

The Roots of Racism and Abortion: An Exploration of Eugenics

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The debate over abortion has bogged down. In general, people talk past each other, with little or no understanding of each other. This is not necessary, and *The Roots of Racism and Abortion* is an invitation to a new debate.

The book is not neutral; it was written by a pro-life activist. But it shows what the debate is really all about, so that people can stop wasting time repeating slogans. Readers on both sides of the controversy will read the book with interest if they are interested in an honest exchange, rather than forcing their misunderstood views on the nation.

Here's the problem with the old debate. Pro-lifers make a series of substantive arguments. They say that the life of an individual person has a beginning, that the beginning is not set arbitrarily, that the beginning is discernible, that the beginning is conception (or fertilization), and that from conception forward the new entity is a member of the human family. Pro-choicers make a procedural argument. They say that there is disagreement in society about when life begins, that we all agree that the mother is human, that she is the one who is most affected by the pregnancy, and that she is the one who should make decisions. The substantive arguments and the procedural arguments do not intersect. The two sides go on talking without ever quite squaring off against each.

Frustrated because they don't understand their opponents, both sides make up arguments for the other side, and knock down straw men. Pro-lifers say that pro-choicers don't care about the truth, and are ready to lie and then kill. Pro-choicers say that pro-lifers are bullies, hung up on sex, determined to keep women subservient. These charges are nonsense, fantasies made up by people who cannot or will not listen to their opponents.

One argument that pro-lifers often make, demolishing a straw man, is especially revealing. Pro-lifers often push an argument about the beginning of life. They say that it is obvious that life begins at conception or fertilization, and challenge their opponents to come up with an alternative. Pro-choicers don't have a clear answer, or in any case do not have any consensus about an answer. Pro-lifers think that they have scored a point, maybe a lot of points.

But in fact, pro-choicers often brush this argument aside without any problem. What pro-choicers often hear, when they are confronted with a sweaty pro-lifer demanding to know when life begins, is an example of poor education. Though they rarely state it explicitly, most pro-choicers are quite sure that life is a continuum, that there is no sharp line anywhere between the sperm and egg, the zygote, the embryo, the fetus, the infant, the child, the adult. They can't explain that to the pro-lifer adequately without a course in biology. The difference between them is not a detail; they have different world views. An elementary course in biology would be enough to explain how continuity works, but a sentence is not enough. Pro-lifers, to understand the truth as pro-choicers see it, must re-arrange their whole view of life, and study evolution.

So the pro-lifers think they have scored points, but the pro-choicers are walking away disdainfully. There is no communication at all; world views have bumped into each other, but not confronted each other.

We do not have to abandon the debate over substantive questions and focus on procedural matters. Rather, we can explore a different substantive question. That is, pro-lifers always want to argue about when life begins, but that is the wrong question. The real debate is whether life has a significant beginning.

The Author, Cavanaugh-O'Keefe began promoting pro-life nonviolent action in the 1970s, and his leadership affected activists on every continent. He was a cofounder of the Prolife Nonviolent Action Project.

Author	John Cavanaugh-O'Keefe
Publisher	Xlibris Corporation, 2000
ISBN	0738830887, 9780738830889
Length	265 pages