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Dear Colleague:

We owe our parents love and respect because they have given us birth and nurtured us. Some such belief is probably universal. The nurturing part is self-evident; children do--or ought to--feel grateful for it. Somewhat problematical is birth--the idea that children ought to be grateful because their parents have given them life. In a premodern society, children who reflect upon the phenomenon will probably say: "Well, my birth was not exactly planned by my parents. It simply occurred after the consummation of a marriage. In a sense, then, it is not a couple of human beings who gave me birth, but nature. I am a child of nature--of processes over which humans have little control." In the modern age and, a fortiori, in the post-modern age, such reflection by children will produce a different--and somewhat discombobulating--effect. They will say: "Well, my parents probably planned my birth, and once I am in my mother's womb the choice remains up to her whether to give me life or not. Here is my mother preparing her law brief--a person I dearly love. Yet she is not just a person. She is almost a goddess, for she once enjoyed the power of either giving or denying me life. I exist by virtue of her decision. I am her creature. I can no longer quite see myself as a miracle of nature beyond mere human decisions. I feel diminished. Simultaneously, I feel empowered, for one day, I too will have the power to permit or deny life."

The modern attitude to life is, then, radically different from the premodern. The other important difference is in regard to truth. Isaiah Berlin argues (in The Crooked Timber of Humanity) that in the West, from antiquity to the mid-18th century, people have always believed in an objective reality and in the possibility of arriving at truth--a possibility that is open to all humans. Of course, often a particular group would assert that they alone possessed the truth--they the Catholics, not the Huguenots, the Christians, not the Moslems, the educated, not the uneducated, and vice versa. But since all humans have potential access to truth, conversion is always possible and resistance to conversion perversity of the first order. From the mid-18th century, but especially from the 1820s onward, the idea of truth as universal lost ground first to individually constructed "truth" (that of the Romantic hero) and then to socially constructed "truth." So we have become not only creators of life, but creators of truth. We have become God, which explains a great deal our sense of alienation and loneliness.

Best wishes,

