

## Abortion Argument

David Kolb

AA<sup>1</sup>: Talking about abortion, would it be fair to say that you're claiming that anytime a unique sperm and egg come together the fertilized egg, soon to be an embryo, becomes a unique person worthy of respect and not to be killed voluntarily.

BB: Yes, that's what I'm saying.

AA: I might want to argue about whether we have a person there or a potential person, but let's agree that we have a genetically unique individual capable of becoming a human person.

BB: Fine, as long as you don't try to use that "capability" to say that at this early stage we are allowed to kill it.

AA: I might want to argue that at another time, but for now I want to let your principle stand. I want to study what it implies.

BB: Why you want to do that?

AA: My suspicion is that while you want to claim this principle is an absolute prohibition you don't really use it that way.

BB: What do you mean?

AA: That what's really going on is not an absolute prohibition but a drawing of lines.

BB: You're not being very clear.

AA: I will be later on. Let me start by taking an obvious case: should a child who is genetically deficient in some way or another, but viable, late in pregnancy, be aborted?

BB: No. The child's life should be defended.

AA: Even though that means immense expense and difficulty for the parents and for society later on in the child's life?

BB: The principle of respect for life takes precedence over the future expense.

AA: I'd be more willing to agree about that if the people who are fighting against

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1. "AA" and "BB" are temporary placeholders while I try to find suitable names for the two voices.

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abortion were willing to put some money behind that claim, but let's come back to the issue later.

BB: Issues of principle override economic considerations.

AA: I'm trying to find out if they really do, in all cases. Let me modify the example: it's early in the pregnancy when the genetic problem is discovered. Does that change your judgment?

BB: No, why should it?

AA: Another example: during in vitro fertilization a genetic problem is discovered with a particular embryo prior to implantation. Can it be discarded?

Obviously I should be opposing in vitro fertilization because it creates a cluster of embryos and only uses one or two of them.

AA: So you're willing to forbid that procedure?

BB: For consistency with the principle, yes.

AA: Now another example. You know miscarriages happen often. There are many different causes. Sometimes there is genetic problem with the fetus and the body rejects it. I presume you would have no trouble if that were to happen?

BB: That's right, no one is actively deciding to kill a human being.

AA: I'm not so sure, because although no conscious decision was made, somebody's body is rejecting the fetus. But let that issue be.

BB: All right.

AA: Going on: there is another kind of miscarriage, sometimes called incompetent uterus, where nothing is wrong with the child, but some problem with the musculature in the mother's uterus causes the baby to miscarry when it reaches a certain weight.

BB: There are treatments for that if it is known to be an impending danger.

AA: Right. But presume no treatment is available or that the danger hasn't been realized. You have a healthy fetus which is dying in those circumstances. If you saw this happening, would you have an obligation to try to prevent it?

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BB: I would think so, but this gets into the delicate the area between killing and letting die.

AA: Yes, and this is where I want to apply your principle. It seems to me that if you respect life and you have the opportunity to avoid a death, and you believe that every fertilized egg is unique human person, you have some responsibility not to let fertilized eggs die unnecessarily.

BB: I can agree with that in general, but I'm not sure what you're implying for concrete cases.

AA: What I'm implying is this: Many children are alive today who would have died a century ago, because the technology for dealing with premature birth has improved so much since then. That's all to the good, but let's extend it. In the near future it will technologically possible to save more fetuses and fertilized eggs than we do now. We can imagine the technology improving to the point where one could intervene earlier and earlier, saving children who are being spontaneously aborted or miscarried. Do you have have an obligation under your principle to develop and apply that technology?

BB: I'm not sure.

AA: People arguing pro-life site cite horrendous statistics about the number of children murdered per year. Even more fetuses and fertilized eggs may be dying through neglect or ignorance. Isn't there some obligation to try to rescue them?

BB: What are you suggesting?

AA: I could suggest lots of things: testing for every woman who is pregnant to measure the dangers of spontaneous abortion and miscarriage. Or having women wear appliances to catch menstrual flows so we can make sure that they do not contain spontaneously aborted or non-implanted fertilized eggs that could be saved, or even...

BB: That's going pretty far. It would not be practical. Think of the inconvenience, and impossibility of monitoring compliance, and the social disruption it would cause.

AA: Exactly my point. Which means that you are not in fact drawing on an absolute principle that every fertilized egg is to be respected. You factor in other considerations, drawing lines for economic and practical and social reasons. I

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pushed into the early stages of pregnancy to make that point. But in the current debate it's the late stages of pregnancy that get discussed. At what point does one forbid abortion after the first trimester etc, worrying about partial-birth abortion and other dramatic events. People talk that way suggesting that an absolute prohibition is being broken but, by pushing the line in the other direction I'm trying to point out that we're all talking about convenience, inconvenience, economics, social disruption, while overall trying to minimize inappropriate loss of life.

BB: Killing and letting die are different.

AA: The difference between killing and letting die is complicated but there's clearly some proportional measure involved. If I'm walking by a freezing lake and someone drowning in the middle is shouting for help, I may be a hero if I risk my own life trying to rescue them, but while I might be shamed I won't be condemned for not trying. On the other hand if I'm walking by the lake and all I have to do is reach down and grab an arm that's reaching up to me, I would be considered morally guilty if I didn't help the person.

BB: Yes, clearly not letting die at some point will demand too high a cost. Consider traffic accidents; we tolerate deaths that could be avoided if we invested in new tech and new modes of transportation.

AA: But that reinforces my argument. The more absolutely you say human life must be respected at all costs, the higher you set that bar. But my early pregnancy example shows that at some point you do let costs override the obligation to save life. I'm perfectly willing to debate abortion on the terms of what kind of social individual financial emotional costs there may be on a particular decision. What I'm not willing to do is to let you claim that the abortion case is settled in advance by an absolute prohibition. I've tried to show you don't really believe that the principle is completely absolute and overrides all other considerations.

BB: You are trying to take away the pro-life appeal to the moral high ground.

AA: Yes. I think it's either insincere, or not well thought out. We're all on the same level trying to draw difficult lines and criteria. My pro-abortion side will argue that in some cases, more than you would like, those other factors outweigh the prohibition, which, I'm trying to show, you yourself do not take as absolute.