

Pro-life, with more grey hairs

By Greg Nacu, 2010

Several years ago, I wrote an article which I posted on the web discussing my opinions about the morality of abortion. A touchy topic, yes, and full of complex nuances too. But I have never shied away from speaking my mind, and my mind has always had strong opinions.

One of my biggest problems with history, is that history tries to capture a person's thoughts, feelings and opinions in a nutshell. One schema that describes what they thought and felt, indelibly written for all time. When the truth is that people change. And I am no exception. My thoughts on abortion have not been frozen in stone for a decade, rather, they have flipped and flopped and zigged and zagged, as I've aged and matured, and as I have experienced life.

In my original article, my stance was staunchly pro-life. And I had a folder full of rationally thought out reasons why abortion was decidedly immoral. The primary driving force of that opinion was one argument, one idea that was far more important to me than the others. And that core idea was that sex is a choice, and that all sexually consenting adults were choosing to take the risk of pregnancy. And that they should live with the consequences of their actions. Once pregnant, if they subsequently chose to abort, my only possible conclusion was that it was out of callousness, or irresponsibility, or worse, flippancy. This is something I found morally repugnant. But note that my sense of moral repugnance was based upon an emotional reaction to a situation which involved people and affairs completely apart from my direct experience. In other words it was an armchair philosophical analysis.

Two major events would occur over the next few years which worked in concert to change my mind almost completely. But that isn't the end of the story. For several years I participated in a local spiritual community, where a small group of close friends met twice a month, worshipped the old gods and also discussed topics and issues of moral and spiritual import. One day the topic somehow drifted into being about abortion. And I voiced my opinions. I ran through the gamut of my careful and rational reasons why it surely was immoral. The accusation of flippancy and callousness was the central argument. But something I was not expecting happened. A woman in that circle had had an abortion, and I didn't know it. I had a lot of respect for her as a person, as a friend and as a fellow seeker of truth. I hurt her pretty badly that night. She went away crying, and I realized in that moment that for all my eloquence, for all my brilliant feats of mental logic, I was wrong.

I let that experience sit in my mind and stir and grow for a few years. I knew my original argument was wrong, I just couldn't figure out quite why it was wrong. So even though my personal opinions have softened, I left the article online. I don't like to appear as though I'm fast and free with my opinions. The truth is that my opinions are always well thought out, and I really believe them, but that still doesn't mean they're always correct, or that new information will not change my mind. It wasn't until sometime later, when I had another experience that things began to clear up in my mind. I had another friend who already had a child, loved and adored that child, but then unexpectedly got pregnant again by a man who would never support her. She had no one to turn to and deliberated endlessly about what to do. She talked to me, and cried and almost as though to make up for my past wrongs, I promised myself I would help this woman in any way that I could. My opinions be damned. She ultimately came to the conclusion that she couldn't go through with having another child. I babysat her child, I gave her a place to stay and essentially I helped her go through with the process.

It was a nightmare. She was an emotional wreck, and I got to experience the next closest thing to first hand the devastation that an abortion causes to the woman going through with it. This finally sealed the deal in my mind. All my original arguments were swiftly and handily crushed. It would be impossible, with any pretense of honesty, to accuse this poor wretch of callousness or flippancy. Surely, I thought now, with all of my arguments destroyed, my stance must also have been wrong, that abortion was not immoral, but merely the unfortunate circumstance in which a child to be would never come to fruition. Still I had lingering doubts, and I found myself unable to rationalize in my mind that the strong emotions I felt, that it was somehow just wrong, were illusory. I read a lot of science in those years, I learned a lot about the developing brain and have even largely come to believe that the soul is a product of the parts of the human body rather than the religiously conceived ghost in the machine. In effect I transformed into the perfect candidate for pro-choice. Although I had all the reasons in the world to no longer be pro-life, I couldn't find within me the zest to be pro-choice that I had demonstrated for pro-life in my first article.

Then I went to a lecture at Queen's University on "when personhood begins." The lecturer approached the subject from his field of study, neuroanatomy. And the talk proceeded by first demonstrating that a human being is manifest merely from the parts within his or her body, and that the mind and the soul, and the personality, are all results of the incomprehensibly complex arrangements of the building blocks of the brain. So far so good, I had naturally come to accept these scientific truths all on my own. Later he described the development of the brain in a fetus, and described how pro-life propaganda uses images of the growing fetus to make us think of it more as a little person than, according to him, it really is. For instance, at only a few weeks it physically resembles a small person, with a head

and arms. But the entire body, with embryonic brain and all, are smaller than the eraser at the end of a pencil. Clearly at this early stage the brain is undeveloped. And his final argument was that the brain does not begin to form human-thinking-like connections until sometime halfway through the second trimester. And thus, abortion ought to be perfectly legal until at least the beginning of the second trimester. Sounds reasonable. There is no soul but that which arises from the complexities of the brain, and the brain is insufficiently developed until at least the second trimester, so abortion should be no problem! It's all very straightforward really. And that's when I realized that the entire line of reasoning was wrong. Not wrong in the narrow sense of being technically incorrect, I'm sure his facts about the brain and cognition are probably right. But the argument is in fact completely invalid from the only standpoint that really matters.

Moral issues are not a product of rational consideration. They are a product of our emotions. If humans don't have souls, that means we are just another type of animal. Not only that but we are very close to other types of animals, like chimpanzees, too. But most people have no emotional problem with the fact that we completely and utterly subjugate them. Yet when the most liberal of human rights is curtailed we are in an uproar. Why the disparity? Well, it's quite simple. We are us. We are human, and there is no other reason why it is such a problem to kill or to violate humans. We slaughter and devour bovine by the millions, but they aren't human so there is no problem. What is and what is not morally acceptable comes right down to what is and what is not emotionally acceptable. And our emotional responses to things have been built into us over eons of naturally selected evolution. I know that sounds like moral relativity, but it's not. Moral relativity supposes that human nature is moldable by a culture, and that the way we think and what we find detestable depends on what we are told as children. This has been demonstrably and repeatedly refuted by scientists for decades. Humans are universally disgusted by the same taboos, and driven by the same desires, but that universality doesn't prove that our morality comes from God. It proves that our morality comes from something we all share in common. Something like, say, our genes. Our genes build our bodies and our brains, and our brains share common emotions about taboos, hopes and fears, desires and more. And our innate emotional reactions determine what we consider to be immoral. Jealous outrage over our partner having sex with someone else, for example, is built into us via our genes. Our minds cannot be shaped to be indifferent about cuckoldry by any degree of childhood indoctrination.

The fundamental problem with the scientist's analysis is precisely that it is a scientific analysis. How many cells a fetus has, or whether dendritic spines have begun to sprout in the neocortex, is an intellectual gimmick. Some pro-choice people have argued that a fetus contains the same number of living cells as a clipped fingernail. The implication of course being that the disposal of a fetus

should elicit no more strong an emotional reaction than cutting one's nails. But if they were right, then it shouldn't, but the cold unavoidable truth is that it does. If you want to know if abortion is moral, judge its morality on the emotional and psychological effect it has on the woman undergoing the procedure. People proclaim, it's about women's rights! A woman has the right to do what she wants with her body. True, but no woman wants to abort her baby. No woman aborts casually. No woman treats her abortion with as little thought as clipping her fingernails after a nice hot shower. The scientific analysis is detached, and that's precisely why it's meaningless. Just as my logical analysis was meaningless in the absence of experience. Did you know that the hospital subjects a woman to a psychological prescreening before they accept her request to have an abortion? That's right. They need to make sure she has a low enough likelihood of committing suicide in the aftermath. When was the last time someone considered suicide because of the emotional devastation of clipping their fingernails? The point is that all rational arguments don't mean a goddamn thing when the natural, emotional, internal reaction of the person having the abortion is that they are killing their baby. They haven't been indoctrinated into thinking abortion is murder, this is just the reality of how human beings feel.

Now, all that said, we need to get on with the policy making. And herein lies the next most important consideration. Yes abortion is immoral. But that doesn't mean it should be illegal. It is not the job of the law to enforce morality nor to dole out divine retribution. Chiefly because, the law simply cannot enforce morality. It is not and could never be made illegal to disown one's parents and leave them in poverty in their old age, for example. But it would almost certainly be immoral to do so. Once we realize that it is not the role of the law to be the arbiter of moral rectitude, we are freed from the false dichotomy that abortion must either be legal and moral, or it must be immoral and therefore also illegal. Women have always found ways to abort their fetuses, and they always will. That doesn't make it okay. But the role of the law is not to tally up karma points, it is to help make sure that society runs as smoothly as possible, while being as fair and equitable to as many people as possible. It would be very nice if we could be perfectly fair and perfectly equitable to all people, all the time. But reality just doesn't work like that. Life is dirty, life is a struggle, and everyone's life is full of mistakes. In short, the abortion scenario is a no win scenario. The life of an unborn fetus and the life of the mother are inextricably bound together. And if the will of the woman and the will of the child are at odds, there is no perfectly ethical solution. Somebody has to win and somebody has to lose. And because a woman is big and strong, and a fetus is small and weak, abortions will likely be a truth about humanity for a very long time. That's life. But don't try to tell me that all of a sudden that makes abortion moral. Pull your head out of the sand. Life is messy. If you make a mistake, forgive yourself, promise yourself to do better in the future, accept that we are all imperfect, and ultimately, move on.