



Killing the Unborn Is Never a Good Option

Abortion isn't going away as a political issue.

By [Doug Bandow](#)

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Even as social conservatives find themselves in retreat on many issues, such as gay marriage, public opposition to abortion remains high. Americans are conflicted, but recognize that the procedure involves more than just hurting oneself. There's another life involved. Abortion can never be a simple case of personal "choice."

In fact, most abortion advocates nervously proclaim themselves to be pro-choice, not pro-abortion. Leading "pro-choice" politicians even argue that the procedure should be rare. Most supporters want to focus on the mother, whether her right to make decisions about herself or the difficult circumstances facing her, while downplaying the consequence of a dead baby.

This attitude was reflected by the recent Daily Kos post by "GypsyPhoenix" which [observed](#): "I don't think anyone, save the sickest, most twisted and perverse among us, wants women to have abortions." The writer added that "I don't think that I, personally, could ever do it," yet went on to argue that "Abortion is going to happen. So reality must be faced, and common sense and safety need to prevail." Meaning the availability of legal abortion.

It's a powerful, though ultimately unsatisfactory, argument for allowing a procedure that results in death. Forcing a mother to carry to term is not a good option. However, abortion is not just another choice. No argument over when life begins can change the fact that there is something special, and morally important, about a potential life irrespective of its state of development. Moreover, except in the important but thankfully rare case of rape, pregnancy results from the exercise of choice, to have sex. While that liberty should be well-nigh absolute, freedom entails responsibility, including for the consequences of choosing sex—such as the arrival of a baby. We can argue over what those responsibilities should be. But responsibilities there should be.

However, the *Washington Post* recently [wrote](#) of some activists' "new push to destigmatize the nation's most controversial medical procedure by talking about it openly and unapologetically," giving it "in some cases, even a positive spin." In that spirit *Salon*'s Valeri Tarico [responded](#) to GypsyPhoenix.

Tarico cheerfully took up the challenge of endorsing abortion: “I believe that abortion care is a positive social good.” Most striking about her argument is the almost complete dismissal of the other life involved. Indeed, she began her essay with the declaration: “I am pro-abortion like I’m pro-knee-replacement and pro-chemotherapy and pro-cataract surgery.” That fits with the Carafem abortion clinic in the Washington, D.C. area, which, [explained](#) one employee, was trying “to present an upgraded, almost spa-like feel.” Some people take mud baths. Others get abortions.

Of course, there’s a reason that no one, at least that I am aware of, is campaigning to ban knee replacements, chemotherapy, and cataract surgery because knees, cancer cells, and cataracts have a right to life. And I doubt many people imagine an abortion to be equivalent to a spa treatment. Indeed, I had a knee replacement and never thought of it as similar to ending a baby’s life. Without a knee replacement I would still be here, though I might hobble around painfully. Without an abortion a baby would be born. They are not the same.

Tarico also argued that “choice is about who gets to make the decision.” Bringing another person into the world “is too big a decision for us to make for each other.” Yet the freedom to have sex ensures that the decision remains with the mother. It is very different to contend that having brought a new life into being, whether advertently or inadvertently, the decision *to end it* remains private. Virtually everyone believes, rightly, that we cannot decide that a child is a mistake and terminate him or her. A baby merely months or weeks away from childhood has a strong claim to similar consideration.

Most of Tarico’s ten reasons “why we must support” abortion are similarly flawed. First, “being able to delay and limit childbearing is fundamental to female empowerment and equality.” True. Which is why everyone should decide when to have sex and have access to contraception. But that doesn’t justify ending a life once created. Second, “well-timed pregnancies give children a healthier start in life.” Sure, which is a reason to treat the decision to have children seriously. But ending a baby’s life is an odd response to the fact that he or she might have been healthier if conceived later.

Third, “I take motherhood seriously.” Certainly someone who does not, as Tarico suggests, feel up to “twenty dedicated years of focus, attention, patience, persistence, social support, mental health, money, and a whole lot more” should not pursue childhood to term. In contrast, carrying the baby to term for nine months, while still a huge burden, is different. That’s why adoption exists, and I am glad for that, since my sister was adopted.

Fourth, “intentional childbearing helps couples, families and communities to get out of poverty.” Yes, but that’s another argument for contraception and adoption, not abortion. Surely no one would justify infanticide as long as it raised per capita income. Fifth, “reproduction is a highly imperfect process.” Yes, but how does that warrant terminating lives that nevertheless emerge?

Sixth, “morality is about the well-being of sentient beings.” Thus, “real people count more than potential people.” That is why when the lives of both mother and baby conflict that of the mother takes precedence. And why a woman should not be forced to carry a baby to term as a result of a rape, despite the innocence of the fetus. But the person in being is not so superior to the person a

few months away from being “real” as to have a right to kill the latter for *any* reason. Especially after having knowingly engaged in the act that created the “potential person.”

Seventh, “contraceptives are imperfect, and people are too.” Right, but the fact that imperfect people sometimes make mistakes and use imperfect products that sometimes don’t work doesn’t mean there are no consequences to the choices voluntarily made. If one engages in behavior known to create babies, one shouldn’t possess an absolute right to kill one that inconveniently shows up. Eighth, one should “believe in mercy, grace, compassion, and the power of fresh starts.” Certainly, but that doesn’t mean anything goes and all consequences *to others* disappear. A baby cannot be simply wished away.

Ninth, “the future is always in motion, and we have the power and responsibility to shape it.” Even small changes mean a different life is created. Tenth, “I love my daughter” who was conceived after termination of an unhealthy pregnancy. No doubt, good can come out of unfortunate decisions, necessary or not. But babies are not interchangeable. One cannot justify eliminating one by bringing another one into existence, just as one cannot justify eliminating an existing child by having another one.

Abortion is not a social good. That doesn’t mean it is never justified. That doesn’t mean that a pregnancy doesn’t pose extraordinary challenges for many women. That doesn’t mean that finding the balance between life and liberty is easy.

But unlike so many other social issues, abortion involves another life. No amount rhetorical legerdemain can change this reality. Call the baby potential life if you wish. He or she still has moral claims that one’s knee does not.

No one is obligated to bring a baby into existence. Having done so voluntarily, however, *by exercising free choice*, a person must bear at least some responsibility for the life created. No one doubts our right to choose sex. The debate is over responsibility when we choose badly. In which case abortion is never a social positive, but sometimes is an unfortunate necessity, a necessary evil.

Abortion will never be an easy issue. But we should not delude ourselves by ignoring the moral complexities of the issue.

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