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# When Plants Have Rights . . . An Idea Gone to Seed

Friday, October 10, 2008

Worldviews are constantly in motion. New issues arise and new questions present themselves. In one sense, worldviews operate as idea factories, as primary ideas work themselves out into related ideas. The basic framework of convictions that lies at the heart of a worldview always works outward toward implications of those key convictions.

Keep that in mind when you read of developments in Switzerland. As previously reported, Switzerland amended its constitution to require that “the dignity of creation” must be taken into account “when handling animals, plants, and other organisms.” In order to meet this constitutional provision, the Swiss government commissioned the Swiss Federal Ethics Committee on Non-Human Biotechnology and asked that body to produce guidelines. The result was a report that is among the most radical ever adopted by any government. “[The Dignity of Living Beings with Regard to Plants](#)” is nothing less than clear evidence of what happens when the Christian worldview is completely eclipsed by secular thought.



At the onset, the Swiss committee admitted that it was operating on the basis of moral intuition. In essence, intuition is all the members had to go on — which should have been sufficient warning in itself.

In the most important part of the report, the committee identified four alternative worldviews that would lead to very different conclusions. These are:

**Theocentrism** — “The basis for this position is the idea of a God who is creator, and therefore the creative ground of all living organisms. What counts for its own sake is God. All organisms count because of their relationship to God.”

**Ratiocentrism** — “In this position the issue of whether beings count for their own sake depends on their (potential) capacity for reason and their capacity for abstract speech.”

**Pathocentrism** — This position is based in the sentience of living organisms. They count morally for their own sake if they are sentient and are therefore able to experience something, in some way, as good or bad.”

**Biocentrism** — “Living organisms should be considered morally for their own sake because they are alive.”

While these four alternative worldviews do not exhaust the possibilities, this outline is very helpful. Even more helpful is the fact that the committee reported on its own mixed commitments. Tellingly, not one member of the committee accepted the Theocentric worldview. The majority chose the biocentric worldview. That fact, taken alone, is sufficient to explain the report. The extension of “rights” to plants, confusing plants with personhood, is the direct implication of the biocentric worldview. If life, defined merely as *biosis*, is at the center of the worldview, then *biosis* must be the good that trumps all other goods.

Now, *The Wall Street Journal* reports that the guidelines set down by the committee are complicating life for scientists. “Unfortunately, we have to take it seriously,” said Beat Keller of the University of Zurich. He was referring to

the mandate that scientists take account of a plant's "dignity" before conducting any experiment.

As the paper reports:

*Several years ago, when Christof Sautter, a botanist at Switzerland's Federal Institute of Technology, failed to get permission to do a local field trial on transgenic wheat, he moved the experiment to the U.S. He's too embarrassed to mention the new dignity rule to his American colleagues. "They'll think Swiss people are crazy," he says.*

*Defenders of the law argue that it reflects a broader, progressive effort to protect the sanctity of living things. Last month, Switzerland granted new rights to all "social animals." Prospective dog owners must take a four-hour course on pet care before they can buy a canine companion, while anglers must learn to catch fish humanely. Fish can't be kept in aquariums that are transparent on all sides. The fish need some shelter. Nor can goldfish be flushed down a toilet to an inglorious end; they must first be anesthetized with special chemicals, and then killed.*

Respect for creation is, for Christians, based in the worship of the Creator. Despoilers of nature are unfaithful stewards of creation. We are to treat all creation — and all creatures — with respect and thankfulness. But, we are not to confuse plants and animals with humans. Humans have rights because human beings are made in the image of God. Plants do not have rights.

The Swiss committee holds that plants have the right to reproduce, and that this is essential to a plant's dignity. They also held that a plant cannot be "arbitrarily" deprived of its life. Arbitrariness is, as might be guessed, in the eye of the beholder.

Professor Keller of the University of Zurich is embarrassed by this weak-headed thinking. So is Yves Poirier, a molecular biologist at the University of Lausanne. "Where does it stop?," he asked. "Should we now defend the dignity of microbes and viruses?"

Gautam Naik, the paper's reporter, asks an obvious question: "For a carrot, is there a more mortifying fate than being peeled, chopped and dropped into boiling water?"

The complications for biological research are real and important enough, but the consequences of this kind of radical thinking will reach far beyond biology.

When the Christian worldview is abandoned, there is no adequate replacement — nothing that can ground human dignity in anything other than philosophical quicksand. When plants are said to have rights, human rights are automatically undermined. A biocentric worldview is a recipe for disaster, but it is a logical alternative once the Christian worldview is rejected.

Just ask the Swiss what happens when a theocentric worldview is abandoned. Better yet, ask a plant.

