

William Brennan - *Dehumanizing the Vulnerable: When Word Games Take Lives*. Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1995.

Dehumanizing the Vulnerable: When Word Games Take Lives, by William Brennan, is a book that merits being read by the widest possible audience. It is meticulously researched and well argued, and packs quite an emotional wallop to boot. In its discussion of such hot button moral topics as abortion, euthanasia, racism, sexism, and totalitarianism, this book will validate and fortify the beliefs of some (including those of the reviewer); infuriate others; and leave still others

discomforted and shaken. This is a book about which it is difficult if not impossible to remain indifferent.

Brennan's basic thesis is that the great crimes against humanity (abortion, attacks on the vulnerable, dependent and disabled, the exploitation of one sex by the other, anti-Semitism, genocide under Nazism and Soviet totalitarianism, racism and the enslavement of non-whites, and the virtual annihilation of America's indigenous peoples) share in common a rhetoric or language of dehumanization. This common way of speaking, Brennan argues, takes a variety of forms, ranging from viewing the unborn, the dependent, women, Jews, Native Americans, blacks either as "deficient humans," "subhuman" or "nonhuman," a "species of lower animals," "repulsive parasitic creatures," "diseased organisms," "inanimate objects," "waste products," or "legal nonpersons."

Brennan argues that pinning such labels on people facilitates greatly or makes possible denying them their basic and essential dignity as full-fledged human beings. It follows that a critically important part of the solution to human oppression is a semantic sea change to rhetoric that is life-affirming and that is capable of counteracting the "toxic" rhetoric of dehumanization. Brennan speaks of an "expansive definition of humanity," one that embraces all human persons regardless of their physical characteristics or stage of life. He points out rightfully that a shift in semantics will not in and of itself eradicate dehumanization. He recognizes that human institutions must change: laws ought to reflect an expansive definition of humanity, and social systems should not allow some people to dehumanize others for profit. However, the powerful role of semantic oppression, long neglected, is given its just due in this book.

Brennan addresses the critical issue of the grounds on which the ethic of expansiveness can be defended. He argues that an "expansive definition of humanity" can be based either on a humanistic or supernatural worldview. That is, its underpinning can be natural law (human beings regardless of characteristics or stage of life being entitled to inalienable rights to dignity and well-being) or divine law (human beings regardless of characteristics or stage of life being equally sacred and valuable in the eyes of God). Thus, Brennan clearly is not pitting secularists against those with an appreciation for the supernatural foundations of our existence; rather he is pitting those with an expansive view of humanity against those with an exclusionary or restrictive view of humanity.

I find myself in wholehearted sympathy with Brennan's argument. It exemplifies a sociology that is morally grounded. A universal moral standard (an expansive definition of humanity) is put forward as a societal ideal. The sociological side of the analysis identifies those cultural elements (in this case linguistic symbols) that not only define how human beings are viewed but have implications for how various groups are treated differently. The sociological analysis helps us understand why the universal moral principle is not being realized and what steps

need to be taken to bring the reality closer in line with the ideal. Clearly the sociological analysis constitutes an intellectual activity independent of the activity by which the moral standard is delineated. However, the sociological analysis is clearly subordinate to the moral mission which serves to frame that activity. Brennan's argument is not esoteric, given the fact that his book is meant to appeal to a general audience and therefore a premium is placed on accessibility. However, the development of a morally-grounded sociology or a Catholic sociology requires systematic efforts to integrate two autonomous yet cybernetically linked intellectual activities—the development of universal moral principles upon which society should be grounded, on the one hand, and the identification of social and cultural forces that either support or impede the actualization of those principles, on the other. In unpacking Brennan's argument, we are able to infer the outlines of such an integrated perspective. High on the agenda of those interested in developing, legitimizing, and institutionalizing a morally based sociology or a Catholic sociology should be to present such a perspective in as explicit and codified a form as possible.

—Anthony L. Haynor
Seton Hall University, South Orange, New Jersey