What's the Debate About?

Most of the issues brought up in the abortion debate are mere smoke screens Find out what the real issue is.

by Francis J. Beckwith

Abortion is an issue over which Americans are deeply divided, and there is little chance that this discord will be remedied anytime soon. Each side of this cultural divide consists of citizens sincere in their convictions. But the passions that fuel these convictions about abortion often distract us from understanding the issues that really divide us.

Now it may seem odd to say "the issues that really divide us," since it seems obvious to most people that what divides us is in fact only one issue, abortion. But that is misleading. After all, if abortion did not result in the death of an unborn human being, the controversy would either cease entirely or diminish significantly. So, what we disagree over is not really abortion. But rather, our disagreement is over the nature of the being whose life abortion terminates, the unborn.

But there is another issue that percolates beneath the abortion debate: What does it mean to say that something is wrong? Suppose, for example, you are arguing with a friend over the question of whether abortion should remain legal, and your friend says to you, "If you don't like abortion, then don't have one." Although this is a common response, it really is a strange one. After all, you probably oppose abortion because you think it is wrong, not because you dislike it.

This can be better understood if we change the issue. Imagine that your friend is a defender of spousal abuse and says to you, "If you don't like spousal abuse, then don't beat your spouse." Upon hearing those words, you would instantly conclude that your friend has no idea why you oppose spousal abuse. Your opposition is not based on what you like or dislike. It is based on what you have good reason to believe is true: one ought not to abuse a fellow human being, especially one's spouse. That moral truth has nothing to do with whether or not you like or dislike spousal abuse.

In the same way, pro-lifers oppose abortion because they have reasons to believe that the unborn are full-fledged members of the human community, no different in nature than you or me. And for that reason, the unborn has a right to life that ought to be enshrined in our laws. Thus, in order to defeat the pro-lifer's point of view, the abortion advocate must show that the unborn is not a full-fledged member of the human community. At the end of the day, the abortion debate is not about likes or dislikes. It is about who and what we are, and whether the unborn is one of us.

Is the Unborn One of Us?

There is no doubt that the unborn is a human being from conception, the result of the dynamic interaction, and organic merger, of the female ovum (which contains 23 chromosomes) and the male sperm (which contains 23 chromosomes). At conception, a whole human being, with its own genome, comes into existence, needing only food, water, shelter, oxygen, and a congenial environment in which to interact. These are necessary in order to grow and develop itself to maturity in accordance with its own nature.

Like the infant, the child, and the adolescent, the unborn is a being that is in the process of unfolding its potential — the potential to grow and develop itself but not to change what it is. This unborn being, because of its nature, is actively disposed to develop into a mature version of itself, though never ceasing to be the same being. Thus, the same human being that begins as a one-cell zygote continues to exist to its birth and through its adulthood unless disease or violence stops it from doing so. This is why it makes perfect sense for any one of us to say, "When I was conceived ..."

This unborn being, because of its nature, is actively disposed to develop into a mature version of itself, though never ceasing to be the same being. Abortion advocates typically do not dispute that the unborn is a human being during all or most of its time in the womb. For example, philosopher David

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Boonin, in his book A Defense of Abortion (Cambridge University Press, 2002), writes:

> On the desk in my office where most of this book was written and revised, there are several pictures of my son, Eli. In one, he is gleefully dancing on the sand along the Gulf of Mexico, the cool ocean breeze wreaking havoc with his wispy hair. … In the top drawer of my desk, I keep another picture of Eli. The picture was taken September 7, 1993, 24 weeks before he was born. The sonogram image is murky, but it reveals clearly enough a small head tilted back slightly, and an arm raised up and bent, with the hand pointing back toward the face and the thumb extended toward the mouth. There is no doubt in my mind that this picture, too, shows the same little boy at a very early stage in his physical development. And there is no question that the position I defend in this book entails that it would have been morally permissible to end his life at this point. (xiii, xiv)

Why does Professor Boonin hold this view? Like some other philosophers, Boonin maintains that the unborn, though a human being, lacks characteristics that are necessary for it to have a right to life. These characteristics typically include having a self-concept, a particular level of higher brain activity, and/or a desire for a right to life. But there are problems with this approach.

Consider first this example. Imagine that your father was involved in a car accident that put him in a temporarily comatose state. His physician tells you he will awake from the coma in nine months. His conscious experiences, memories, particular skills and abilities will be lost forever and he will have no mental record of them. This means that he will have to relearn all of his abilities and knowledge as he did before he had any conscious experiences. But they would not be the same experiences and desires he had before. That is, he is in precisely the same position as the standard unborn child, with all the basic capacities he had at the beginning of his existence. Thus, if your father has a right to life while in the coma, then so does the standard unborn child.

Another problem with the Boonin-type view is that it provides no real moral reason to oppose seemingly immoral experiments on the unborn. Imagine that there is a scientist who is able to alter the unborn's brain development in such a way that the higher brain and its functions are prevented from arising. And thus, when the child is born, it never develops a self-concept or a desire for a right to life. In fact, its organs are harvested and donated to needy patients.

Conclusion:

It's All About Who and What We Are

In the July 9, 2000 edition of the Los Angeles Times (Orange County edition), abortion advocate Eileen Padberg claimed that an implication of the pro-life position is that the unborn child "has more rights than" our "wives, sisters, and daughters."

Ironically, by excluding the unborn from the human community, Ms. Padberg diminishes, and puts in peril, the very rights she jealously, and correctly, guards. For she is saying that the government may exclude small, vulnerable, defenseless, and dependent unborn human beings from its protection for no other reason than because others consider the unborn's destruction vital to their well-being.

But Ms. Padberg would surely, and correctly, protest a government policy that allows for the exploitation and destruction of wives, sisters, and daughters by powerful people who believe they will live better lives by engaging in such atrocities against these women. So, if the unborn is one of us, then whatever is true of our worth and dignity is true of theirs as well.

Francis J. Beckwith is Professor of Philosophy & Church-Studies at Baylor University, teaching in the departments of philosophy and political science as well as the J. M. Institute of Church-State Studies. He is the author many books and essays on pro-life issues, including ***Defending Life: A Moral and Legal Case Against Abortion Choice*****,** Cambridge University Press; 2007.

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