

# Abortion: The crude symbol of freedom

**MORAL CHOICES**  
COURSES BY NEWSPAPER

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This is the fourth of 16 articles in the series called "Moral Choices in Contemporary Society," which is the text for an Oakland University course. It was written for Courses by Newspaper, a program of University Extension of the University of California, San Diego. Copyright 1976-77 by the Regents of the University of California.

By DANIEL CALLAHAN  
Even in a nation well familiar with acrimonious debate, the struggle over abortion takes a special place. It intimidates politicians and divides the churches. It often sets husbands and wives at odds and remains an open source of dispute among physicians, who are as divided as the rest of society.

This debate is not peculiar to our time and place. Abortion has been a subject of fierce argument for at least 30,000 years. It was capable of dividing primitive tribes and families and has, in our century, seen a wholly bewildering pattern of changes in the law.

If the trend in many Western countries in recent years has been toward a liberalization of abortion laws, just the opposite has been true in Eastern Europe, where it is harder now to get an abortion than a decade ago.

IT IS SAID that abortion is a "religious" question—but churches take moral stands on any other number of moral and social issues without those issues being labeled religious.

It is said that abortion is a "medical problem"—though the evidence is overwhelming that most women seek abortions for personal and social, not medical reasons.

Abortion is euphemistically called "pregnancy termination"—though it is clear that a pregnancy is only so terminated by killing a fetus (feticide).

It is said that, if abortion is accepted, then infanticide and the killing of the elderly are certain to follow—though this has not happened in any modern country that in recent decades has liberalized its abortion laws.

It is said that restrictive abortion laws are imposed by repressive males—though every survey ever conducted in this country indicates women are more opposed to abortion than men.

It is said that abortion is an offense against the sanctity of life—but opponents of abortion are not among the more visible marchers against war and capital punishment.

I mention all of these contentions only to point out that it is an emotionally charged issue, in which neither those favorable to legalized abortion nor those opposed have a monopoly on dubious arguments.

IS IT POSSIBLE, in the midst of such strife and passion, to get some moral grasp on just what is at stake?

The key problem is to decide how and in what way it is a moral problem. For those who hold that the fetus is nothing but "tissue," no more important than a hangnail, then of course there is no moral issue at all; abortion becomes one more item of elective surgery. For those who hold that women have no rights whatever over the right-to-life of a fetus, then that position equally dissolves any moral dilemmas. But even if people talk that way in public, I have met very few who are able to be so clear-cut in private. How could they be?

Whatever one's theory of the fetus, it is undeniable that, even after seven to eight weeks, it looks suspiciously familiar. It looks—well—human.

Maybe it should not be called a person or a human being—but there it is, and it appears more than a trace like the rest of us.

Yet what does that tell us of moral significance? For it is argued that the fetus is too little developed to claim the status of a person and much too little developed to say that its interests and welfare must always override those of a woman who wants an abortion. This is not an easy view to dismiss.

THERE IS NO agreement whatever in this country about when human life, much less personhood, begins.

It is not just that the public is divided. So are philosophers, theologians and scientists.

If we mean by "human being" or "person" only that which is genetically unique, then the fetus would obviously qualify. If we mean something more—an ability to relate to other people or to reason, for example—then the fetus clearly would not qualify.

Or we may choose to look for some mid-point in the development of the fetus, a dividing line which would avoid the dubious result of declaring even a newly fertilized egg a person, as well as the equally dubious result of failing to declare a fetus a person until shortly before or even after birth.

"Viability," which is normally thought of as possible after 24 weeks of gestation, is one of those attractive dividing lines. So at least the U.S. Supreme Court decided in its famous 1973 abortion decision.

THESE ARE SERIOUS puzzles.



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They become all the more troubling if we look at the broader problem of deciding how we should allocate rights and to whom.

Should we in the first place even try to determine who is a person and who is not? Blacks, one recalls, were solemnly declared non-persons as late as the 17th century. In our own times, the Nazis had no hesitation whatever about killing those they thought unworthy of legal protection.

In short, if we even begin trying to decide who should and should not count as a person, we may be setting the stage for any manner of moral abomination.

## Hikers will study flowers

"Spring Wildflowers" will be the subject of a nature walk to be held at the nature study area of Kensington Metropark at 8 a.m. Saturday, May 28. Persons should meet at the nature center.

Park Naturalist Dave Moilanen said the woodland wildflowers, which give spring much of its sparkling color, will be featured. The program includes general identification techniques.

The program is free, except for vehicle entry permits (annual regular, \$5; senior citizen, \$1 or daily, \$1).

Persons should register in advance by calling the nature center at 685-1561.

Still, one cannot ignore the claims of those women who feel they should have the right, in the case of the fetus only, to decide its fate.

Even if it is a hazardous moral enterprise to allow one group of people (whites, women) to have total power over another group (blacks, fetuses), it may also be hazardous to deprive individuals of those free choices which may decisively determine their basic health and well-being. (This is exactly the way many women frame their demand for abortion.)

THE GREAT STRENGTH of the claim, however, that women should have the right to choose is—whether we like it or not—that the status of the fetus is morally uncertain. It may have rights, it may not; who can know with any certainty?

For me personally, that uncertainty is just enough to tip the scale in favor of the woman who wants an abortion.

It is a choice, though, with which I at least live uneasily. Women have been oppressed through the ages, in great part by being given no choice about their own bodies. As a symbol of a final liberation from the bondage

of a fixed biological destiny, the right to abortion is powerful.

Yet what a disturbing symbol! For it is a symbol of freedom which can only be realized by crudely affirming still another symbol—the strong killing the weak.

Even if a fetus is not human or not a person, it is the beginning of all individual life. In killing a fetus, we kill possibility and we kill life. It may be that the world is so inherently rotten and irrational that we must choose

one good (freedom) at the expense of another (life).

Yet I wish I could dismiss a nagging thought: The fault may not lie in the way the world is; it may lie in ourselves, ever prone to elevate our private self-interests to the status of high moral good.

NEXT WEEK: Daniel Callahan discusses the moral problems involved in society's treatment of "Aging and the Aged."

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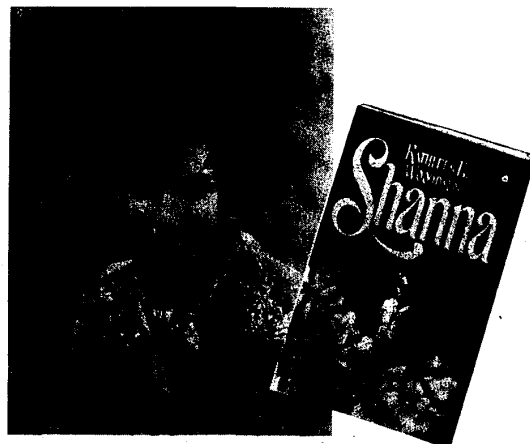


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