Abortion: Murder, or Removal of Tissue?

by Dane Inouye

Suzy was eighteen years old and was about to start a new chapter in her life. She had a full-ride academic scholarship to attend the University of Hawai‘i, where she planned to major in nursing. Suzy’s life was going exactly the way she had planned it—go to college, become a nurse, meet the perfect man, and then start a family when she was around twenty-five. That’s when her doctor told her the startling news, “Suzy, you’re pregnant.” Suzy was very active in her church and had always been against abortion but she never thought she would be put into this situation. Suzy was mad, scared and sad all at the same time. She thought to herself, “How could this have happened to me? I still have dreams and other things I want to accomplish. What am I going to do?” This is the same issue that faces thousands of American women each year, Abortion.

In the United States there has not always been an abortion controversy. Laurence Tribe writes that in post-Revolution America, abortions were allowed and not uncommon (Tribe 28). It wasn’t until 1821 that Connecticut prohibited abortions, though only abortions induced by dangerous poisons. The anti-abortion movement did not gain speed until the mid 1800’s. It was actually physicians who began to oppose abortion. Tribe says that this was because there was an increase in untrained doctors promising miraculous abortions. Physicians wanted to protect women and stop competition from untrained health providers (Tribe 30). It wasn’t until this time that America’s view on abortion began to change. In 1869, Pope Pius IX declared abortions immoral, bringing the Roman Catholic Church into the controversy. According to Tribe, in less than two decades over forty anti-abortion laws were passed in the U.S. (Tribe 34).

The abortion controversy began to gain speed in the 1950’s. This was due in part to advances in the medical field that were making abortions and pregnancies safer. Women of this time were also beginning to enter the work force. As many women began their careers, they didn’t have time for pregnancy, so they started the pro abortion argument.

In 1973 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of Jane Roe in Roe vs. Wade, making abortions legal in the United States. Even after this landmark decision was handed down there continued to be a heated debate.

Today, there are over a million abortions performed in the U.S. annually (Abortion). Recently, many legislators have been lobbying to get Roe vs. Wade overturned. South Dakota has banned nearly all abortions, setting the stage for pro-life advocates to challenge the law. According to the Planned Parenthood Federation of America there are ten other states considering abortion bans (CNN).

At the center of the abortion controversy lies the question of when human life begins. This one question could swing the pendulum in favor of either side. So much of the debate rages over the question of personhood. Conservatives say that life begins at conception, the union of sperm and ovum. Liberals argue that for the fetus to be considered a person it must be able to survive on its own, having both consciousness and self-consciousness. America seems to be at a standstill on this issue. President Bush, along with many churches, believes that life begins at conception, making abortion immoral. On the other side, many liberals and feminists believe that life doesn’t begin until birth. This makes abortion just the removal of “a ball of cells”.

I believe that “personhood” is subjective. It does not have one definitive definition. Therefore, personhood is based on what each individual defines it as. In this sense, abortion cannot be placed in black and white terms. By examining each side of the argument one is able to create their own definition of abortion, making it moral or immoral in their mind.

Anti-abortionists often argue that all forty-six chromosomes are present at conception, creating the fetuses blueprint for its entire life. From that point forward the fetus will go through different stages and develop into an adult. Stephen Scharz writes that a child in the womb is the same person as when he is born and when he is a teenager and an adult. He has just changed and is in different stages of development (Scharz 32). The fetus is a person from the time when two haploid cells (the sperm and egg) unite to create a human being. These anti-abortionists argue that by killing the fetus one is murdering a human in its first stage of development.

Other pro-life advocates such as Landrum Shettles and David Rorvik, argue that the fetus is a potential life (Rorvik 18). Within every cell there
is DNA, and after conception the zygote will have inherited its own individual, unique DNA. From this, the zygote’s genotype will be established, which Shettles and Rorvik say is the “most decisive circumstance that makes you who you are” (Rorvik 18). Conception starts the series of events that leads up to and ends in a child’s birth. The fetus is able to use its DNA to direct and mature itself into a person. By making the fetus a potential human, one would be killing something that will on its own become a person.

Pro-abortionists may argue that if the fetus is a potential life then wouldn’t a sperm or egg be considered a potential life? As Donald DeMarco writes, gametes are not able to direct themselves into development (DeMarco). So they would not be considered a potential life because they would need to be able to direct their own growth into an individual. As Shettles and Rorvik write, they are only parts that make up human life, not human life itself (Rorvik 19).

Steven Schwartz concludes that since the fetus guides itself into forming a child it can’t be considered just “a bunch of cells”. Nothing new gets added while the fetus is forming that gives it “personhood” so, the fetus already has personhood (Schwartz 33). There is no place to draw the line to say “here is where personhood was added.” The person is already in the womb by the fact that at no place does something special like personhood get added.

Religion takes a deep look at the Bible for help in the abortion controversy. The Bible does not specifically refer to anything about abortion but many inferences can be made. Anti-abortionist often turn to Psalm 139:13-16 where David tells God “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb (Holy Bible, Psalm 139:13-16). This verse implies that God creates a person in the mother’s womb. The Bible often refers to the fetus as child or man which gives the fetus personhood. In Luke 1:15 the Bible says “he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth [or from his mother’s womb] (Holy Bible, Luke 1:15).” This verse says that even in the women’s womb the fetus is filled with the Holy Spirit. Throughout the Bible many inferences can be made that God creates the fetus as a person, giving the fetus personhood from conception.

In his article Deciding Abortion Daniel Oliver looks at abortion from a different point of view by saying: What if we allow abortions and the fetus is a person, and what if we ban abortion but the fetus isn’t a person (Oliver)? If we allow abortion but the fetus is a person then we have just committed murder. On the other hand if we ban abortion but the fetus is not a person then we have obstructed for no reason a women’s choice to do what she wishes. Oliver uses the example of a building. He says imagine if a building was about to be demolished but a few onlookers said they think they saw a boy in the window. Halting the demolition would cost the company millions of dollars but they of course would stop to investigate (Oliver). This is called the Precautionary Principle, which states that if the consequences of an action are unknown, but are judged to have some potential for major or irreversible negative consequences, then it is better to avoid that action (Precautionary Principle). With abortions, there is the possibility that a human life will be irreversibly damaged, so it is best to avoid the action.

Pro-abortionists have always argued that for personness to be granted, the fetus must show consciousness and self-consciousness. Frank Zindler states that even though fetuses move, show sensitivity to pain and have a heartbeat and brainwaves, this does not mean they are persons, because earthworms have the same characteristics (Zindler 26). The difference is consciousness, but as Michael Bettencourt describes, consciousness is not easily defined but is easily seen in the absence. Someone who has lost consciousness, who is unable to see and interact with the world, or see his place in the world, is quite easily pointed out (Bettencourt 38). While the fetus does show signs of life, it does not show consciousness until after birth. Therefore, it cannot be given the same rights as a person is given.

Pro-abortion scientists argue that based on studying exceptions in the development of zygotes, one cannot give a fetus personhood. If personhood is considered from the time of conception, what do we make of twins? They start off from one cell but split to from two distinct individuals. Does this mean that the twins are one person? As Dr. Milby describes, cloning could give an example on why a fetus cannot be considered a person. Based on cloning, it has been proven that it is not only a zygote that can support the development of a person; almost any kind of cell with the normal chromosomes is able to do the same (Milby). Another example could be parthenogenesis, which is the development of an organism from a haploid cell. Milby describes that parthenogenesis has been induced and observed in a variety of animals from lizards to rabbits (Milby). If a fetus is given personhood because it is able to develop into a person, then even haploid cells such as an ovum should be given personhood rights. Finally, Dr. Milby describes a unique event called chimera, where two fertilized eggs become one (Milby). The only explanation is that the fetus is not yet a person.
because two people cannot join to become one. Through twins, parthenogenesis, and chimera, Dr. Milby describes how a fetus cannot be considered a person.

John Robertson takes time to break down and justify Roe v. Wade in his piece Gestational Burden and Fetal Status: Justifying Roe vs. Wade. He talks about how if a fetus were protected under the fourteenth amendment, then they would be given the same right to live as a person. Even by giving the fetus the rights of a person, it would not give it the right to the body of another person (Robertson). The right to use the body of another person can only come from a willing candidate. According to Robertson, sexual intercourse does not constitute willingness for gestation, even though the risk of procreation exists (Robertson). Fetuses then, should not be given the status of personhood until they are viable.

The Bible can also be used to support the pro-abortion movement. The most convincing argument comes from Exodus 21:22 where the Bible talks about what happens if men are fighting and hit a pregnant woman, causing a miscarriage. The Bible says that if there is no serious injury [to the women] then the offender must be fined whatever the husband asks, but if there is serious injury [to the women] then one must take an “eye for an eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand,...” (Holy Bible, Exodus 21:22). This implies that the woman is worth more than the fetus. The first part of the statement says that if a woman loses her baby but is not hurt, it becomes civil matter, with payment being what the husband asks. The second part of the statement talks about if the women is killed or hurt, then the man who killed her must be killed. This puts the women’s life in greater value than that of the fetus.

Often, anti-abortionists will argue that the fetus feels pain and they will try to show pictures of aborted fetuses. As Bettencourt argues, this does nothing but reason with our ability to sympathize (Bettencourt 40). Pro-abortionists even say that fetuses don’t have a well enough developed cerebral cortex to feel pain until at least the 4th month. Even then, it’s not until after birth that the nervous connections and sensory inputs register pain. Before that the fetus’s actions are reflexive. These tactics are used to try to get us to develop strong emotional ties with the fetus, but do not have any facts supporting them.

In opposition of Shettles and Rorvik, Bettencourt denies genes being “the most important thing in determining who you are.” He says that awareness comes from constant negotiation with the world (Bettencourt 38). Fetuses are not able to negotiate with the world and are thus not people. They possess a layout of a possible personality but are not a definitive individual. The individual comes from the constant relationship with the outside world and is not something written purely in genes.

Often, anti-abortionists will agree that abortions should be allowed only if the mothers’ life is endangered by the pregnancy. As Zindler points out, agreeing to this is admitting that the fetus is less important than the women who is carrying it (Zindler 29). Just by saying that one is able to sacrifice the fetus to save the women, they are implying that the fetus holds less status than the woman. On the other hand, by saying abortions should not be allowed even to save a woman’s life, then they are saying that a woman is not worth more than a single cell (Zindler 29).

Both pro-lifers and pro-abortionists make some strong points about the validity of their claims, touching on different aspects from science, religion, morality, and ethics. As one can see, proving one right and one wrong is not easy. If we take a look at what science can tell us about abortion we find out that at around one month into the pregnancy the fetus’s heart, digestive organs, spinal cord and backbone begin to develop. After three months the fetus starts to become recognizable as human. Its arms, legs, fingers, and toes are fully formed and most organs and tissues are developed. At around five months the fetus begins to develop reflexes such as sucking and swallowing. The sex is identifiable and the mother is able to feel the fetus moving. At eight months the fetus will be able to survive outside of the body but would need very special care. Most organs are well developed. In this stage there will be a great deal of brain growth. At nine months the fetus is fully formed and is ready for birth (Fetal Development). It appears that these steps will not tell us anything unless we have a definition of personhood to begin with. Science is not definitive on when a fetus gains personhood.

If science cannot give an answer on whether or not a fetus is a person then maybe religion can tell us. The Bible implies many times that the fetus is considered a child or person. While many anti-abortionists may argue that this gives the fetus full and equal rights as a person, the Bible also contradicts itself by saying that the fetus’s life is worth less than the mothers. The fetuses’ life should be worth the same as the women if it were a person. Surely, I would like to have the same right to live as my mother.

After examining both science and religion one still is unable to conclude definitively when personhood
begins. Morality or ethics may be able to provide us with the answer. Pro-life advocates state that human life begins at conception, so murdering a fetus would be equal to murdering a human life. But, as Jane English points out, self-defense can be a justified means to take a human life (English 44). So, not all taking of human lives are considered immoral. On the other side pro-choice advocates argue that since the fetus is not a person, a women should be able to do what she pleases. Jane English argues that, even if the fetus is not a person that does not mean that one is able to do as one pleases with it. For example, even though animals are not people, it is wrong to kill and torture them (English 44). Morality and ethics also appear to be giving us two answers to our question.

Examining our definition of a person could give us a start on where personhood begins. Some general conditions could be: descendent from humans, having a certain type of DNA, having hands feet, head, arms, and eyes. There are also psychological factors such as conciousness, perception, ability to use language, signals, ability to use tools, having a concept of self and ones own interest and desires. Some social factors could include the ability to work with others, sympathize, love, encourage, and value the interest of others (English 45). This list is not complete. It could also be argued that just because one does not possess some of these traits, they are not necessarily inhuman or it could be argued that just possessing a majority of these traits does not make one human. Are people who do not possess arms or legs, or who are blind or have a psychological disease not considered a person? Or could a robot with exceptional artificial intelligence be considered a person? As one is able to see, our definition of personhood can vary greatly depending on the situation.

In the case in my introduction, Suzy will have to examine deep within herself to see what she believes makes up a person. Judging abortion moral or immoral can only come from one’s definition of personhood. As you can see this is a very complicated definition to come up with. Therefore, the choice should be left up for the individual to decide what a person is. The law should not be the one making this decision.
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