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Abortion on Second Thought

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I was a teenager and young adult in the late 1960s and early 1970s, before *Roe v. Wade* made legal abortions widely available in the United States. But if the occasion had arisen, and if it could have been managed safely, I would have aborted an illegitimate baby without a second thought.

My only emotional qualms would have arisen from the way an abortion would publicly declare that I was handling my life incompetently. As best I can remember, I had never heard anyone argue that it would be murder, and even if I had encountered the idea, I would have dismissed it immediately as one of those obscure and radical philosophical arguments of no real–life consequence.

I did not hold this opinion defiantly, or uneasily, or thoughtfully. It was just an unexamined assumption that there was no third person involved in early pregnancy.

My opinion began to change several years later, after I was married and my son was born. Somehow the change is connected with the feeling I had as I stared at him in his bassinet the first night we were home from the hospital. I couldn't believe he was outside my body. He was now separable from me, this child who had never even existed before he was inside me. It was a strange and unforgettable experience.

At any rate, in a paper I wrote a couple of years later in graduate school, I argued both the pro–and anti–abortion positions, and when another student–an anti–abortion activist, I think–angrily demanded to know my opinion, I said, honestly, that I didn't know.

Agnosticism on an issue that might involve infanticide being unacceptable, I had to figure out whether abortion is murder or not. Although emotion had led me to ask the question, the answer was too important to leave to instinct. Did I really believe the microscopic collection of cells or the barely visible tadpole–shaped thing of the first few weeks was a human being whose deliberate destruction would be intolerable? No.

On the other hand, what about the eight–and–a–half–month–old fetus, two weeks away from birth? My son might easily have been born that early; obviously, no decent person would condone killing such a baby with a lethal injection just before inducing labor. That definitely *is* murder. And not just any murder, but the most horrible kind imaginable, because of the moral innocence and absolute dependence of its victim. Unforgivable, in fact–except they say God can forgive anything.

At this point, it was clear to me that a time must be determined before which abortion is acceptable and after which it is murder. The Supreme Court used trimesters in its original *Roe v. Wade* decision, and decided that states might defend a baby's right to life at the expense of other rights in the third trimester of pregnancy, when the fetus is possibly viable. I realized I had to agree, even though it meant opposing almost all abortions in the last three months. A third–trimester baby can usually survive, with help, and certainly looks as human as most newborns.

However, the arbitrariness of this deadline, depending as it does on the accident of how far medical technology happens to have advanced, might have appalling consequences for individual babies. Today's miscarriage will be tomorrow's extreme prematurity. Indeed, viability now extends into part of the second trimester.

No, to find a time when I could comfortably say, "This is a thing with no human rights," I had to go to the first part of the first trimester. Still, though, this would mean picking a date on one side of which I would acknowledge a human being whose helplessness and innocence compels all the protection society can provide, and on the other side of which would be a growth requiring no more attention than the nuisance of a minor medical procedure. The bottom line was that I couldn't find a date like that.

It would mean there would be some morning when a woman could be told that if she'd gone to a clinic the previous afternoon, it would have been all right to have an abortion, because the baby she now carries was not then a human being. Naturally any developmental category involves the drawing of similarly absurd dividing lines, but very few have such deadly consequences.

Finally, at the end of tediously extended efforts to avoid it, I was forced to accept the conclusion that life begins at conception. Any date after that compels one to agree to the killing of beings that are indistinguishable from the beings it would be murder to kill, under a legal deadline arrangement, in a few hours. How can you tell the difference, then, between infanticide and harmless medical procedure? In such a dilemma, if a mistake is going to be made, it must surely be made on the side of avoiding infanticide.

Speaking without the expertise of a theologian or medical doctor, there are to my mind only two reasonably clear natural divisions in prenatal life: its beginning, at conception, and its end, at birth. The radical pro–abortion position accepts the latter moment as the beginning of a person's right to life. In fact, the U.S. legal system also accepts this radical view. Post–*Roe v. Wade* cases established a constitutional right to abortion even after viability, and have actually forbidden states to require medical aid for viable aborted babies.

What this means is that in 1985, for example, something like *twelve thousand* babies were aborted during their sixth month of development or later. If their abortions had only been accidental instead of deliberate, so that neonatal care could have been provided, *many* of them–not a few, or a dozen, but many–would be living children today. I cannot even imagine myself or anyone I know participating in these late abortions, especially when they are done by the mother for convenience, and the medical workers for money. This is the stuff of Friday night horror shows.

Of course, the vast majority–more than 99 percent–of fetuses are aborted before the sixth month begins. That, however, is no comfort at all to the hundred and fifty thousand or so who are aborted in their fourth or fifth months every year. These are babies with working nervous and muscular systems, who are sensitive to pain, who can swallow, make a fist, and frown. All they need is a little more time. What they get is forcible birth, and sometimes lethal injections or even the vacuum and a scraping knife. And they feel it.

The only way a person more ethically advanced than Saddam Hussein can approve of this grotesquely evil practice is by assuming, as Southern leaders once did about slaves, that there is no human victim involved. This is very hard to do for late–term viable fetuses, who have to be poisoned just before birth in order to avoid the emergence of a breathing, squalling baby.

The people who actively and deliberately advocate these late–pregnancy deaths, from Supreme Court justices to ACLU attorneys to Planned Parenthood's Faye Wattleton, deserve criticism analogous to that Abraham Lincoln made of the supporters of slavery. "Although volume upon volume is written to prove slavery a very good thing," he said, "we never hear of the man who wishes to take the good of it, by being a slave himself." Indeed not. And I have yet to hear of an abortion advocate who has rectified, by suicide, his parents' decision not to abort him, or who even argues, in acknowledgement of the burdens his childhood imposed on his parents, that they *should* have aborted him.

Lincoln continued with one of his illuminating remarks about the American experiment in political liberty: while "most governments have been based, practically, on the denial of equal rights of men . . . ours began by affirming these rights." Immediately after that affirmation, the Declaration of Independence went on to claim an unalienable right to life, the protection of which is one of the main reasons that "governments are instituted among men." Slavery snatches equality, and abortion snatches life. Americans can only support these thefts by denying the humanity of their targets.

While accepting the latest possible moment–birth–as the cutoff for abortions involves obvious and gory murder, I must in all honesty admit to some lingering unease in accepting the earliest possible moment, i.e., conception. Although my analytical odyssey has forced me to reject even the earliest abortions and to acknowledge at the least a right to life in those strange little creatures of the first month of pregnancy, I still don't feel for them the degree of protectiveness and concern that a six–month–old fetus elicits. After all, a very large number of embryos die of natural causes in their first month without our ever knowing about them, much less grieving for them. Some fail even to implant themselves in the uterine wall; in my imagination, these little ones only a few days past the original combination of two cells seem like motes in the air, floating through dust and sunbeams, dying unnoticed by any but God.

Many people sympathize with this relative unconcern for very young embryos, and pro–abortion lobbyists therefore harp on the point. As prominent abortion advocate Garrett Hardin puts it, "Why should we call a fertilized egg or a tiny embryo a human being?" Nevertheless, the fact is that any abortion draws a mortal deadline, and this requires an arrogance and callousness to actual living beings that I believe we must recognize and reject, just as we have recognized and rejected the evil inherent in slavery.

I am writing about these ethical ruminations of mine because I suspect they are probably not very unusual. Only about 15 percent of Americans claim there is an unlimited right to abortion all the way up to birth minus a day, and I don't believe these people are all obsessive ideologues by any means. Surely many of them are just as insouciantly thoughtless as I used to be. Furthermore, a statistically over–represented group in the 15 percent are single young men.

If the argument against abortion were directed at the *end* of pregnancy instead of its beginning, people, it seems to me, would, as I did, see the whole thing more clearly. Everyone agrees that killing little one–day–old Joey is murder; they can hardly avoid agreeing it would also have been murder if he'd been killed a few hours before he began his birth. And if abortion at birth minus two hours is murder, what about birth minus two days? What about killing him a week earlier? What is the moment, in the abortion advocate's opinion, before which an abortion can take place? Ask him to name the mortal deadline.

True, even if abortion were eventually to be outlawed in the last trimester, fewer than one percent of the babies would be saved; and extending the ban to the last two trimesters would still only save 10 or 11 percent. That, however, is tens of thousands of fully formed infants per year. Widespread awareness that Planned Parenthood's Faye Wattleton is fighting for the unlimited right to abort *third–trimester* fetuses in Pennsylvania, and that the ACLU advertises its pro–abortion participation in *80 percent* of American abortion litigation, helps us to recognize the prochoice movement as the wildly radical creature it is.

Those who favor convenience abortions have attempted to desensitize the American people to infanticide, and the abortion explosion after *Roe v. Wade* shows they've had some success. On the other hand, the polls show that most people still think abortion is wrong, and, as Lincoln said of slavery, "Like every other wrong which some men will commit if left alone, it ought to be prohibited by law."

Is there any chance of that? I think there is, in as much as about 70 percent of Americans disapprove of convenience abortions even in the *first* trimester of pregnancy, and in as much as people like me, when they come to consider the question seriously, have sometimes changed their minds. After all, in this country's nineteenth–century moral crisis, the majority of the people repeatedly rejected slavery. A good example of this happened just a few years before the Civil War began, in the territory of Kansas, where pro–slavery forces made one of their biggest stands. Among other tactics, they rigged an election in order to claim the existence of a pro–slave majority in the territory. But when the balloting was repeated using fair electoral processes, slavery was voted down six–to–one.

There was no pro–slave majority in Kansas, just as there is no pro–abortion majority now. There was a small but very passionate pro–slave minority, and then a majority who recognized a right to freedom for blacks, but didn't want to fight over it. Today, if the courts step out of the way, I think we will find a majority who recognize a right to life for the unborn.

Abortion is founded, as Lincoln said of slavery, on the selfishness of man's nature; opposition to it, in his love of justice. If the love of justice could lead a world that had always known slavery, as mankind had through the nineteenth century, to abolish it, this love can lead America one day to choose life.

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