
Abortion and the Ideal of Tolerance

Political democracy requires a readiness to respect and give equal consideration to the moral interests and ideals of others. To the extent that either side falsifies or oversimplifies the issues, the democratic process is made more difficult. To the extent that we lose our reverence for toleration, democracy is threatened. To the extent that we choose immediate gain at the cost of truth and fairness, our national birthright is violated. Ironically, it is the most highly charged issues that most need the exercise of toleration. So it is with abortion, which has been and is likely to continue to be a divisive issue in our society.

Many who favor abortion maintain that killing a human fetus is not killing a person or a potential person. They may admit that a fetus procreated by human parents is both a living being and a human fetus. But in denying its "personhood," they do not believe that it should have moral or legal right to full and equal protection against homicide. Since a human fetus is not a person, a human fetus does not have a right to life. Others, who use a "potential person" criterion, reach a more limited conclusion. They argue that only potential persons have a right to life. Some humans are not potential persons; therefore, some humans do not have a right to life.

Opponents of abortion, including Ronald Reagan, maintain that this is a deliberate dodge, for two reasons: First, if a box is small and blue, why not call it a small blue box? If a fetus is human and a living being, why not call it a living human being? Second, the real question is not at what point personhood begins, but what is the value of human life? And if the fundamental question is the sanctity of human life and not the sanctity only of persons, then any living human deserves full and equal protection against homicide.

The argument is rather simple: All human life is sacred and deserves full and equal protection against homicide. Since a living human fetus is a living human being, it therefore deserves full and equal protection against homicide. In his statement "Abortion and the Conscience of the Nation," the President maintained that "this consideration itself should be enough for all of us to insist on protecting the unborn."

One conclusion that can be drawn is that many Americans disagree on this issue because they are arguing from different premises and different moral principles. Roughly speaking, those who would allow abortion maintain that persons or potential persons have superior moral standing that entitles them and only them to the full pro-

tection of all basic rights, including the rights to life and to privacy. Those who oppose abortion generally maintain that, because the right to life that entitles all humans to full and equal protection is a fundamental and overriding right, appeals to privacy or other rights are simply not relevant.

We are dealing here with competing moral principles. Moral principles are neither self-evident truths nor empirical statements. Therefore our approach to these principles should be significantly different. We are a great nation largely because we believe that excellence is strengthened by the free exchange of ideas. It is one thing to disagree with a moral position; another to deny that it is a moral position. Toleration does not require that we not compete in the free market of ideas or not attempt to show that our view is better than any others. It does require that in competing we show equal consideration for the moral principles of others and that we do not use propaganda, coercion, or the suppression of truth as a means to achieve our ends.

Finally, and perhaps most important, if we pursue our own moral ends by denigrating or trampling on others' moral interests, including the freedom to pursue diverse ideals, we lapse, inadvertently or not, into fanaticism. One of the greatest tragedies of the abortion controversy is that too many on both sides of the dispute have abandoned the ideal of tolerance and bow to the idol of fanaticism.—*Marvin Kohl*