated monad, for whom relationships with others can either be hedonistic benefits or annoying constraints on one’s private freedoms.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For an expanded version of this cultural analysis, see Charles Bellinger, *The Trinitarian Self: The Key to the Puzzle of Violence* (Eugene OR: Pickwick, 2008).

*Analyzing the abortion debate.* Dimensional anthropology is also useful in analyzing the abortion debate. People on both sides of the debate tend to frame their arguments as attacks on tyranny. The pro-choice side says that laws restricting access to abortion tyrannically impose the moral and religious beliefs of some people on other people who do not share those beliefs. Abortion rights are thus demanded by the ideal of personal liberty. The pro-life side believes that the practice of abortion is a tyrannical killing of unborn children. Abortion is often connected in pro-life rhetoric with the slaughter of the innocents by Herod as well as with slavery and with Nazism.<sup>5</sup> This observation – that both sides see themselves as true Americans, advancing the cause of freedom and justice – goes a long way toward explaining why this debate is so heated and apparently so intractable. The unclarity of the concept of tyranny in American political thought can be blamed for this situation, if one does not blame the robust self-righteousness that shapes the thinking of most people most of the time.<sup>6</sup> People always want to believe that they are on the side of good and their opponents on the side of evil. The use of rights language by advocates on both sides powerfully confirms the validity of this observation.<sup>7</sup> Rights language is the favorite rhetorical weapon of people who seek to convince themselves and others that tyranny is *over there*, not inside of *us*, as when someone thinks: “I am in favor of rights and freedom; those people over there are the nasty ones who oppose freedom.”

To notice that people on both sides of the debate see themselves as struggling against tyranny raises the question: Why do they interpret tyranny in the way that they do? This is where dimensional anthropology is very enlightening. The pro-choice position, as a philosophical phenomenon, is usually expressed as a plea for individual rights, played as a trump card that overwhelms everything else. But to someone who does not subscribe to that position and views it from the outside, it is clear that the pro-choice worldview is unbalanced, in that it overemphasizes the individual selfhood dimension of

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<sup>5</sup> See James Burtchaell, *Rachel Weeping: The Case Against Abortion* (San Francisco CA: Harper & Row, 1984) and William Brennan, *Dehumanizing the Vulnerable: When Word Games Take Lives* (Toronto ON: Life Cycle Books, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Charles Bellinger, *The Joker Is Satan, and So Are We* (Fort Worth TX: Churchyard Books, 2010), ch. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Ann Glendon, *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse* (New York NY: Free Press, 1991).

reality.<sup>8</sup> This overemphasis leads to a predictable pattern of thought that is seen over and over again in pro-choice rhetoric. Selfhood is lifted up while the other dimensions are seen as threats. This accounts for the common idea that “nature,” in the sense of the natural fertility of a woman’s body, is a source of slavery that must be overcome through the technology of contraception and abortion. Recall, for instance, John Wilcox’s insightful essay “Nature as Demonic in Thomson’s Defense of Abortion.”<sup>9</sup> By labeling the fetus as a “mass of cells” the pro-choice view is firmly placing it within nature and asserting the power of human agents to dominate and control nature when it disturbs our plans and goals in life.

Turning from the lower part of the vertical axis to the horizontal plane, we can see that the pro-choice position must fend off society because other people are seen primarily as threats rather than as helpful allies. The *other people* are always chomping at the bit to *impose* their beliefs on the isolated individual, thereby depriving the self of its liberties. And, of course, the historical background of the pro-choice way of thinking is the broad cultural trend away from religious notions of God as Creator. This cultural development has been described by thinkers such as Martin Buber and Eric Voegelin as the “eclipse of God” and the “eclipse of reason.”<sup>10</sup> Hence, the pro-choice position views tyranny in the way that it does because it arises out of a way of inhabiting the dimensions of reality that sees nature as a threat, other people as tyrannical, and God as absent. Instead of the original complexity of the dimensions, the self is reduced to a tiny dot that sees the exercise of its own choice-making powers in the present moment in time to be the sum total of reality.<sup>11</sup> The self is God in

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Feminism Without Illusions: A Critique of Individualism* (Chapel Hill NC: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> John John Wilcox, “Nature as Demonic in Thomson’s Defense of Abortion” in *The Ethics of Abortion: Pro Life vs. Pro-Choice*, 3rd ed, ed. Robert Baird and Stuart Rosenbaum (Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 2001), pp. 257-71.

<sup>10</sup> See Martin Buber, *The Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation between Religion and Philosophy* (Atlantic Highlands NJ: Humanities Press International, 1988 [1952]) and Eric Voegelin, *Modernity without Restraint* (Columbia MO: Univ. of Missouri Press, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> See Pierre Manent, *The City of Man*, translated by Mark A. LePain (Princeton NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000), p. 189: “One is tempted to say that with Kant’s moral philosophy, modern man has achieved clarity on what he had been seeking since the beginning of the modern movement. At last he can think what until that time he could only will: he can now think that he is neither a creature of God nor a part of Nature, that

a world of its own making.<sup>12</sup>

René Girard has argued that when two opposing camps conflict with each other, their mimetic struggle leads them to become enemy twins who are identical to each other. While this is true in many cases, I think that Girard himself would agree with my contention that this is not the case with regard to the abortion debate. When we turn to ask why pro-life advocates interpret tyranny in the way that they do, we must give a very different sort of answer than we did with the pro-choice side. The pro-choice position suffers from a lack of balance that results from what Kenneth Burke would call an intense narrowing of the circumference of vision.<sup>13</sup> The pro-life side is arguing for a vision of anthropological health that lifts up balance and complexity as the ideal.<sup>14</sup> A healthy sense of selfhood, from the pro-life perspective, synthesizes the dimensions in a creative way. Human beings ought to grow in psychological and moral maturity as they journey through life. Human beings ought to live in harmony with nature, both within and beyond their own bodies. Human beings ought to love their neighbors and seek non-violent solutions to life's difficulties. Human beings are empowered to do all of these things when they draw their spiritual sustenance from God, their Creator, in whom they live and move and have their being. The best pro-life advocacy, in my opinion, will always express itself in a way that lifts up openness to living complexly as the ultimate ideal.

These observations bring out the falseness of depictions of the abortion debate that would simplistically claim that it is nothing but a struggle between those who favor individual rights and those who favor democracy. The falseness can be seen when we realize that if *Roe v. Wade* were overturned and if a particular state were to vote to legalize abortion, it is not the case that pro-life advocates would throw up their hands and see their cause as being over. The pro-life vision is rooted in concern for anthropological health, not in a concern for a particular political principle or a particular legal environment.

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he is in short born of himself, the child of his own liberty.”

<sup>12</sup> David Hart, *In the Aftermath: Provocations and Laments* (Grand Rapids MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009), ch. 1. See also his *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives and A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley CA: Univ. of California Press, 1969), pp. 77 ff.

<sup>14</sup> Sidney Callahan, “Abortion and the Sexual Agenda” in Baird and Rosenbaum is a plea for complexity, pp. 167-78.

Even if abortion were illegal, pro-life advocates would realize that they still have much amount of work to do to win over hearts and minds to a truthful understanding of anthropological and moral health, so that women will not seek illegal abortions and the men in their lives would not pressure them to do so.

*Making sense of violence.* In my view, the deepest root of human violence is resistance to the possibility of psychological and spiritual growth. We all have the potential to grow as persons, but we resist that possibility. The violence that we do to others is our way of reinforcing our immaturity.<sup>15</sup> Dimensional anthropology allows us to refine this perspective by specifying further that growth into maturity means growth into a way of life that inhabits all of the dimensions in their richness and complexity. Immaturity will thus always take the form of some type of constriction of one's consciousness. This can be illustrated by reference to what I call the "slavery/Holocaust accusation" that is often made by pro-life advocates in their critique of abortion. The argument is that slavery was based on dehumanizing blacks and Nazism on dehumanizing Jews. Abortion is based on dehumanizing unborn children by calling them mere fetuses, embryos, or clumps of cells. The dehumanizing rhetoric is always a prelude to carrying out acts of violence against a certain class of human beings. Sometimes pro-choice advocates respond to this accusation by saying that the analogy does not work because the slaves and the Jews were real persons (i.e., already born) while embryos are subhuman. This response does not refute the accusation. It simply confirms it.<sup>16</sup>

Dimensional anthropology supports the basic truth of this accusation and then takes the analogy to an even higher level. Slavery existed in a cultural setting that placed an overemphasis on the vertical axis. Those with dark skin were labeled as inferior beings, lower down than whites, and just above cattle on the Great Chain of Being. The slave-owning culture, in general, was living in a time-lag, in that it inhabited the vertical, monarchical political ontology that had dominated the Old World for so many centuries. The North, in contrast, had moved into the horizontal plane ontology that lifted up democracy as the ideal. This discordance between these different ways of inhabiting the

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<sup>15</sup> Charles Bellinger. *The Genealogy of Violence: Reflections on Creation, Freedom, and Evil* (New York NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> See Robert Weisbord, "Legalized Abortion and the Holocaust: An Insulting Parallel," *The Jewish Veteran* (January.-March 1982): 12-13.



dimensions made the Civil War well nigh inevitable. By the middle of the twentieth century, monarchy was a relic of the past, and the horizontal plane was dominant. But if human beings are still immature psychologically, then they will overemphasize whatever dimension in which they are living, and thus we had collectivism. Nazism and Stalinism were horizontal pathologies, as were the distortions operative in Rwanda, Bosnia, and so forth. In our time, individualism is hegemonic, as I have been arguing throughout this essay.

So, if human immaturity expresses itself as a narrowed overemphasis on a particular dimension, we can say that slavery was based on vertical othering, Nazism on horizontal othering, and abortion on temporal othering. Othering, which labels an object as “different” in preparation for doing violence to it, is the exact opposite of the Golden Rule. The Golden Rule builds a bridge between me and the other. It seeks the good for both. Othering cuts off the other and does violence to it. Abortion, because it overemphasizes the temporal trajectory of individual selfhood, finds its other in the fetus. At the heart of the pro-choice argument, there is always the notion that it is okay to kill a fetus because it is “not yet” a person.<sup>17</sup> I get to live in time and pursue my plans and goals; you, the fetus, do not get to live in time.<sup>18</sup>

Dimensional anthropology affirms and refines the slavery/Holocaust accusation, but it is an entirely separate issue as to whether is wise for pro-life advocates to employ this accusation as a persuasive strategy. My own view is that we should not, but this is not the place for me to make that argument.

*Interpreting Genesis 1-4.* The literary unit constituted by the first four chapters of *Genesis* looks very interesting from the perspective of dimensional anthropology. It is often said that there are two creation stories here, but I suggest that there are actually three. Chapter one of *Genesis* is a vertical axis story. It describes the creation of the cosmos, the Great Chain of Being, with human beings at the pinnacle. Chapters two and three of *Genesis* is an account

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<sup>17</sup> See Mary-Anne Warren, “On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion” in Baird and Rosenbaum, *The Ethics of Abortion*, pp. 272-79.

<sup>18</sup> A character in Alice Walker’s short story “The Abortion” says this: “Somewhere her child – she never dodged into the language of ‘fetuses’ and ‘amorphous growths’ – was being flushed down a sewer. Gone all her or his chances to see the sunlight, savor a fig. ‘Well,’ she said to this child, ‘it was you or me, Kiddo, and I chose me.’” Alice Walker, *You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down* (New York NY: Harcourt, 1981), p. 70.

of the birth of selfhood in an act of defiance against God. Adam and Eve inaugurate time as we know it by listening to the serpent, who says: “You shall be as God, knowing good and evil.” But where is the horizontal plane creation story of the birth of human culture? It is clearly present, in the saga of Cain and Abel. Cain’s sibling rivalry, his mimetic desire, led him to commit the first murder. God then asks him: “Where is your brother?” This question powerfully evokes the horizontal plane of human relationships. Cain is described later in the chapter as the builder of the first city. René Girard uses the story of Cain and Abel as the interpretive key to human history. In these first four chapters of the Bible we have a cosmo-genesis, a psycho-genesis, and a socio-genesis.

With regard to the abortion debate, the lesson is not hard to draw. God’s good creation has been derailed by human efforts to seize God-like power. We want to define for ourselves good and evil, and we want to have control over life and death. But the result is simply rivalry and violence, the predictable results of our strong tendency to imitate Cain again and again. When we live by othering and violence, rather than by the Golden Rule, we are failing to realize that in God’s world there are no *others*. We are all God’s children, whom God is bringing into existence. Creation is God’s work and human personhood is the event of creation.

The central paradox of the pro-choice position is this: lived from within, it is an inflation of the self to God-like proportions. Viewed from without, it is individualistic narrowness, a shrunken circumference of concern.<sup>19</sup> There is, however, an incoherence here that points to the truth: we only become most fully human by renouncing our false claims to divinity. Human egocentricity is a movement of puffing up, inflation; but this inflation actually carries us away from being truly human. When we allow our egocentricity and narrowness to be deflated by God’s grace, we can learn to inhabit the dimensions of reality in a complex way. Then we can become children of God and loving siblings of each other. The pro-choice motto is: We are all Gods. The pro-life motto is: We are all God’s children.

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<sup>19</sup> Chantal Delsol’s *Icarus Fallen: The Search for Meaning in an Uncertain World* (Wilmington DE: ISI Books, 2003) and *The Unlearned Lessons of the Twentieth Century: An Essay on Late Modernity* (Wilmington DE: ISI Books, 2006) are profound meditations on this idea. See argues that “contemporary individualism represents the continuation, in solitary form, of the utopian dream [Nazism and Stalinism]” (*Unlearned Lessons*, p. 61).