

12. Abortion Revisited (2024)

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Several years have passed since my first essay on abortion. I still stand by my arguments for why many people oppose this procedure. But in the ensuing years, a political twist has been added to the discussion. And since it relates to issues I discussed in my most recent essays, I thought a revisit to this topic might be timely.

One consequence of the level of consciousness in the human brain is the awareness of what death means. Especially what it means to us personally. Thinking about your own death can be very frightening and even depressing. It is not surprising then that most religions offer the balm of some sort of eternal life, even after the body is dead. What survives, called a spirit or soul, usually retains many of the personality and identity characteristics of its former embodiment. Many religions assume that each person's soul is unique. This means billions of emancipated souls have been collecting somewhere since the origins of humans. Other religions assume there are a finite number of souls, and when a person dies, their soul eventually goes into a new person or even another organism.

The Bible is ambiguous about when the soul first enters a developing human. However, the Catholic Church and several state legislatures and courts have recently declared that a human zygote acquires its soul at fertilization. Like many religious claims, this is not easily proved or disproved. What is a soul made of? Where does it reside in the zygote and later in the whole person? More pertinent, why make this claim now?

This century has seen a steady decline in religiosity worldwide. For those of us who grew up in 1950s America, the changes have been striking. Various forms of Christianity that were dominant have seen major declines in attendance and practice. This has not gone down well with religious practitioners. There are now efforts in the US to ban books the surviving religious right dislikes, require prayers and Bible reading in public schools, and strip evolution, sex education, and inclusiveness from the curriculum.

But the big one is abortion! By declaring that a zygote is a human being, meaning it has acquired a soul, the religious right feels it is also justified in declaring abortion murder. If the general public accepts this argument, it is *de facto* accepting a major premise of Christianity. And if the public accepts this, how can it then oppose the other efforts to restore religion in our society? Abortion is thus being used as a "wedge" issue to counter the recent decline in religious beliefs.

This raises the general issue of how conflicting beliefs can, or should, coexist in a cooperative society. Until recently, the criterion seemed to be that you could believe anything you wanted, as long as it did not cause physical harm to another person. By that criterion, a religious person's opposition to abortion should not be allowed to inhibit other people's decisions, whereas religious opposition to vaccines for communicable diseases may be overridden because additional infections increase everyone's risk. What about services and benefits? Should someone in a bakery be allowed to refuse a homosexual customer's wedding cake order because the baker's religion is against homosexuality? Can a Catholic organization that hires non-Catholic staff refuse to provide birth control benefits because that offends their religion?

All of these issues have been raised recently, and both state and the Supreme Courts have increasingly sided with the religious right. There has been surprisingly little legislative pushback. Many members of Congress are not religious, (I even know some), but they dare not support abortion on the grounds that they do not believe in souls. There remains a widespread presumption that all US politicians should be

religious. So, they issue some vague statement about being "a person of faith" and focus on the rights of women to decide what to do with their own bodies. The latter is certainly a valid argument, but these politicians are skirting a core theological issue.

These actions tie into my previous essays because the religious right is currently teaming up with the Republican push to replace our cooperative society with a pyramidal one. Leaders at the top of the pyramid would then grant special powers and privileges to religion, and in exchange, acquire large numbers of voters and preachers declaring religious justification for pyramidal policies. There is certainly precedent. In the US south prior to and during the Civil War, preachers of multiple denominations found ample justification in the Bible for the subjugation of Black people as slaves. And currently, many religious organizations are willing to give a complete pass to the unchristian behavior of candidate Donald Trump as long as he guarantees that if elected, he will put them back in power.

Because most humans are reticent to harm a child, abortion, even to those who do not believe in a soul, makes people uncomfortable. Most of us consider human life to be sacred, and so the question of when human life really begins can be quite important. For myself, as a biologist, I do not believe in souls and am convinced human consciousness is a result of that big computer in our heads, the brain. As is becoming increasingly obvious with the development of artificial intelligence, a sufficiently complex computer can do almost everything we do, including acquire a fear of death.

Given my point of view, I cannot see a fertilized egg, a blastula, or a gastrula (early stages of human development) as persons. They don't even have any nerves. As the fetus develops further and develops a nervous system, it replicates many of the stages of our evolution: first responding reflexively to stimuli, then adding in a bit of learning, and eventually having sufficient neural power to generalize and predict things. That is roughly where I think a fetus becomes a human, which in recent law has been about 20 weeks or so of development. And even then, I do not think advanced fetuses have enough consciousness that they should be saved if one has to choose between them and the life of the mother.

And what do I think about my own death? I think of it as somebody pulling the plug on my computer. When you pull the plug on a computer, it goes dead. No images, no language, no artificial intelligence. Does that depress me? Not really. I have tried to use this limited brain of mine as much as possible during my lifetime. I have been to places and done things that I never dreamed possible and I will not feel cheated when my body finally pulls the plug.