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Why Your Friends Are 'Pro-Choice' (And What to Do About It)

Last month I spoke to the Heretics Club at Colgate University. Given the prevailing secular orthodoxy at most universities, I wasn't sure if the term "heretic" applied to the speaker or his listeners!

To my great joy, the turnout was above normal---thanks to excellent promotional work by the two chaplains who sponsor the club. I began with a statement of goodwill: "I'm not here to change your mind on the spot, but to simply lay out my reasons for thinking the pro-life view is true and reasonable to believe. I will argue my case using science and philosophy, as well as discuss the two strongest objections to my view---David Boonin's 'desire' argument and Judith Jarvis Thomson's 'violinist' argument. Then, I hope to hear from you. It will be your turn to ask anything you want, and I'll do my best to give your concerns a fair hearing."

By all accounts, the event was a smashing success. Three secular students told a faculty adviser they were rethinking their views as a result of the talk. A dozen students stayed long after the formal question-and-answer session to pepper me with additional questions.

Of course, not everyone was convinced on the spot. During the extended question and answer, a polite female student replied (paraphrase), "I'm against abortion and will never have one. If one of my friends gets pregnant and wants an abortion, I will do everything I can to talk her out of it. But I don't want the government involved in taking away a woman's choice. I guess that's why I'm against abortion and am pro-choice."

The student was hardly alone. She was echoing the sentiments of millions of Americans who personally dislike abortion but do not identify as pro-life. Their beliefs are perfectly summed up in this popular bumper sticker: "Don't like abortion? Don't have one."

Confusing Moral Claims with Preference Claims

Notice the bumper sticker completely transforms the nature of the abortion debate with a single word---"like."

When pro-life advocates claim that elective abortion unjustly takes the life of a defenseless human being, they aren't saying they dislike abortion. They are saying it's objectively wrong, regardless of how one feels about it. Notice what's going on here. The pro-life advocate makes a moral claim that he believes is objectively true---namely, that elective abortion unjustly takes the life of a defenseless human being. The abortion-choice advocate responds by changing that objective truth claim into a subjective one about likes and dislikes, as if the pro-lifer were talking about a mere preference. But this misses the point entirely. As Francis J. Beckwith [points out](#), pro-life advocates don't oppose abortion because they find it distasteful; they oppose it because it violates rational moral principles.

Imagine if I said, "Don't like slavery? Then don't own a slave." Or, "Don't like spousal abuse? Then don't beat your wife!" If I said such things, you would immediately realize I don't grasp why slavery and spousal abuse are wrong. They are not wrong because I personally dislike them. They are wrong because slaves and spouses are intrinsically valuable human beings who have a natural right not to be treated as property. Whether I personally like slavery or spousal abuse is completely beside the point. If I liked spousal abuse, you would rightly say I was sick! You wouldn't resign yourself to, "I guess abuse is right for you but not for me."

And yet this is precisely what the pro-choicer does. He reduces abortion to a mere preference and then declares, "Hands off! Keep the government out of the abortion business!"

What Do You Mean By 'Keep Government Out'?

Ironically, the pro-choicer fails to recognize two key facts that completely undermine his appeal for government neutrality. First, the federal government is already deeply involved in abortion. In fact, one branch of the government, the federal courts, has completely co-opted the abortion issue---leaving the executive and legislative branches with no say. As law professor Hadley Arkes stated in his [testimony before Congress](#), the courts have exclusive authority to first invent, then broadly apply, the abortion license---leaving the people with no voice on the matter through their elected officials. The American people may talk about abortion all they want, but they have no real say on the matter. Federal judges speak for them.

Second, government neutrality is impossible on abortion. The law either recognizes the unborn as valuable human beings and thus protects them, or it doesn't and permits killing them. By agreeing that human fetuses are fitting subjects for abortion, the federal courts are taking a public policy position that the unborn don't deserve the same protections owed toddlers or other human beings. This is hardly a neutral position; it's an extremely controversial one with deep metaphysical underpinnings. Thus, when people tell me the federal government should stay out of the abortion decision, I take my cue from Arkes and ask, "Including the federal courts?"

The Fix: Ask Why

Here's how I engaged the student at Colgate University. When she said she was personally against abortion but wanted to keep it legal, I asked a very [simple question](#) I learned from Greg Koukl: "Why are you against abortion?" When she replied, "Because it's killing, and I personally think it's wrong to do that," I asked: "What does abortion kill?" She was hesitant, but honest: "Um, I guess a human being?"

She's right. If abortion doesn't unjustly kill an innocent human being, why oppose it at all? Then, very gently, I pressed the point home. "Let me see if I understand you correctly---and if I don't, please feel free to clarify. You're personally against abortion because you think it wrongly kills a human being, but you want it to be legal to kill that human being?"

I appreciated her candid reply. "I don't know. I'm still trying to figure that out."

Notice two things I did. First, when she essentially said women have a right to choose, I asked her to complete her own sentence: Choose what? Never proceed without spelling out exactly what will be chosen! Second, once she clarified the choice in question, I asked *why* she thought that particular choice was wrong. That one question transformed the debate from a discussion about likes and dislikes to one about what's right and what's wrong.

Until that transformation takes place, don't be surprised if your friends are "pro-choice."