

## ABORTION: SEMANTIC SLIPPAGE & INTEMPERATE LANGUAGE --- ELLIOTT #1895

Having just cleaned a *physical* hornet's nest out of a corner of our house, I sat down and, writing this here letter to the editor (CCT today, 13Oct84), stirred up a *dialectical* hornet's nest. The phone's been wringing off the wall, 2:1 against me on the current bell-curve: 20% NEVER abortion, 55% modifications (freedom within limits, which most in this group grant are bureaucratically impracticable), 25% FOR "abortion on demand." This thinksheet comments on today's Cape Cod forum-by-phone: tomorrow, a church here is doing a forum by church-going.

1. Some public issues have, more than others, high potential for stimulating public (1) intemperance and (2) thought, antagonistic as are these two realities to each other. Supremely, at the moment (Ferraro going up or down in three weeks), abortion. My letter has stimulated both, by simulating the horror a female feels upon learning she has an unwanted pregnancy--simulating it by associating it with a horror men and women share, viz., discovering one has a tumor/cancer, a "growth" toward death as a fetus is a "growth" toward life (though that's a judgment we impose: both growths are, from within themselves, growths toward each its own life). By empathy I have felt women's horror over an unwanted pregnancy--but none of my phoners on the Right have been willing to deal honestly with that horror: they've concentrated myopically on the horror of "the dead baby," "the murder of millions," "bloody abortionists." PRINCIPLE: Good ethics will (1) try to enter into the feelings and thoughts of all parties in a private or public dispute; (2) state all points of view clearly, fairly, adequately; and (3) as precisely as possible define all ethical principles ("values") involved (what's of significance? what's at stake?). Further (4), dialectics will avoid confusing principles and strategies (two nonconvertible realities). Again(5): though battles over ethical issues tend to narrow argumentation, intellectual and moral maturity will always vote for not neglecting the wider context (what authorities are involved? how are revelation and reason to be related in this case? how can authority for order and good-order be kept in dialectical relationship with all else, esp. the truth-search? how keep principle and practice talking with each other?).

2. Frightening fact: None of my phoners on the Right were capable of transcendence of their feelings (which translates as "empathy": if you can't get out of your own feelings, you can't get into anybody else's). (The Left is somewhat better, esp. the well-educated--e.g., a U.Chic. PhD in biology and his Chic.Th.Sem.-graduate wife.) "Well-educated," in this sense, means (1) having been humiliated face-to-face with your ignorance and prejudice vis-a-vis the vastness of knowledge and the greater vastness of the unknown, and also vis-a-vis the Byzantine complexity of all "value" issues--(2) without having had one's curiosity and intellectual self-respect crushed in the process. Many are the walking wounded who've been crushed without being upheld; more are the vain ignoramuses who've been victimized by some arrogant dogma (e.g., Marxism or Shaefferism--a number of my phoners were devotees of the late Frank Shaeffer, who wrote on cover-p.2 of his books he gave to me, "Willis, when are you going to get rid of your shit and come to the truth?"). Simone Weil, that great human being on the boundary between Judaism and Christianity: "We do not have to acquire humility. There is humility in us--but (we become proud when) we humiliate ourselves before false gods." Esp. is it distressing to me that brighter folks more easily make themselves stupid by getting hooked on simplistic systems, which give an illicit workout to their brains: it takes one to know one, and for five years I was hooked on Protestant fundamentalism--by my own decision, against my parents. Today's confirmation: The brighter the phoner on the Right, the more dogmatic and arrogant. (The brightest was so screeching "Thou shalt not kill!" at me that I yielded to the temptation to say "Thank God for the customs and laws of our land, else I might not be free of your making an exception in my case.")

3. Intemperate language subverts dialog and promotes violence--indeed, *is* verbal violence. Here's a catalog of screeches from the brightest today: "Abortions in

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America are worse than the Holocaust of the Jews!" I'm "hypocritical," "anti-Christian," "illogical," "unreasonable," "irrational," "antisocial," "immoral"; "Your arguments don't make sense"; "How can you call yourself a Christian?"; I "need to be re-educated" (Communist term! When I replied, "You mean I need to be persuaded to your point of view." He: "No, I mean re-educated." I: "What's the difference?" He fudged; or, to use another confection as analogy, his rhetoric became cotton-candy.)

3. Categorical stew, recipe for: Do what I do when I make stew, viz., throw into the pot every available edible. In food preparation, the result may be unpalatable but will be nourishing: in thinking, the result is confusion and poison. Vis-a-vis the subject of my thinksheet, here are some prior thinksheets against categorical stew: #559 ("Self'--'individual'--'person': WHICH?); #1870 ("...'Tragedy,' 'Crime,' 'Sin'"); #1876 ("Election '84: ABORTION...and Rights Loci").

4. Cook any stew long enough and the contents lose each its own flavor: in categorical stew, meanings become inseparable in what I call semantic slippage. EXAMPLE: These were treated, by my Rightist phoners, as synonyms: "human being" (which, said they, the fetus "scientifically" is), "individual," "person," "self." Then, by the error I call propositional reversability (see #1893), the Constitution protects the rights of the fetus as a "human being"--my pointing out that the Const. nowhere uses "human being" (an expression which, in science, has no more relative sense than, e.g., "canine being")...Another example of semantic slippage: Abortion, said all phoning Rightist, is "murder"--a claim which, since 1973, it plainly is not in codex criminalis; but bombing abortion centers does endanger human life and could easily, though bombings have not yet, lead to murder. Further and inconsistently, no Rightist phoner would call either war or capital punishment murder, though both are, literally, as much violations of "Thou shalt not kill" as is abortion (and none had realized that the Decalog here means "Thou shalt not murder," i.e., disturb public order by taking society's rights of war and capital punishment into his/her own hands).

5. The extremes on abortion play the game I call "More Compassionate Than Thou"--but no Rightist had anything practical to say about the anti-equal-access effects of any anti-abortion legislation; they tried to keep the conversation on taboo (with its fears and angers), in a tone of self-righteous arrogance ("They ought not to get pregnant"; "Give their babies out for adoption"; "Sterilize them after the second birth.").

6. Two relevant books I refer people to: (1) Susan Brownmiller's AGAINST OUR WILL (on rape--but is not antiabortion legislation a freedom-deprivation parallel to rape?); (2) Thos.A. Shannon, ed., BIOETHICS (633-p. revised anthology, Paulist/81): bioethics as at the intersection of religion, ethics, custom, law, anthro-sociology, science. A good book for dialog with the Right: Francis Shaeffer's WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE HUMAN RACE? And of course supremely the Bible: Ps.139 is God everywhere, not just in the womb (as Rightist quoters imply); and God's "child" is, ult., the biosphere.

## Fetus dependent, not an individual

More ignorance than dishonesty, it seems to me, pervades the current abortion debate. Dishonesty leads to subtleness, ignorance leads to arrogance — and what we're hearing from both sides is more arrogant than subtle.

American pluralism is a hawser with a Protestant core around which are many windings and weavings from the West and, increasingly, from the East. Europe's Enlightenment, which raised "the individual" to the status of the sacred, is one of those strands. When you hear someone promoting "the sacredness (or dignity, or ultimate value) of the individual," you are listening to the Enlightenment.

As a Christian and a theologian, I'm against locating the sacred in any of God's creatures or even in the whole creation: Only God is holy and worthy of worship. The fetus is not sacred, the individual (with freedom from the umbilical cord) is not sa-

cred, society is not sacred: I am not, respectively, a vitalist, and individualist, or a socialist.

But in the name of what truth there is in the Enlightenment "individual," I must speak out against the arrogance of vitalists who condemn all abortions as murders. When one views the individual as sacred, one must grant each skinbag (i.e. individual) the right to put itself first. Any growth inside the skinbag — such as a tumor or a fetus — is at the decisional disposal of the person: a fetus, no matter how old, has no more status than a cancer: both are alive and making demands on the individual organism.

Of course the fetus is not an individual organism, not an "individual": it's a dependent growth its host should be free to dispose of at will, with government help when necessary.

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