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The Strongest Argument Against Abortion—the Fetus

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Thursday, February 19, 2004

How should we make the case against abortion? Over thirty years after Roe v. Wade, pro-life advocates remain divided on the central issue of argument and strategy. This vital debate was highlighted in the January/February addition of Touchstone magazine, and it deserves the attention of all those who contend for the sanctity of human life and seek to bring an end to the scourge of abortion.

In the magazine's lead article, philosopher Francis J. Beckwith takes on what he describes as the "new rhetorical strategy" now commonly advocated by some pro-life activists. This new strategy is based on the conviction that the older line of argument—which focused on the indisputable humanity of the fetus—has failed to sustain a compelling social movement against abortion. Instead of focusing on the fetus, advocates of the new strategy suggest that the pro-life movement should redirect its argument to "the alleged harm abortion does to women."

Beckwith, a professor of church-state studies at Baylor University, argues that the "new rhetorical strategy" is fatally flawed and will actually serve to support the pro-abortion worldview. Beckwith points to the fact that, though a vast majority of Americans believe abortion to be a moral evil, these same people do not believe abortion to be so inherently immoral that it should be made illegal. "Even though the vast majority of Americans see abortion to be morally wrong and believe that it is the taking of a human life," Beckwith explains, "many in that majority do not consider it a serious moral wrong (i.e. unjustified homicide)."

Beckwith is on to something here. A wealth of statistical data indicates that Americans see abortion as morally wrong. As a matter of fact, a majority of women seeking abortion indicate that they know that what they are doing is morally wrong or, at the very least, is "deviant behavior." On this basis, advocates of the new strategy suggest that pro-lifers should move on to a new argument. Beckwith sees this as a serious mistake. Where advocates of the new strategy argue that Americans already know that the killing of a fetus is morally wrong, Beckwith counters that Americans obviously do not believe that abortion is sufficiently immoral to be made illegal. "Until the American populous judges abortion to be a serious moral wrong rather than a mere moral wrong," Beckwith asserts, "their opinion on the legal status of abortion will not likely shift in a pro-life direction."

Advocates of the new rhetorical strategy have argued that since the vast majority of Americans already believe that the fetus is human, and nonetheless support abortion as a legal right, the obvious alternative is to shift the argument to the negative effect of abortion on the women involved. Beckwith resolutely refuses to shift his argument from the moral status of the fetus. Those who argue that abortion should be legal even as they acknowledge that the fetus is human are, as Beckwith suggest, either sociopaths who simply permit and support what they know to be moral evil, or individuals who are morally immature and fail to see the logic of their own presuppositions.

Beckwith's critique is devastating. As he suggests, the argument that abortion is a negative experience for women fails to take in to account the fact that many women consider abortion to be the easiest way out of a very difficult situation. Once the moral status of the fetus is no longer the ground of argument, women are free to calculate the moral status of their abortion choices without reference to the fact that abortion kills an innocent human life. As Beckwith explains, that argument could lend support to infanticide and other moral atrocities. Pro-life advocates must return to a moral focus on

the fetus and must base our argument on the fact that abortion is the taking of innocent human life. The fact that Americans seem to be supporting a form of moral schizophrenia indicates that most Americans do not have a full understanding of why the fetus must be recognized as fully human and thus deserving of moral protection.

Those who advocate a new rhetorical strategy are simply mistaken, Beckwith argues, for “pregnant women seeking abortions generally do not see their fetuses on the same moral plane as they see either themselves or their already born children.”

The distinction between a baby and a fetus is central to the moral confusion that marks the American mind on the question of abortion. Clearly, a majority of Americans believe that a fetus is human, but they deny that the unborn child should be granted the same right to life as a baby living outside the womb. Beckwith zeros in on the central issue in the pro-life argument, and asserts that “the pro-life argument is not that abortion is wrong because it kills a baby, but rather, that abortion is morally wrong because it kills a human person who is not yet a baby—a label we ordinarily assign to newborns, not preborns—but still a fully human person.” Since so many Americans have convinced themselves that a fetus is not a baby, “a woman seeking an abortion can, thanks to this argument, have the abortion without believing she is killing a bonafide member of the human community.”

Thus, the woman is fully aware that she is killing something, but she is not convinced that this preborn life is a baby.

As a philosopher, Beckwith takes both words and arguments with deadly seriousness. Thus, he recognizes the inherent contradiction that marks the position held by millions of Americans. They argue that abortion is morally wrong, and recognize that it is the taking of innocent human life. At the same time, they argue that it would be wrong to impose this moral principle upon women and defend a legal right to abortion as the most appropriate public policy. Insightfully, Beckwith raises the issue of slavery, demonstrating conclusively that the application of this same argument to the question of slavery would never have led to abolition. Beckwith argues that Americans would react in anger to a politician who said, “I am personally opposed to owning a slave and torturing my spouse, but it would be wrong for me to try to force my personal beliefs on someone who felt it consistent with his deeply held beliefs to engage in such behaviors.” This politician would be considered “a moral monster,” Beckwith argues—yet this very pattern of argument is precisely what millions of Americans propose as their own highly moral position.

The pro-life movement had better get back to contending for the inherent humanity and dignity of the fetus, Beckwith argues, or the argument against abortion will be lost. Americans must be shown that “if fetuses are human persons, one cannot be pro-choice on abortion, just as one cannot be pro-choice on slavery and at the same time maintain that slaves are human persons.” As Beckwith summarizes his argument: “In other words, the pro-life movement must convince the vast majority of the public that abortion is a serious moral wrong and not a mere moral wrong.” America’s current policy concerning abortion—established in *Roe v. Wade* and later court decisions—is thus not morally neutral in any sense. The government’s policy is based in the presupposition that the fetus does not possess the same right to life as a baby living outside the womb. This is not neutrality Beckwith insists, but hostility toward the fetus.

In articles responding to Beckwith, other pro-life advocates consider his arguments. Terry Schlossberg, executive director of Presbyterians Pro-Life, supports Beckwith’s case and points out that the pro-life argument must now be extended to the issues of cloning and embryo research. Schlossberg argues that the pro-life argument will only be won when the vast majority of Americans experience something like a moral conversion. “Ultimately settling this question,” she argues, “lies in recognizing every human being as neighbor, and that is a moral settlement.”

A defender of the new rhetorical strategy also responded to Beckwith’s article. Frederica Mathewes-Green, an influential writer and pro-life advocate, concedes much of Beckwith’s case, but argues that millions of Americans have simply lost the capacity for serious moral reasoning. “They could agree that the unborn is a living human baby,” she explains, “and yet shrug off the conclusion that it should not be killed.” This inconsistency, troubling as it is, is what prompted advocates of the new rhetorical strategy to attempt a new argument.

David Mills, Touchstone’s editor, admits that the new rhetorical strategy does look attractive. Nevertheless, Mills sided with Beckwith. “It is a matter of our ultimate goal or end. Saving the lives of unborn children is a great thing, and getting pro-choice media to let pro-life voices be heard is a very good thing, but our ultimate end is changing—converting—the hearts and minds of the people...” Pointing to the negative consequences of abortion in the life of the mother is all well and good, Mills allows, but in the end the only compelling argument that matters is centered in the inherent humanity of

the fetus and thus the tremendous moral evil involved in killing unborn human life. “We want a culture in which unborn children survive to birth,” Mills concludes, “but we need one in which they survive not because people think abortion is painful, but because they know it is wrong.”

The Touchstone debate makes for compelling reading, and should serve as a catalyst for the refining of pro-life strategy and argument. Beckwith’s case against the new rhetorical strategy is absolutely conclusive, and his arguments should serve as a corrective for pro-life advocates who are growing weary of arguing on behalf of the fetus. Those who oppose abortion—and especially those on the front line counseling women who may be seeking abortion—should use every honest argument in the pro-life arsenal. Women should be confronted with the pain and other negative effects that will follow their choice for abortion. Nevertheless, in the end, the non-negotiable argument that stands at the center of the argument against abortion is the moral status of the fetus and the horrible moral wrong that abortion represents.

In the end, the pro-life argument stands or falls, not on the question of lifestyle, but on the question of life itself.

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