

Making the Pro-Life Case

A SIMPLE ARGUMENT AGAINST ABORTION

If abortion is not wrong, nothing is wrong.

— Mother Teresa

“Amid the mass of arguments pro and con about abortion,” writes philosopher William Lane Craig, “there are two central questions that...determine how you assess everything else.” These two questions, one scientific and one moral, serve to greatly clarify our thinking: (1) **Is the unborn a human being?** and (2) **Do human beings possess intrinsic moral value?**

The argument against abortion, in which the above questions are answered, may be formulated as follows:

- 1) Elective¹ abortion intentionally takes the life of an innocent human being;
- 2) It is morally wrong to intentionally take the life of an innocent human being;²
- 3) Therefore, elective abortion is morally wrong.

This argument is *valid*; that is, the conclusion logically follows from the two premises. But in order for the argument to be *sound*—which would assure us that the conclusion is correct—both premises must be true.

Premise (1) is a factual, biological claim, and its veracity is not in dispute. “It is scientifically correct to say that an individual human life begins at conception,” affirms Dr. Micheline Mathews-Roth of Harvard Medical School. Indeed, from its conception the unborn is a distinct, genetically complete, self-integrating human organism—an individual, living member of the species *Homo sapiens*—and needs only the proper care and nutrients to proceed through the many stages of human development. Abortion, by definition, kills a growing human being before his or her birth.

Premise (2) is a basic moral principle, but it lies at the heart of the abortion controversy. As National Review editor Ramesh Ponnuru writes, “The fundamental question in dispute ... can be described in different ways: whether all human beings have a right not to be killed; whether membership in the human species is enough to confer rights; whether we accept the existence of a category of human non-persons.” Given the scientific certainty of Premise (1), *abortion advocates must reject Premise (2)*. Unwittingly or not, they wish to legitimize the killing of an entire class of innocent humans.

Pro-lifers see no justification for such discrimination. The pro-life view holds that human beings are *intrinsically* valuable—valuable in themselves. We maintain worth and dignity not by virtue of *what we can do* or the various properties we may acquire, but because of *the kind of thing we are*—a human being. Each and every member of the human family is equal in his or her fundamental rights, including the right to life itself.

To see why moral discrimination between groups of humans doesn’t make sense, consider the four major differences between the unborn (unprotected by law) and the newborn (protected by law). Philosopher Stephen Schwarz created the helpful acronym SLED:



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S – Size. Obviously, some human beings are smaller than others. But since when has size or physical appearance had any bearing on our rights? As a classic children’s book puts it, “A person’s a person, no matter how small.”

L – Level of Development. The unborn, of course, is at an earlier stage of human development than the newborn; likewise, an adolescent is at an earlier stage than an adult. How is one’s level of development morally relevant? An adult’s mental faculties are more highly developed than a child’s, but that doesn’t make him more valuable.

E – Environment. At the time of birth, a child leaves her mother’s womb and enters a new environment. Should this change in geography—a matter of inches—account for a change in legal protection for the child, as it does now in the United States? Location is irrelevant to *what* (e.g., a human being) something is.

D – Degree of Dependency. The unborn is certainly more dependent than most other human beings. But we are all dependent (on other people and things) to some degree; this doesn’t change who we are and the moral status we hold. Should we question the personhood of those dependent on kidney machines, insulin or pacemakers?

Each of these four differences is morally trivial. Indeed, moral status doesn’t hinge upon such characteristics or abilities; we have dignity *in virtue of our nature as human beings*—that’s the only requirement. And that’s why it’s wrong to deliberately kill *any* innocent human being.

One Further Premise. Some in our society find it difficult to translate the abortion issue into the arena of public policy. Thus, a legal premise is needed:

- 4) Any practice that intentionally takes the life of an innocent human being should be prohibited by law;
- 5) Therefore, elective abortion should be prohibited by law.

Given the value accorded to all human life in Premise (2), Premise (4) seems obvious. After all, the most important task of any government is to protect its people from being killed; as Thomas Jefferson once wrote, “The care of human life and happiness and not their destruction is the first and only legitimate object of good government.” The unborn, like every other class of human beings, should be recognized as persons worthy of protection under the law.

The full pro-life argument, then, uses Premises (1) and (2) to reach the conclusion (3) that elective abortion is morally wrong, and it uses Premises (1) and (4) to reach the conclusion (5) that elective abortion should be made illegal.

- 1) Elective abortion intentionally takes the life of an innocent human being;
- 2) It is morally wrong to intentionally take the life of an innocent human being;
- 3) Therefore, elective abortion is morally wrong.
- 4) Any practice that intentionally takes the life of an innocent human being should be prohibited by law;
- 5) Therefore, elective abortion should be prohibited by law.

Three Simple Points. Thus, there are three important premises in the case against abortion: a *scientific* premise noting the humanity of the unborn; a *moral* premise recognizing the immorality of taking innocent human life; and a *legal* premise that acknowledges the government’s role in protecting its people. These three basic points establish the truth of the pro-life position.

Elective abortion is a serious moral wrong—and should be illegal—because it deliberately takes the life of an innocent, unborn human being.

¹ An “elective” abortion is any abortion that is not medically necessary to save the mother’s life.

² —at least, for the reasons people have elective abortions (e.g., the unborn is unwanted, inconvenient, disabled, economically burdensome, etc.).