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Is Abortion a Moral Issue? A Fascinating Debate on the Left

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An unprecedented view into this debate is available on the pages of *Slate.com*—a prominent Web site that features some of the liveliest reporting available anywhere today. Nevertheless, this exchange between writers William Saletan and Katha Pollitt did not begin on the Internet, but in the pages of *The New York Times* and *The Nation*.

Saletan fired the first salvo, suggesting in an op/ed commentary published in *The New York Times* that pro-choicers should admit that abortion is “bad” and that those who support abortion rights should work toward a truly dramatic reduction in the total number of abortions.

Saletan’s argument is not exactly new, either for himself or for the movement he supports. In his 2004 book, *Bearing Right: How Conservatives Won the Abortion War*, Saletan offered some of the most incisive and perceptive analysis of the national abortion debate. In essence, Saletan argued that America has settled on a fragile consensus he described as “conservative pro-choice.” Americans are quite squeamish about abortion itself, but have resisted efforts to eliminate access to abortion altogether.

Even those who disagree with Saletan must take his argument seriously. Those of us who yearn to see America affirm the sanctity of all human life, born and preborn, must acknowledge that we have much work to do in terms of changing public opinion—the task of reaching the hearts and minds of millions of individual citizens.

That process of reaching hearts and minds is Saletan’s concern as well, even as he is a strong defender of abortion rights. As he sees it, support for abortion rights is diminishing as the pro-life movement has been largely successful in focusing upon the moral status of the fetus and the objectionable—even horrible—nature of abortion itself.

Writing on the thirty-third anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, Saletan boldly argued: “It’s time for the abortion-rights movement to declare war on abortion.”

That was a rather amazing statement, and Saletan clearly intended to catch the attention of abortion-rights advocates.

“If you support abortion rights, this idea may strike you as nuts,” Saletan acknowledged. “But look at your predicament. Most Americans support *Roe* and think women, not the government, should make abortion decisions. Yet they’ve entrusted Congress and the White House to politicians who oppose legal abortion, and they haven’t stopped the confirmations to the Supreme Court of John G. Roberts Jr. and . . . Samuel A. Alito Jr.”

In terms of political analysis, Saletan reminded his pro-choice readers that abortion may have been a “winning issue” for their side sixteen years ago, but no more. “You have a problem,” he advised.

His candid analysis was offered so that the pro-abortion movement might awaken from its slumber. “The problem is abortion,” he summarized. In order to make his point, he raised the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act and the Unborn Victims of Violence Act—both passed overwhelmingly by Congress and signed into law by President Bush—and reminded: “And most Americans supported both bills, because they agree with your opponents about the simplest thing: It’s bad to kill a fetus.”

Significantly, Saletan then offered his own moral analysis. “They’re right. It is bad,” he confirmed. “This is why the issue hasn’t gone away. Abortion, like race-conscious hiring, generates moral friction. Most people will tolerate it as a lesser evil or a temporary measure, but they’ll never fully accept it. They want a world in which it’s less necessary. If you grow complacent or try to institutionalize it, they’ll run out of patience. That’s what happened to affirmative action. And it’ll happen to abortion, if you stay hunkered down behind *Roe*.”

Instead, Saletan argued that the pro-abortion movement should coalesce around an agenda of lowering the total number of abortions and increasing the use of contraceptives.

All this was just too much for Katha Pollitt, a fire-brand liberal who serves as a regular columnist for *The Nation*, one of America’s most influential journals of liberal opinion.

Pollitt was shocked—absolutely *shocked*—that Saletan was ready to speak of abortion in moral terms. This is a move she emphatically rejects. “Inevitably, attacking abortion as a great evil means attacking providers and patients. If abortion is so bad, why not stigmatize the doctors who perform them? Deny the clinic a permit in your town? Make women feel guilty and ashamed for choosing it and make them sweat so they won’t screw up again?”

Furthermore, she warned that abortion might soon “join obesity and smoking as unacceptable behavior in polite society.”

Taken by itself, this is a truly amazing comment. At the very least, it suggests that, in Katha Pollitt’s social circle, obesity and smoking are taken as genuine moral issues, when abortion—the killing of an unborn human—is not.

But there's more. Consider this statement: "The trouble with thinking in terms of zero abortions is that you make abortion so hateful you do the antichoicers' work for them. You accept that the zygote/embryo/fetus has some kind of claim to be born." Did you get that? Any honest reading of her words would lead to the inevitable conclusion that Pollitt believes that the unborn human has *no* "claim to be born."

Pollitt was responding directly to Saletan's op/ed in *The New York Times*. In her view, Saletan was simply giving away the store by admitting that abortion was indeed a serious moral issue and that it is a "bad" reality in and of itself.

From their initial exchange in the *Times* and *The Nation*, Saletan and Pollitt continued their debate at *Slate.com*. Their exchange took the form of lengthy letters addressed to each other, with Saletan first clarifying what he really intended to say as he argued about abortion in moral terms. "I'm no fan of the language of sin," he clarified. "But I don't see why we have to shrink from words like good and bad. It's bad to cause a pregnancy in a situation where you're going to end up having an abortion. It's bad to cause a pregnancy in a situation where you can't be a good mom or dad. Our high rates of unintended pregnancy and abortion are a collective moral problem. If we don't want the government to tell us what to do, we'd better address the problem individually."

Beyond this, Saletan also told Pollitt that his purpose was not to create a movement that would combine pro-choicers with the pro-life. Instead, "I'm trying to form a coalition with the public," he suggested.

Saletan is an ardent supporter of abortion rights, but he positions himself in something of a centrist position—at least his position looks somewhat centrist with Katha Pollitt as background. He is concerned that when Pollitt dismisses any claim to life on the part of the fetus, she confuses the fetus with the zygote, "alienating people who see the difference and might support us if they realize we care about it." This is an interesting move, and a move I believe to be destined to fail.

Why? Because Saletan's effort to suggest that the fetus *might* have some claim to life while the zygote evidently does not, is based in no clear or compelling scientific definition of life. The human continuum begins with the union of the sperm and the egg and continues throughout gestation and life until natural death. At no point along this continuum does the life suddenly "become" human. Such arguments are based upon convenient abstractions or arbitrarily chosen capacities or characteristics. Pollitt's position is truly abhorrent and radical, but it is at least consistent.

Responding to Saletan, Pollitt accuses him of offering no real rationale for why abortion should be seen as "so outrageous, so terribly morally offensive, so wrong." She is willing to speak of abortion as a "difficult" decision, but that is about all. She explains that opposition to abortion is really an extension of an effort to deny sexual freedom to women, and to stigmatize sex outside of marriage. She identifies this with what she sees as the nation's "already broad, deep strain of sexual Puritanism, shame and blame."

Responding to Pollitt, Saletan clarified his position: “This is why I use the word ‘bad.’ It upsets many people on the left, but for the same reason, it wakes up people in the middle. It’s new, and in my opinion, it’s true. (I don’t use the word ‘wrong,’ because to me that implies a prohibitive conclusion. ‘Bad’ is a consideration. Abortion can be a less-bad option than continuing a pregnancy. In that case, it’s bad but not wrong.)”

Pollitt remained unmoved. “Morality has to do with rights and duties and obligations between people,” she insisted. “So, no: I do not think terminating a pregnancy is wrong. A potential person is not a person, any more than an acorn is an oak tree. I don’t think women should have to give birth just because a sperm met an egg. I think women have the right to consult their own wishes, needs, and capacities and produce only loved, wanted children they can care for—or even no children at all. I think we would all be better off as a society if we respected women’s ability to make these decisions for themselves and concentrated on caring well for the born. There is certainly enough work there to keep us all very busy.”

In the end, Saletan appeared to have retreated somewhat from his argument about the moral status of abortion, but the very fact that he addressed the issue so clearly and candidly is telling in itself. As for Pollitt, she was eventually willing to admit that abortion is “icky.” As she explained this term: “I think that expresses rather well how lots of people feel about abortion: They may not find it immoral or want to see it made illegal, but it disturbs them. It just seems like a bad thing.”

Why should pro-lifers pay attention to this debate among advocates of abortion rights? The answer to that question is simple—the exchange between William Saletan and Katha Pollitt demonstrates the inherent weakness of the pro-abortion argument, or its pro-choice variant. Lacking any objective definition of human life and the status of the unborn, the pro-abortion movement is mired in a pattern of endless internal debates and confusions. Saletan’s argument is less radical than Pollitt’s, but his position is morally arbitrary, based more in pragmatic concern than in moral philosophy.

In any event, the exchange between William Saletan and Katha Pollitt indicates that the pro-abortion movement knows that it has work to do in reaching the hearts and minds of Americans. The pro-life movement had better remind itself of the same challenge. Both sides are locked in a race to reach the hearts and minds of those still stuck in the middle.

