

Counterpoint

Abortion as a Mixed Good *

Marvin Kohl

There are good reasons for supporting a liberal abortion policy. Many anti-abortion arguments we hear today are inadequate. If born human progeny have greater moral standing, if fundamental respect for women demands the recognition of their right to choose responsibly, and if an anti-abortion public policy is deeply harmful, then we have a plausible case for abortion as a mixed good. It is a mixed good because it typically harms by killing another closely akin being—even when an abortion is performed to prevent injury to the life or health of the mother. Moreover, to take away a life leaves many of us with a sense of moral uneasiness, often anguish—even if it be less sentient or only a potential human being, even if it be the best we can morally do in a particular situation. This sentiment is not the result of a Ghandi-like sense of purity. Rather it is due to the understanding that, in many cases, sex education or birth-control might have been workable and, if so, clearly seems to be preferable. A large part of this anguish is that, as with many human problems, we have allowed the situation to develop to the point where the best moral alternative (though not the only one) is to kill another being.

In light of this, I wish to suggest that Richard Taylor and Jeanne Caputo's "Abortion and Morality" (FI, Fall 1982, p. 32) is an unfair portrayal of the problem. First of all, suppose it is true (which I think it is not) that "the question of when a fertilized ovum becomes a 'human being' is clearly unanswerable." Surely it is then at least plausible to maintain that, since a line cannot be successfully drawn, we should assume that we indeed do have a human being from the moment of conception. Taylor and Caputo attempt to parry this criticism by suggesting that, since most fertilized ova are never implanted in the womb, God is the supreme abortionist. Now this slapdash move may be amusing to some,

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but it is clearly fallacious: for the issue in abortion is not the death of the fetus (as in an honest miscarriage or its like), but deliberate killing.

Taylor and Caputo rightfully marshal evidence about the human suffering and the capacity for evil that lies in the proposals to curtail the legal right to abortion. Again, I am sympathetic with their conclusion. But to arrive at it by suggesting that all, or even most, anti-abortionists are blind to morality because they are indifferent to suffering is, at best, simplistic.

First of all, it is one thing to disagree with a moral position and another to deny that it is a moral position. Second, not all harm is suffering; killing someone whose life has, or could have, genuine meaning is plausibly conceived of as an act of harm. Third, dogmatic fundamentalists are not the only ones who oppose abortion. Many reflective people oppose abortion, as utilitarians, because they believe killing is contagious. They believe that a slide is inevitable and therefore that a liberal or moderate abortion policy has net negative utility. Many other opponents of abortion seem to be act intuitionists. They maintain that one can "see" the rightness or wrongness of an act. They maintain that all abortion is wrong because, if one would witness an abortion, one would "see" or intuit the wrongness of that act.

Now both of these positions may be mistaken. Nonetheless they are moral points of view. And the humanist can dismiss them out of hand only if he is willing to embrace the same kind of simple-minded dogmatism he hopes to conquer. Perhaps in the great battle with the Moral Majority it is understandable that some should become almost like their enemies. But an open society, a political democracy, if it is to work well, requires that we have full relevant information as to choices. To the extent either side falsifies or oversimplifies the issues, the process of democracy is made more difficult. To the extent that we humanists lose our reverence for certain ideals or choose immediate political gain at the price of sacrificing truth and fairness, we violate our birthright.