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Issue #3 - Toddler Tactics: How to Simplify the Abortion Debate

By Scott Klusendorf

Next time a friend or co-worker says the abortion controversy is too complex to resolve, don't panic. Trot out a toddler and clarify what's really at stake.

Pro-life advocates contend that elective abortion unjustly takes the life of a defenseless human being. This simplifies the abortion controversy by focusing public attention on just one question: Is the unborn a member of the human family? If so, killing him or her to benefit others is a serious moral wrong. It treats the distinct human being, with his or her own intrinsic worth, as nothing more than a disposable instrument. Conversely, if the unborn are not human, elective abortion requires no more justification than having a tooth pulled.

This is not a debate between those who are pro-choice and those who are anti-choice. Every pro-life advocate that I know is vigorously “pro-choice” when it comes to women choosing a number of moral goods. They support a woman’s right to choose her own health care provider, to choose her own school, to choose her own husband, to choose her own job, to choose her own religion, and to choose her own career, to name a few. These are among the many choices that pro-life advocates fully support for the women of our country. But some choices are wrong, like

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killing innocent human beings simply because they are in the way and cannot defend themselves.¹ No, we shouldn't be pro-choice about that.

Assuming What You are Trying to Prove

Advocates of elective abortion generally believe that the unborn are not fully human. But instead of proving this conclusion with facts and arguments, many people simply assume it within the course of their rhetoric. We call this "begging the question" and it's a logical fallacy that lurks behind many arguments for abortion. For example, arguing that abortion is justified because a woman has a right to control her own body assumes there is only one body involved—that of the woman. But this is precisely the point abortion advocates try to prove. Hence, they beg the question. Or, take the claim that no one knows when life begins, therefore abortion should remain legal. But to argue that no one knows when life begins, and that abortion must remain legal through all nine months of pregnancy, assumes that life does not begin until birth—the exact point abortion advocates try to prove. This is hardly a neutral position. It is a clear case of begging the question.

Trot Out a Toddler

Here's how to clarify things. If you think a particular argument begs the question regarding the status of the unborn, ask yourself if

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this justification for abortion also works as a justification for killing toddlers or other humans. If not, the argument assumes the unborn are not fully human. Now, it may be the case that the unborn are not fully human and abortion is therefore justified. But this must be argued with evidence, not merely assumed by one's rhetoric. Suppose, for example, that a friend justifies elective abortion this way: "Women have a right to make their own private decisions. What goes on in the bedroom is their business and no one else's." When you hear this, don't panic. Trot out a toddler:

Pro-lifer: You say that privacy is the issue. Pretend that I have a two-year old in front of me (hold out your hand at waist level to illustrate this). May I kill him as long as I do it in the privacy of the bedroom?

Abortion-advocate: That's silly--of course not!

Pro-lifer: Why not?

Abortion-advocate: Because he's a human being.

Pro-lifer: Ah. If the unborn are human, like the toddler, we shouldn't kill the unborn in the name of privacy anymore than we'd kill a toddler for that reason.

Abortion-advocate: You're comparing apples with oranges, two things that are completely unrelated. Look, killing toddlers is one thing. Killing a fetus that is not a human being is quite another.

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Pro-Lifer: Ah. That's the issue, isn't it? Are the unborn human beings, like toddlers? That is the one issue that matters.

Staying Focused

Notice that you've not yet argued for the humanity of the unborn. You'll do that later. For now, all you are doing is framing the issue around one question: What is the unborn? That is the crux of the debate.

Abortion-advocate: But many poor women cannot afford to raise another child.

Pro-lifer: When human beings get expensive, may we kill them? Getting back to my toddler example, suppose a large family collectively decides to quietly dispose of its three youngest children to help ease the family budget. Would this be okay?

Abortion-advocate: Well, no, but aborting a fetus is not the same as killing children.

Pro-lifer: So, once again, the issue is: What is the unborn? Is the fetus the same as a human being? We can't escape that question, can we?

Clarify the Tough Questions--Trot Out Your Toddler

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Abortion-advocate: But what about a woman who's been raped? Every time she looks at that kid she's going to remember what happened to her. If that's not hardship, what is?

Pro-lifer: I agree that we should provide compassionate care for the victim and it should be the best care possible. That's not at issue here. It's your proposed solution I'm struggling to understand. Tell me, how should a civil society treat innocent human beings that remind us of a painful event? Is it okay to kill them so we can feel better? Can we, for example, kill a toddler who reminds her mother of a rape?

Abortion-advocate: No, I wouldn't do that.

Pro-lifer: I wouldn't either. But again, isn't that because you and I both agree that it's wrong to kill innocent human beings, even if they do remind us of a painful event?

Abortion-advocate: But you don't understand how much this woman has suffered. Put yourself in her shoes. How would you feel?

Pro-lifer: You're right. I don't understand her feelings. How could I? How could anyone? I'm just asking if hardship justifies homicide? Can we, for instance, kill toddlers who remind us of painful events? Again, my claim here is really quite modest. If the unborn are members of the human family, like toddlers, we should not kill them to make someone else feel better. It's better to suffer

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evil rather than inflict it.² Personally, I wish I could give a different answer, but I can't without trashing the principle that my right to life shouldn't depend on how others feel about me. In the end, sometimes the right thing to do is not the easy thing to do. And what's right depends on the question: What is the unborn? We can't get around it.

Once you've framed the discussion around the status of the unborn, you can make a scientific and philosophic case for the pro-life position. Scientifically, we know that from the earliest stages of development, the unborn are distinct, living, and whole human beings. Philosophically, there is no morally significant difference between the embryo you once were and the adult you are today. Differences of size, level of development, environment, and degree of dependency are not relevant in the way that abortion advocates need them to be.

Remember, moral clarity starts with just one question: What is the unborn? All other objections miss the point.

1. Greg Koukl, *Precious Unborn Human Persons* (Lomita: STR Press, 1998)

2. Peter Kreeft, *The Unaborted Socrates* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983)