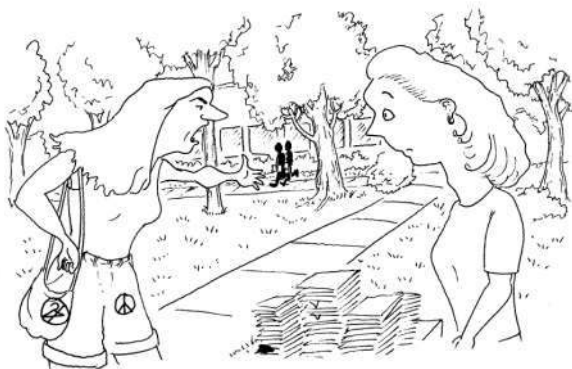


Session #2: Five Bad Ways People Argue About Abortion



Review of pro-life syllogism:

P1: It is wrong to intentionally kill innocent human beings.

P2: Abortion intentionally kills innocent human beings.

Therefore,

C: Abortion is morally wrong.

Key question: Do any of my opponent's objections refute that syllogism? If not, your opponent is changing the subject. Practice narrating the debate—that is, remind your critic of the case you presented and how his responses fail to refute your case or establish his (assuming he has one). Look for five bad ways people argue:

1. They assume rather than argue.

Example—back alley argument: “The law can't stop all abortions. Women will be forced to get dangerous illegal ones.”

- Philosophical reply: Argument begs the question by assuming the unborn are not human. Otherwise, the argument is saying that because some people die attempting to kill others, the state should make it safe and legal to do so. But why should the law be faulted for making it more risky for one human to intentionally take the life of another completely innocent one?
- While all deaths from abortion are a tragedy, it's false that 5,000 to 10,000 women died annually from illegal abortion. Experts from the other side affirm this (Teitze, Nathanson, Callahan, Calderone).
- The claim that laws can't stop all abortions is silly. Laws against rape don't stop all rape but that hardly justifies legalizing the practice.
- Women are not forced to have illegal abortions. They choose to have them. To say otherwise demeans women.

2. They attack rather than argue.

Example: “Men can't get pregnant. Only women should decide the issue.”

- Arguments don't have gender; people do. Pro-life women use the same pro-life arguments.
- If men can't speak on abortion, *Roe v. Wade* should be reversed because nine men decided it.
- Leads to bizarre reasoning: Should only generals decide the morality of war?

Example: “Pro-life advocates have no right to oppose abortion unless they adopt unwanted children.”

- How does my alleged unwillingness to adopt a child justify an abortionist killing him?
- Argument begs the question: It assumes the unborn are not human. For example, the homeless are unwanted. Can we intentionally kill them? Can I kill unwanted toddlers?
- Plenty of people want to adopt unwanted kids but can't due to bureaucratic red tape.

Example: “Pro-life advocates are inconsistent for opposing abortion but not the death penalty.”

- Suppose we are inconsistent. How does this refute our pro-life syllogism? How does it refute the humanity of the unborn? Could the unborn still be human even if we're inconsistent?
- The argument attacks a strawman. The pro-life view is not that it is always wrong to kill, only that it's wrong to intentionally kill an innocent human being.
- The consistency sword cuts both ways. The abortion-choice advocate is against capital punishment but supports abortion. Doesn't that make him inconsistent?

Example: “Pro-life advocates are too narrow and should broaden their focus to oppose war, poverty, economic inequality, care for the environment, AIDS, etc.”

- Suppose we are too narrow. How does that justify intentionally killing an innocent human being? Could abortion still be wrong even if pro-lifers fail to fulfill all their obligations?
- Of course abortion isn't the only issue, any more than slavery was the only issue in 1860 or killing Jews the only issue in 1940. But both were the *dominant* issues of their day. While many issues are important, they don't all carry the same moral weight.
- How does it follow that because I oppose the intentional destruction of an innocent human being, I must take personal responsibility for curing all of society's ills? Is the American Cancer Society “too narrow” because it focuses on one particular disease and not others? To be effective, pro-life advocates should focus on one big moral issue, not many.
- War is a *contingent* evil that must be prudently considered. Abortion, however, is an *absolute* evil and laws permitting it are scandalous. Critics of the pro-life view are asking us to overlook an absolute evil in favor of preventing contingent ones. Meanwhile, the U.S. government can't stop economic inequity in Thailand, but it can ban the killing of unborn humans within its own borders, which is why pro-life Christians have political duties.

Example: “Pro-life advocates should work to reduce abortion by focusing on its underlying causes rather than working politically to make it illegal.”

- Why care about “reducing” abortion if it doesn’t intentionally kill an innocent human being?
- Imagine someone saying that underlying cause of spousal abuse is psychological, so rather than banning wife abuse, the state will provide free counseling for men.
- There are underlying causes for rape, murder, and theft, but that hardly means it’s misguided to pass laws against them.

3. They assert rather than argue.

Example—“Women have a right to choose.”

- Argument or assertion? Choose what? And where does right to choose come from?
- To reverse the burden of proof, ask, “Why would you believe a thing like that?”

4. They confuse functioning as a human with being a human.

Example—“Embryo is not self-aware and has no immediately exercisable desires.”

- Why does self-awareness or having desires matter? Why are they value-giving in first place?
- The objection proves too much; it disqualifies newborns who lack self-awareness or desires.
- Results in savage inequality: Self awareness comes in degrees. So does having desires. No one in this room shares those things equally. Thus, if self-awareness or having desires grounds our value as persons, those with more of those characteristics have more value (and, hence, a greater right to life) than those with less. You can throw human equality on the ash heap of history! Far better to argue that although humans differ immensely in terms of characteristics, they share a common human nature.
- Frank Beckwith: Suppose a scientist surgically alters the brain of a developing fetus so he never desires anything. Then, at age 5, the child is killed so his body parts can be used to treat illness in others. If the child had no desires when he was killed, was he nevertheless wronged?

5. They hide behind the hard cases.

For the inquirer, ask: “How should a civil society treat innocent human beings who remind us of a painful event? For the crusader, ask: “I’ll grant for the sake of argument we allow abortion for rape. Will you join me in opposing all other abortions?” He won’t. He wants all abortion legal. (In other words, call his bluff.) Another tactic: Ask, “In pregnancies that result from rape, how many humans are involved, two or three? If they say three, ask how we should treat each. Should we execute the guilty rapist? (Most say no.) Execute his mother? Execute the child for the sin of his father?”