

A Reasoned Argument against Abortion

*Homily adapted from
Peter Kreeft, Making Choices (Servant Books, 1990)*



Why do you think our Lord died on the cross for our sins? Obviously out of love for us. To love someone is to value his or her life. Our Lord died for us because He valued our lives. Today, the intrinsic value of human life is under attack around the world. For this reason I shall speak on one of the most blatant assaults on the worth of human life: Abortion.

Many people, I am sure, are rather tired of hearing about abortion. They think that they have heard all the arguments so why keep bringing it up? Well, for a number of reasons. First, because most people have not heard all the arguments or even the most important ones. Most generally hear only what the newspapers, magazines, radio and television let them hear. Second, because abortion has not gone away but increased its hold upon the psyche of our land. In Canada it now causes almost as many deaths as cancer and heart disease combined. Except in this case the deaths are intentional and the victims are the unborn. Third, the mentality that helped legitimize abortion is now spreading to other life issues such as euthanasia, assisted suicide, reproductive technologies, foetal experimentation (including embryonic stem cell research), and, as soon as science and technology permit, forms of eugenics – designer babies.

Abortion is an issue on which no moral compromise is possible. That is why so many politicians and ordinary Canadians are uncomfortable with it. Either abortion is the killing of innocent human beings – children, our children – and so homicide and should be stopped, or abortion is not the killing of innocent human

beings, is not homicide, and any legal restriction against it is intolerable. Both sides cannot be right. I shall now present a basic reasoned argument for the position that abortion is wrong and should be stopped.

The case against abortion rests on four premises: one is religious, one is ethical, another is scientific, and the last is legal. Given these four premises the conclusion inescapably follows.

The first and most important premise is **religious**. Yes, the case against abortion rests on religious grounds, but not that of any particular religion. It involves the category of the sacred and the sacred is a religious category.

The premise is simply that every human life is sacred. This means its value is absolute not relative: not relative to money, or convenience, or other people's desires, or society's opinion. The value of my life is not dependent on whether I am convenient to you or not; whether I interfere with your plans or not; whether you want me or not; whether society accepts me or not.

In other words, every person is an end and not a means to an end and should be treated as such. We use things as means of getting something else (i.e. money to buy a car; a car to get to work). But people are not things to be used. They are ends. That is, they have value in their own right and not for what we get from them. If we treat people as means and things as ends instead of the other way around: if we love things and use people, instead of using things and loving people, then we reverse reality's order. We violate reality and we are wrong in doing so.

This "religious" premise is so morally fundamental that one need not be a Christian, or of any particular religion at all, to recognize it. Stated another way, it is the belief that human beings are not things to be used but persons to be respected and loved. Can any sane or moral person disagree with it? The whole concept of "human rights" is implicitly based on it.

The second premise is **ethical**. It states that murder, defined as the deliberate killing of an innocent human being, is wrong. The second premise, unbeknownst to many legislators, is based on the first. The reason why murder is wrong is that human life is sacred. It has an absolute value and is not relative to pragmatic ends. It is this sacredness that makes the deliberate killing of innocent human beings murder while it does not make the killing of chickens for your supper murder. Human beings are an end and not a means to an end. While one may legitimately

question the humaneness of animal factory farms no sensible person puts them in the same moral category as an Auschwitz or the Soviet gulags. Human life being sacred, no individual or group has a right to destroy it, except perhaps in legitimate self-defence – when one's own sacred thing (i.e. life) is threatened.ⁱ

An ethics that has no sense of the sacred has no absolute values. Deny absolute values, then nothing is intrinsically right or wrong, only that which one chooses to call right or wrong. If one says all values are relative, as many do today, so that each person can decide his own values, what is the logical consequence? One is then saying that each person can choose for himself what he considers morally acceptable. You think stealing is wrong? Maybe it is wrong by your values but not by mine. The same would hold true for racism, rape, robbery, etc. To be consistent (and few people are), if one claims morality is simply a matter of personal choice, one cannot consider these things as intrinsically wrong. We have prisons full of people who say, "Yes" to this view. Some might counter that a personal choice of action is okay "so long as you do not hurt someone else." Prescinding from how such an absolute moral claim can be made if all values are relative, what of the unborn child in abortion? Is he or she hurt by a personal choice?ⁱⁱ

The third premise is **scientific**. It is a fact, a scientific fact, that from the moment of conception there exists a genetically programmed distinct individual member of the species "human being." This is proven by the DNA, which is as distinct and human as that of its mother or father, as you or me. Therefore, a foetus is not merely a "blob" of tissue; it is a human being. The DNA proves it.

Nor is it merely a part of the mother. While physically attached and dependent on her it is nonetheless distinct from her. One's humanity is not determined by geographic location or degree of dependency. To claim that the foetus is simply a part of the mother would be to define a pregnant woman as a human being with four eyes, two heads, four legs – because the part of her called the foetus also has eyes, a head and legs. This is obviously ridiculous.

Some use the term "foetus" in reference to an unborn child as if it designated something other than a human being. "Foetus" simply designates a human being at a particular stage of development, just like "infant" and "adolescent," not a difference in being. While all animals in the womb are called foetuses not all animal foetuses are human beings. The nature of a foetus is determined by parentage. And the product of human is human. Genetically a human foetus does not become a human being at viability or birth or later. Every change between

conception and death is a relative one – of size, shape, strength, independence, etc. Only at the beginning and end of human life are there absolute changes. Before conception you simply did not exist; after death you no longer exist on this earth. At conception you came into existence. We are all former foetuses. And since a foetus is a distinct human individual its life is sacred, has its own rights, and comes under the commandment "Thou shalt not kill."ⁱⁱⁱ

Finally, there is the **legal** premise. The primary purpose of law is to protect human rights. And among these rights is the right to life. Law must therefore protect human life. My right to shoot my gun ends at your body. Your right to control your own body ends where my body begins. A pregnant woman's right over her own body ends where her baby's body begins. Law must protect the rights of all of us, not just some. The more basic the right the more it needs to be legally recognized and protected. And the most fundamental right is the right to life. You cannot exercise your right to free speech, or free association, or to an economic livelihood if you are not first alive. Therefore the law should protect the right of the unborn to life.

This has repercussions on the stance of political parties, since elected officials have power to enact protective laws for the unborn. Some protest that in politics it is necessary to be more than a "one issue party." Such a slogan, however, simply misses the point. The point is not whether a particular political party is concerned with more than one issue – they all are – but whether it recognizes fundamental issues as fundamental. If it does not, then a political party may have a lot going for it but still perpetuate a great evil. I will make a rather strong comparison in order to give clarity to the point. The Nazi party built the Autobahn highway (which is still in use today), established many youth programs, and got the German economy out of a severe depression. In themselves these are all commendable things. But I still would not vote for the Nazi Party because their principles and policies violated fundamental human rights. Any party or politician, however commendable in other respects, that supports abortion is violating a fundamental human right and should not be voted for.

The conclusion from these four premises – the religious, ethical, scientific, and legal – is that abortion is a serious moral evil and should be outlawed. Our response as Christians and Canadian citizens is manifold:

I. We must do all that is morally permissible to protect the unborn. This does not include murdering abortionists as, contrary to the insinuations of pro-abortion media, almost all pro-lifers acknowledge.

2. We need to contact and encourage our parliamentarians to effect laws to protect the unborn.
3. We need to examine the abortion (and other life issues) stand of political candidates and parties during elections and vote with this in mind.
4. We should morally and economically support and encourage women in crisis pregnancies, either individually or through groups such as Birthright or the Miriam Centre.
5. We must present the pro-life side of issues as best we can when it is challenged by friends, co-workers, or in the media. This means educating yourself on the issues and arguments.
6. We should join or financially support pro-life groups who publicly represent the pro-life cause, such as Action Life and Campaign Life Coalition. They can also provide helpful resources and information.
7. We should personally participate in pro-life activities.
8. Finally, since we battle not men but principalities and powers, we must pray to God for His help. Before God there are no neutral corners. There is no sitting on the sidelines of life. All are called to bear witness to the truth, in season and out of season. What is at stake here is the type of world we hand on to our children and grandchildren, the saving of human lives, the salvation of souls, and our fidelity to Jesus Christ. Let us not be found sleeping in this crucial hour when we are so desperately needed.

ⁱ Some have argued that in cases where the life of the mother is threatened by her pregnancy is abortion not a legitimate application of the principle of self-defence? Several points need to be made:

- (1) The vast majority of today's abortions (about 96%) have nothing to do with protecting the life or health of the mother, or rape or incest for that matter, and more to do with protecting the lifestyle of the mother and father. According to Statistics Canada (2005) over 90% of women give socio-economic reasons for terminating their pregnancy. About 3% claim personal health problems (not necessarily life-threatening), while less than 1% give rape or incest as the reason. So even if the self-defence argument were valid it would still not legitimize the overwhelming majority of today's abortions – in which it is simply being used as a backup birth control method. Yet when Canada's Criminal Code was being amended in 1969 to widen the legal grounds for abortion, the public was informed that it was essentially to deal with cases involving the health of the mother, rape and incest. Yet the actual result was abortion on demand. The old legal adage that difficult cases make for bad laws was ignored but proven true.

The "hard cases" approach is now being utilized in the same manner by advocates of legalized euthanasia and assisted suicide, to gain public and parliamentary sympathy and advance their true goal of euthanasia/assisted suicide on demand.

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- (2) In the few cases where a pregnancy is physically dangerous to the mother, modern medicine has developed to the point that frequently both the mother and baby's life can be saved. Back in 1951 Dr. R. Heffernan, then President of Tufts Medical school, stated in an address to the American College of Surgeons: "Anyone who performs therapeutic abortion is either ignorant of modern medical methods or unwilling to take the time and effort to 'apply them'."
 - (3) The argument from self-defence generally involves a life-threatening attack by an *intentional* aggressor. But the baby in the womb is not an intentional aggressor and should not therefore be treated as such. How then should the unborn child be treated? As another innocent party, like the mother, intimately involved in a dangerous pregnancy. In other words the unborn baby is another patient – just as in cases of rape or incest the unborn baby is another victim. Doctors are morally bound to do all that they can to save the life of both patients. In the rare instances where saving the life of both patients is not possible then a doctor may perform necessary medical procedures that are aimed at saving one patient's life but have the *unintended* and *unavoidable* consequence of killing the other. (This cannot include direct abortion since that is intentionally aimed at killing one of the patients.) Such an action would be a legitimate application of the principle of double effect – a foundational moral principle when deliberating on actions undertaken for a real good that have a foreseeable but unavoidable harmful secondary effect.

ⁱⁱ Some try to escape the logic of moral relativism by saying society or one's culture sets the norms as to what is right or wrong. But if each society or culture is the legitimate determiner of its own morality then a society that allows slavery (such as the old Confederate South) or apartheid (such as former South Africa) or the beating of one's wife (such as Saudi Arabia) is not really wrong in doing so, only different, and we should not criticize it. In fact, external pressure to change such a society would be a form of cultural imperialism. And if the state, which is the governing authority in a society, determines which moral norms shall carry the weight of law, then there can be nothing wrong with the state taking from you any so-called "right" it wants. After all, if state laws gave you the right in the first place then state laws can take it away too. Human "rights" then become a legal fiction existing at the state's discretion. It is only in recognizing human life as sacred, and moral norms as rooted in our common human nature, that the claims of moral relativism can be avoided.

ⁱⁱⁱ Some abortion advocates argue that while the foetus is a *human being* it is not a *human person*. Such an argument claims that there is a radical difference between the designation "human being" and "human person," so much so that being the latter gives one a right to life while being the former does not. The former is treated as designating simply the physical attributes of a particular animal species, the latter as designating the attributes of man as a thinking being. And it is this ability to think, they argue, sometimes referred to as "rationality," "self-consciousness," or "self-awareness," that is unique to man and makes him the bearer of rights.

While the distinction has some merit it goes too far in a number of ways. First, it too radically separates the physical and the intellectual. Second, it does not give enough moral weight to the natural capacity or potentiality for "self-consciousness" or "rationality". Third, it confuses *functioning* as a person for *being* a person. Fourth, the criteria suffers from a degree of uncertainty and arbitrariness.

For a philosophical materialist (who claims only physical things are real) a radical division between the body and the intellect is impossible since he equates the mind (i.e. the intellect) with the brain. And a zygote or foetus is genetically programmed to develop a brain and is in fact in the process of doing so. Therefore the unborn possesses real potential for an intellect. It cannot therefore be disposed of like a thing or animal that has no potential for rational life. For the non-materialist, who sees man as a union of body and soul – with the intellect/mind being an attribute of the soul but dependent on the brain for its operation – such a distinction is too radical a separation as well. The soul is as much present in the foetus as the body. And as the brain of the foetus develops so too does the intellect's operative ability. So whether one takes a strictly materialistic approach to life or accepts the existence of the spirit, in either case the potential for self-consciousness or rationality in the unborn must be acknowledged.

Further, one must also acknowledge that some degree of its actualization must also exist, for nothing can move from pure potentiality to actuality. And being in the process of developing rationality or self-consciousness must carry moral significance in itself, since it already distinguishes human life from all other known physical life forms. And to recognize that this capacity is innate to human beings is to admit it must exist in some way in human beings even at the zygote/foetus level. Otherwise it could never develop. And because human beings do have this capacity innately – and indeed have it *essentially* – they have a right to life from the first moment of conception.

For those who argue that self-consciousness or rationality must be functioning at a certain level before one can be classified as a person with rights, it may be legitimately asked what level of function is required and how is this determined? We need to avoid being arbitrary in such an important matter. After all, if we are going to use function to determine whether someone can be killed we had better be certain as to what exactly we are talking about and when it exists. In a court of law, for example, no one can be convicted of a capital offence if there is reasonable doubt as to his guilt. What about reasonable doubt as to the mental state of an innocent human being like the foetus? And do newborns or infants have significantly more intellectual function than a full term foetus? If not, can parents indiscriminately kill their own newborn children as presently a mother can indiscriminately kill her unborn child? Do Downs Syndrome, autistic, Alzheimer's or comatose persons have the level of function necessary to be classified as persons? Adult human beings also vary significantly in their cognitive abilities. What moral significance does this carry? Does it imply varying degrees of personhood amongst the general adult population? Common sense and common decency tells us all human beings, including newborn babies and Down's Syndrome adults, are human persons. Varying intellectual capabilities does not make them more or less of a person. It only signifies greater or lesser degrees of realization of their full human potential. And the same holds true of a baby in the womb.

One suspects this criteria of “self-awareness” or “rationality” was devised explicitly for the purpose of legitimizing abortion (and certain cases of euthanasia). For while its advocates apply it universally to the unborn – and with no significant distinction between trimesters – as criteria for unrestricted abortion, they hesitate to apply it universally to infants as grounds for unrestricted infanticide (thank goodness!), arguing instead for its selective application, for example, to infants with congenital defects or severe illnesses.