

## *The Role of Philosophy in the Contemporary Abortion Debate*

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*Inspired by Patrick Lee's "A Christian Philosopher's View of Recent Directions in the Abortion Debate," this essay raises the question of how effective philosophical arguments can be in determining the moral status of legalized abortion. On one hand, Christian philosophers have been successful in explaining both the humanity and the personhood of the unborn child, as well as exposing the incoherence of those who would deny the unborn child's humanity or personhood. Nevertheless, in order to confront the pro-abortion position in its most radical form, a much more complex philosophical argument must be given. Following thinkers such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Christian philosophers must articulate and promote a philosophical position according to which morality is conceived in richer terms than the mere respecting of individual rights. The social dimension of human nature must be rediscovered in order that the happiness and welfare of others becomes a desirable goal in and of itself. According to a morality where individual rights is the bottom line (for example, that of Judith Jarvis Thompson), women very well may have the right to "extricate" themselves from their pregnancy even when doing so will result in the death of their child. What must be explained, therefore, is the more profound insight that social morality is equally concerned with obligations to others, including those who are most helpless and unable to speak for themselves.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Patrick Lee's essay provides much clarity for those attempting to understand the primary issues at stake for the philosophical dimensions of the abortion debate. His argument is most certainly the work of a Christian philosopher, and yet he avoids even subtle appeals to the authority of the Christian gospel, realizing the need to present the pro-life case to those who do not share his faith. In this respect, Lee's treatment of the abortion issue should be a model for defenders of the unborn in the secular intellectual arena. The influence of the academic dimension of the abortion debate has often been underestimated with the cynical view that the question of abortion will never be settled, but simply won or lost. This unfortunate opinion is thoroughly refuted by Lee's argument, which shows that rational scrutiny can provide us with a solid foundation for the pro-life position that can be impressed upon the open-minded. Even though many defenders of abortion lack such open-mindedness, a new generation of Americans is coming that is free of the prejudices clung to by their parents. As this new generation begins to enter the university, their minds will be the battleground and arguments like Lee's will be the ammunition.

In reading Lee's essay, I couldn't help but think of a famous remark Aristotle makes at the outset of his *Nicomachean Ethics* regarding the difficulty of providing rational demonstration in the area of morality. Because of the nature of the subject matter, the moral philosopher most often must "be satisfied to indicate the truth with a rough and general sketch" (1962, 1094b20). What Aristotle seems to mean by this is that matters regarding morality do not proceed smoothly from self-evident principles to syllogistically derived conclusions. The principles in question are often the result of traditionally held beliefs solidified through public opinion and tested over the course of time within some sort of political framework. As it happens, this teaching of Aristotle is something Lee appears to understand well. Rather than advancing what he claims to be a knockdown proof of the wrongness of abortion, Lee does something equally devastating to the pro-abortion position, namely, he shows how any reasonable defense of abortion necessarily entails a defense of other absurdly monstrous activities and social policies that all defenders of abortion would find morally unacceptable. This is especially evident in Lee's discussion of personhood (and is intimately connected with the embryological observations made early in the essay). I will begin with a few remarks on that discussion and conclude with some observations on a woman's alleged right to self-determination used to defend abortion, notwithstanding the personhood of the unborn child.

## II. SPECIES MEMBERSHIP, CONSCIOUSNESS, AND PERSONHOOD

After reading Lee's paper, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that any zygote, embryo, or fetus conceived between two human parents must be considered a human being. Once upon a time, of course, this would have been considered a mere superstition based upon some religious doctrine of the soul's infusion into the body by the hand of God. Wisely, Lee avoids such theological claims while presenting the repeatedly confirmed idea that a newly conceived human zygote is a separate individual organism belonging to the human species. What better term for "separate and individual organism belonging to the human species" is there than *human being*? To deny that the human zygote is a human being is to deny the obvious, right?

Unfortunately, this is not as obvious as one might expect. In his recent book entitled *Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Dignity*, Leon Kass (considered to be the most powerful and articulate conservative voice in contemporary bioethics) makes the following puzzling remarks:

Granting that a human life begins at fertilization and develops via a continuous process thereafter, surely—one might say—the blastocyst itself can hardly be considered a human being. I myself would agree that a blastocyst is not, in the *full* sense, a human being—or what the current fashion calls, rather arbitrarily and without clear definition, a person. (2002, p. 88)

Why does Kass deny that a human zygote is a human being in the "full sense?" As he goes on to explain, it is because a human zygote "does not look like a human being nor can it do very much of what human beings do" (p. 88). This is where Lee's analysis of the abortion debate must be invoked, even as a correction to what many would consider to be Kass's moral conservatism.<sup>1</sup> What the zygote cannot do is function as a conscious being or intelligently interact with the world around it. What Kass has failed to recognize, however, is that denying the unborn human the status of personhood on this basis results in very unsavory, and even absurd, conclusions. Equally incapable of consciousness are human beings at the stage of infancy, in comas, or merely asleep. The personhood of such beings is determined not by the active exercise of consciousness, but by their *capacity* for consciousness. To suggest otherwise is to reach the ridiculous conclusion that human beings progressively lose their human dignity the further they are from that active exercise. I do not wish to recapitulate Lee's argument here. Suffice it to say that any defense of abortion that also entails the moral permissibility of infanticide, involuntary euthanasia, and

the indiscriminate killing of those temporarily having lost consciousness is one that even the fiercest defenders of abortion would likely abandon after realizing the full implications of their position.

### III. INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS AND THE ROLE OF SOCIETY

As one learns from Lee's article, however, the question of personhood constitutes only half the debate. One must also reckon with the defense of abortion (originally articulated by Judith Jarvis Thomson) that a woman has the right to terminate her unborn child notwithstanding that child's personhood. This side of the abortion debate is more complex, and exposes the very different understandings of morality and society held by the debate's many participants. It is very telling that Lee appeals to the thought of Alasdair MacIntyre in order to complete his answer to the extreme individualism that lies beneath the surface of this current defense of abortion. As Lee's approach reveals, the alleged right of self-determination has been taken to the extreme of causing some women to see their unborn children as nothing other than beings who makes claims upon them. The morally relevant question becomes not how to act virtuously in difficult situations, nor how to act so as to secure the happiness of all those involved, but rather to determine one's minimum obligations. It is a classic case of the question of right surpassing the question of the good (Grant, 1985, pp. 69–89), and of the replacement of the golden rule ("do unto others as you would have them do unto you") with its minimalist inverse ("do not do unto others as you would not have them do unto you") (Hobbes, 1994, xiii, 5; xv, 35). One might suggest that even the inverse of the golden rule would forbid abortion, since one is taking the life of the innocent, and yet Judith Thomson would promptly respond that, strictly speaking, no life is being *taken*. In having an abortion a mother is simply extricating herself from a situation that results in her child's death. Such are the barbaric results of considering morality strictly in terms of individual rights.

What I believe Lee's appeal to MacIntyre shows is that it is ultimately impossible to persuade someone of the wrongness of killing an innocent human being without showing how a genuine concern for the welfare of others is a constitutive element in one's own welfare. That we have lost this idea should be evident from the mere fact that highly esteemed philosophers have begun to argue that allowing one's unborn child to die is morally justified *notwithstanding* the fact that that child is a person. Once the mentality behind such an argument becomes commonplace among philosophers, the only response is one that involves a philosophical rediscovery of our social nature. Only by such a rediscovery can the

moral minimalism of Thompson's argument be replaced with the view that the human community, and a genuine concern for the welfare of others, is essential to our own happiness, not simply as a means to achieving our own individual ends and protecting our individual rights, but as an end in itself. Should we be surprised that our society has begun to defend the killing of those we consider burdensome when our strongest intellectual influences are philosophers who deny our natural sociability? According to John Locke, for example, the reason for coming into society has nothing to do with any natural love or affection we have for other human beings, but is exclusively bound up with the way in which society promises to preserve our life, our liberty, and the security of our material possessions (1952, § 123). It is not difficult to see from this the way in which an unborn child could be perceived as a threat to the freedom and material wealth that our society has been created to promote.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

To be sure, the many dimensions of Lee's essay reminds us of the Christian intellectual's multi-layered obligation in renewing what Pope John Paul II has called a "culture of life." Not only must we continue to point out the striking implications of recent embryological research. Not only must we continue to unpack the idea of personhood by articulating a philosophically compelling anthropology. We must also follow philosophers like MacIntyre in changing the way we think about the fundamental meaning of our social existence. Patrick Lee has provided a nice sketch of how one might begin this enormous task, but there is much philosophizing yet to be done.

#### NOTE

1. Kass goes on to argue that the human embryo deserves our respect, though not the same respect due to human beings outside the womb.

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