

Abortion and the human foetus

Ottawa *Citizen*, under the headline “A fetus is not a person,” Monday 3 May 2010

Mark Mercer
Department of Philosophy
Saint Mary's University
Halifax, NS B3H 3C3
(902) 420-5825
mark.mercer@smu.ca

Those of us concerned that abortion be legal, safe, and easy to obtain, both in Canada and around the world, need to set aside talk of a woman's right to choose, at least for a moment. Women's reproductive freedom is today under threat, and that's partially because talk of choice seems irrelevant in face of the fact that abortion involves killing human foetuses.

Opponents of abortion insist that an individual's right to do with her body what she wants doesn't include or imply a right to do to other people's bodies what she wants. And they are right, it doesn't.

For that reason, if we are going to show that abortion should remain a private matter, of no interest to the law, we have to address directly the question of killing human foetuses.

The point we must make is that killing a human foetus is not killing a person. The reasons a woman might have for seeking an abortion cannot be outweighed by the foetus's right to life, for, not being a person, the foetus has no such right.

Debates about abortion are often misconceived as debates about when human life begins or whether the foetus is human. Let's remove these misconceptions right away.

The question when human life begins gains no purchase because nowhere in the process of reproduction does anything non-living come to life. The egg is alive, the sperm is alive, and, should the sperm fertilize the egg, the zygote is alive.

For its part, the question whether a human foetus is a human being simply answers itself. A human foetus is a human foetus; it is not the foetus of any other species. At conception, with the creation of a zygote, comes a new human being, another individual animal of our species.

Abortion, then, involves the deliberate or, at least, knowing killing of a human being.

But that abortion involves the deliberate killing of a human being is no reason for abortion to be illegal. No one should in the least be morally troubled by abortion.

To kill a reader of this newspaper would be to kill a creature richly aware of its environment and full of beliefs and desires, including the desire to continue living. To kill him or her would be to kill a self-conscious creature. Thus, to kill a reader of this paper would be to destroy a self-aware locus of experience, one, moreover, that prefers not to die.

That is why only extremely strong, ethically sound reasons could justify killing a reader of this paper. Absent such reasons, we're enjoined to let her live.

A human foetus, on the other hand, though human, has only a rudimentary awareness of its environment and lacks self consciousness entirely. It has no interest in living, for it can have no interests at all.

Because a foetus is not a person, killing a foetus is not killing a person. That established, now comes the time to speak of a woman's right to choose. A pregnant woman is a person, and because easy access to abortion helps her to live her life as she wishes, we as a society should make sure abortion is easily available to women generally.

Now it is true that each human foetus is potentially a person, in that, most likely, in the fullness of time, any particular foetus will become a person. But this is an argument against abortion only if it is better to have that particular future person walking around than it is to respect a here-and-now person's autonomy.

The overall point is that abortion is not in any degree a morally fraught option. A woman considering whether to have an abortion or, instead, to raise a child is making a practical decision, not a moral one. This is what we who are pro-choice have to make more widely known.

Certainly, people who don't want to raise a child should practice contraception, but that's because abortion is a surgical procedure and surgical procedures are risky and consume time, money, and emotion. But from an ethical perspective, there is nothing at all to say against ending an unwanted pregnancy through abortion.