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The Abortion Debate in America

More than forty years after the landmark *Roe V. Wade* Supreme Court legislation, which deemed abortion a fundamental right under the U.S. Constitution, the debate over abortion in America roars on. The dispute has polarized our country into two ideologies—“pro-life” and “pro-choice”—dividing us socially, culturally and politically, and there seems to be no end in sight. The following paper will elucidate the arguments from both sides of the abortion debate, explain the Catholic Church’s importance in said debate, and clarify my own personal thoughts and opinions regarding abortion.

First, let us examine the pro-life position. The primary pro-life argument centers on morality, saying that abortion is an immoral act of murder. This notion is founded upon the Christian faith, which believes human life begins at conception (Paul II, 1994). Pro-lifers argue that humans are full of life even in their embryonic and fetal stages of development, therefore any terminated pregnancy is murder and a direct violation of God’s sixth commandment, “thou shalt not kill.”

Pro-lifers also argue that women who claim to want control over their body (a common argument for pro-choice advocates) shouldn’t have let themselves get pregnant in the first place. Both religious and secular pro-life proponents consider abortion a heinous form of contraception that could have been prevented. Religious pro-lifers advocate chastity and abstinence, which eliminates all possibility of an unwanted pregnancy, while secular pro-lifers insist on the efficacy of responsible contraceptive use (BBC, 2014).

Another popular pro-life argument regards adoption. Pro-lifers assert that unwanted babies need not be discarded. Rather, they can be put up for adoption and live out their life in a loving family (Procon.org, 2015).

The last big pro-life argument I will touch on regards abortion demographics. Pro-lifers often argue that those who commonly obtain abortions—minors, teens and uneducated women—are not capable of understanding the full implications of their actions. They believe such individuals often regret their abortion, and experience immense psychological distress later in life (Weissmann, 2013).

As mentioned above, the pro-life viewpoint is deeply founded in Christian doctrine and ethics. One of the earliest known teachings on abortion comes from *The Didache*, a Christian catechism-like treatise written around 100 CE, which commands “you shall not murder a child by abortion” (*Didache*, Chap. 2). In the centuries following *The Didache* though, there was large debate over the ethicality of earlier term abortions—abortions obtained in the first trimester of pregnancy—and the idea of “ensoulment.” Essentially, Christians were unsure of when the soul entered the human body because no one knew whether human life began at conception or at some later stage in human development. For example, *The Apostolic Constitutions*, written around 375-380 CE, condemned only the abortion of a formed fetus. The formation of the fetus usually marks the second trimester of pregnancy. Therefore, it was acceptable to have an abortion in the first trimester of pregnancy. St. Augustine himself believed in a concept of “delayed ensoulment,” and condoned early termination abortion as well (Noonan, 1967).

This uncertainty and inconsistency remained for centuries until 1896 when Pope Pius IX dropped the animate/inanimate fetus distinction. In light of new scientific

discoveries in the fields of obstetrics and gynecology, he officially declared the Church's view of human life as beginning at conception (Robinson, 2007). Therefore, any abortion was considered murder in the eyes of the Church, and was punishable by excommunication. The Church's consideration holds to this day, defining abortion as "the killing of the fetus in any way and at any time from the moment of conception" (*The Code of Canon Law*, 1998).

Of course, we cannot forget the antithetical point of view. Pro-choice advocates fundamentally believe that women should have the choice/option/ability to legally obtain a safe abortion. They argue that all women reserve the right to have control over their body and reproduction, and thereby defend the Supreme Court's decision in *Roe V. Wade* (Procon.org, 2015).

Critical to the pro-choice argument is the belief that human life begins when a fetus becomes "viable," rather than at conception. A fetus is considered viable when it has a 50-50 chance of being able to live outside of the mother's womb, which of course comes many weeks after conception. Pro-choicers ground this belief in science, specifically embryology, which has determined that a fetus is still attached and apart of its mother during the first trimester of pregnancy (before it is viable), and is therefore completely dependent on the mother's health and care during this time. Embryology has also determined that in the first twenty-six weeks of pregnancy, fetuses are incapable of feeling pain because the pain-processing part of the brain has yet to develop (Belluck, 2013).

Another big pro-choice argument considers the safety of abortion. History shows that abortions have been had, and will continue to be had, regardless of legality

(Morrison, 2014). All legalizing abortion does is simply make it safe for women to have them because they are able to undergo the procedure in a hospital with professional physicians. Pro-choicers essentially argue that denying women the right to obtaining an abortion only denies them the right to obtaining a *safe* abortion.

Other pro-choice arguments consider economic, sociological and psychological factors. Economically speaking, legalized abortion has resulted in reduced government welfare costs, reduced crime, less childhood “unwantedness”, neglect, abuse and poverty, and has proved to be an effective instrument for population control (Donohue III, 2001). Legalized abortion has also mitigated psychological damage and harm for victims of rape and incest (Cohen, 2006). Furthermore, abortion has given hope to millions of women unfit to have a child, such as those without financial resources and teenage girls not yet ready to rear a child (Weissmann, 2013).

My personal thoughts and beliefs tend to align with the pro-choice side of the argument. I am studying to become an economist so naturally I look at all the proven economical and societal benefits of abortion including: crime reduction, reduced welfare costs, population control, and decreased childhood unwantedness. I am also very irreligious therefore I do not subscribe to religious doctrine or dogma. Rather, I look at the scientific facts regarding the matter. Lastly, I look at the history of abortion, which clearly shows that abortions will be had regardless of legality and therefore regardless of safety. I question why we should deny women the right to safe, physician-performed abortion procedures and leave them to their own unsafe, and even life-threatening methods.

I'd also like to know why religious people and pro-lifers care so much about other people's personal lives? I get that having an abortion goes against many people's religious beliefs, but *the option* to obtain an abortion does not. If they don't like abortion, they simply need not have one. Religious pro-lifers don't care that people have the legal *option* to get tattoos even though *having* a tattoo goes against the Bible's teachings (Leviticus 19:28) do they? And, they don't care that people can go out and buy polyester clothing even though the Bible prohibits wearing "clothing woven of two kinds of material" (Leviticus 19:19) right?

Speaking of the Bible, I don't think that the book can or should be used to substantiate pro-life arguments. Nowhere in the Bible is there explicit condemnation of abortion. Though, interestingly enough, the Bible does explicitly mention many supposedly just/moral instances of child related misdeeds including: child murder (ie. Deuteronomy 21:18-21), infanticide (ie. Psalms 135:8, 136:10), child abuse (ie. Proverbs 22:15) and child sacrifice (ie. Genesis 22:9-10).

All in all, I firmly believe that our current laws on abortion are fair and just. They defend a women's right to have control over her body and reproductive health and do not impose unfairly upon any religious beliefs. While I am still deciding how I feel about later term abortions, I do think that it is perfectly okay to obtain an earlier term abortion (before a fetus becomes viable) in view of all the scientific facts regarding the matter. I do think it is questionable to abort a fetus that could survive as a premature baby outside of the womb. But, again, I do not consider a fetus as human if it cannot survive outside of its mother's womb. Ultimately, I think that the pro-life stance and argument against abortion is deficiently based upon religious dogma and I am disgusted by how fervently

some pro-life proponents work to deny women their constitutional right to having an abortion.

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