

The Abortion Conflict:

A Libertarian Message to Both Sides

by Charles V. Eimermann

From the summer of 1992 to the summer of 1993 I was active in abortion clinic defense in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I have heard the arguments against abortion, seen the graphic pictures and videos of aborted fetuses, and been the object—depending on the moods and temperaments of the demonstrators—of both bitter denunciation and expressions of loving concern for my presumed ill-fated soul.

The anti-abortion demonstrators and I spent many hours discussing good and evil, life and death, and almost everything in between. I lived with thoughts and images of abortion nearly every waking moment, and sometimes in my sleep as well.

Part of the effect of placing myself in the midst of people afire with “righteous” indignation was seeing the need to move beyond the usual slogans and dogmatic assertions that flew back and forth, for the most part influencing no one. From my libertarian perspective, the arguments being made by both sides of the debate were often false, in disregard of the context, or missing the point altogether.

It may seem as though nothing new can be said on the topic, that all that remains is the slugging out of the issue in the courts and legislatures, but it isn’t so. There *is* more to be said, and it needs to be heard by both sides—because both sides are their own worst enemy.

What follows is an admittedly unconventional view of the abortion issue, which is no disadvantage considering the sorry mess the conventional views have made of it. Though a very brief treatment of a complex set of intertwining issues, it will give thoughtful readers an opportunity to see the broad issue of choice in a new light.

I argue in part 1 against the case made by anti-abortionists and in part 2 against the arguments of abortion rights advocates. I do not go into decisions of the courts. They have been made against the backdrop of prevailing confused thought regarding freedom and are expressions of that thought. The law will become more coherent when prevailing thought is more coherent.

Part 1

The core of the anti-abortionist's argument is that the fetus is a person, fully human and possessing the same rights as anyone outside the womb. It is assumed that if this assertion is true, abortion must be considered murder and be made illegal. But *would* the personhood of the fetus give it a right to life, or have the anti-abortionists omitted a crucial link in their argument?

The answer is that the fetus, in its unique circumstances, would *not* acquire a right to life. The anti-abortionist has leapfrogged over the real issue and embraced a conclusion that does not follow from his own premise. The fetus, even if considered a full-fledged human being, could have a right to life only if it had *more* rights than anyone outside the womb—more rights than can possibly be held by anyone in a society based on equal rights and respect for individual autonomy. How can this be so? The answer comes from an unexpected place.

The Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution prohibits slavery *and* involuntary servitude. It is written as a general principle. It does not even mention slavery based on race, the issue at the time it was written, and therefore cannot be held to apply solely to that condition. Nor does it draw distinctions between greater or lesser instances of what it prohibits. It applies both to slavery and to the essence of slavery, its identifying feature—involuntary servitude. The complete text reads:

1. Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.
2. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

This powerful but sorely neglected amendment is one of the most effective shields imaginable against tyranny in all its disguises—effective, that is, if its implications are understood.

The Constitution has been interpreted in different ways at different times. How it is interpreted depends, for better or worse, more on the values and quality of thought of those interpreting it than on the accepted meanings of words or on original intent—which, in certain areas, was itself so out of sync with the spirit of the document that it had to be overturned. Examples of this are the eventual correction of blind spots regarding blacks and women, which illustrate that the ramifications of a stated principle often go well beyond the vision of those who at any given time profess adherence to it. Social conventions and fixed habits of thought can thoroughly block out what in more enlightened times is seen as self-evident and beyond question.

Whatever the past or present thought on the Thirteenth Amendment, an objective reading of it yields an unmistakable conclusion, encompassing the usual narrow application but going well beyond it: no one may be required against his or her will to serve the interests of another. The much avoided implications of this are profound and revolutionary but every bit as logically and morally required as was the ending of black slavery.

When we look at the way rights in other parts of the Constitution are treated, we often (but not always) find considerable willingness to notice the principles involved. In the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments, certain freedoms are set forth that the country's founders wanted to be especially sure would not be legislated out of existence or simply ignored. As a

result, careful scrutiny—though often not careful enough—is continually applied to government actions that appear to threaten those freedoms. Lawsuits to prevent the actions frequently follow.

It is not just legislation that would destroy or severely damage a particular freedom that is opposed, but legislation that “chips away” at it. The infringement that some see as insignificant, others see as the first step, the camel’s nose in the tent, the beginning of a process that would eventually obliterate the freedom. It is, ironically, these smaller incursions that pose the biggest threat, being more likely to be accepted as harmless by people who would be inclined to rise up against more sweeping and blatant attempts to curtail their freedom.

Small incursions can easily be rationalized as necessary in order to achieve some other good, but their cumulative effects can be devastating to freedom. Once the precedent is set for diminishing a particular freedom, it begins a chain reaction that slowly turns the issue in question on its head. Where at one time a compelling argument was required to allow *infringement* on a freedom, at a later time it is the *retaining* of the freedom that is thought to require the compelling argument. When the burden of proof shifts in this way, the effect is as profound as it would be in a court of law if the rule became that a defendant is to be presumed guilty until proven innocent, instead of the reverse.

The importance of defending a principle cannot be overstated. Just as an unenforced “no parking” rule becomes, in practice, “park wherever you like,” an undefended principle will eventually evolve into an opposing one. There is no neutral ground in the world of ideas. Though the replacement principle will not always be fully understood or consciously recognized, it will do its work just as surely. It is not necessary to understand a principle to be helped or harmed by it, but it *is* necessary to understand it if one wants some control in the matter.

In defending the principles expressed (however imperfectly) in our guiding documents, it is understandable, then, that even the slightest violations—for example, of freedom of the press—are furiously resisted. So too with freedom of religion. Freedom of speech is so precious that it is interpreted to extend far beyond speech, to include one’s choice of clothing as well as actions that are expressive of one’s beliefs, however unpopular, such as burning an American flag.

Yet if the issue of involuntary servitude comes up, it is treated as though the Thirteenth Amendment took care of that once and for all. Everyone knows that this amendment prohibits slavery—meaning no manacles, no slave auctions, no plantations worked by black people owned by white people.

Involuntary servitude is generally thought of as existing only in that way—total or not at all. There is no steely-eyed watchfulness, no flurry of lawsuits unleashed on legislation that chips away at the right to pursue one’s own ends rather than someone else’s. There is no constant awareness that the thwarting of one’s will by meddlesome legislation amounts to installing a master here, another master there, yet another there, until one’s life is so controlled by others that it is effectively no longer one’s own. If the crime of thievery, for example, were thought of in that same all-or-nothing way, we could expect a judge to say to a plaintiff, “Did the accused take everything you own? No? Then you have not been robbed.”

Stealing, it should be noted, is actually an instance of the imposition of involuntary servitude. Though properly recognized as wrong, its wrongfulness is poorly understood. The person stolen from has been required to involuntarily serve the thief’s interests rather than his own. The time spent working to acquire what was later stolen becomes time spent in forced

service to the thief. Even when the stolen item represents little or no labor on the part of the owner, his being required to give it up means he must subordinate his will to that of the thief. It is not really the “right to property” (a term that obscures more than it reveals) that is central here but the underlying broader right from which property rights derive—the right to be free, which means the right to not be made the unwilling means to others’ ends, the right to not be enslaved—even a little bit.

So too with the crime of rape and many other actions, legal and illegal, that have one thing in common—the denial of choice as to whose interests one will serve. When we fail to recognize this essential element of acts correctly called criminal, we are less likely to see criminality hidden in the law itself, eroding our individual sovereignty instead of protecting it. There is actually only one freedom, which we unfortunately chop and dice until it is no longer recognizable. It is the freedom to choose. The less we have of it, the more we are in a condition of involuntary servitude.

The controversy over abortion is one of the results of missing the philosophical substance of the Thirteenth Amendment. The opponents of abortion, who have strived mightily to portray abortion as the moral, or immoral, equivalent of the practice of slavery with its refusal to recognize blacks as persons, have got it exactly backwards. It is not abortion that is reminiscent of slavery but the *prohibition* of abortion. It is morally indefensible for the same reasons.

The term slavery, while lying largely unused when its defining feature—denial of choice—is clearly present, is often erroneously applied when that essential feature is absent. The essence of slavery is not distasteful or laborious service. Nor does it have to do with the amount of pay received, or whether there is any pay at all. Any burden may be *voluntarily* taken on for no compensation whatsoever without the slightest injustice. It is the “involuntary” connected to “servitude” that constitutes an offense against a person’s humanity. The essence of slavery is the absence of choice in the rendering of service.

A woman’s decision to terminate a pregnancy is the choice to *not* serve the interests of the fetus—or those of fetus advocates, biological fathers, potential adoptive parents, or anyone else. A law that prohibits abortion makes such service involuntary and is therefore both immoral and unconstitutional. This is true whether or not the fetus is considered a person.

The importance of personhood in the abortion debate has been misunderstood entirely. It would be more fitting for those seeking to establish a fetus’s right to be served to assert that those having an obligation to serve are *not* persons. Even slave holders knew that and saw to it that blacks were denied personhood status. Trying to establish a right to be served by claiming personhood for the fetus ignores the real issue. Has anyone said that a pregnant woman is not a person? Then how can she be forced to provide service? It is *her* personhood that matters, not that of the fetus. If *she* is a person, she cannot be required to serve anyone or any thing.

Thus the “pro-life” rejoinder whenever the issue of choice is brought up—“What about the choice of the fetus?”—is irrelevant. The fetus’s choice to do what? Live? No, that is not what the anti-abortionists are actually pleading for. They are not simply asking that the fetus be allowed to continue to exist—either through its own efforts, as in the case of healthy adults, or through the efforts of a willing provider of service, as in the case of children or the very ill. No, they are asking that the pregnant woman’s personhood be revoked and that the fetus be given a special right not held by anyone else, a right that goes well beyond even the so-called entitlement rights that have crept into our laws (which many anti-abortionists paradoxically oppose).

The super-entitlement the anti-abortionists are hoping to bestow on the fetus is the right

to the products, processes, and protection of another's body without that person's consent, the right to physically use the body of another for one's own purposes—requiring not only involuntary servitude, but servitude of the most personal kind. This clearly would put the fetus in a separate category above everyone else and the pregnant woman in a separate category below everyone else. The anti-abortionist's claim that the fetus deserves a right to life equal with that of other human beings is therefore an argument *for*, not against, the legality of abortion.

A right to life sustained by the unauthorized use of another's body cannot be created for the fetus without establishing patently *unequal* rights. We do not even allow life-saving use of organs of people who have died unless they or their next of kin have given consent—even though it can be rightly argued that others die as a result. Surely, a pregnant woman's rightful authority over her body is not less than that of a dead person. The right to life is of necessity a limited one—limited by the freedom of all to reject involuntary servitude.

Those who would impose their will on pregnant women try mightily to make their views seem reasonable. It has been claimed, for example, that requiring such gestational servitude is no different than requiring parents to support their children. Perhaps there would be some ground to be gained by that approach if parents actually were so required, but in fact they are not. Ironically, those who make that argument actively promote the option to *avoid* any such obligation to support a child. Adoption, the much trumpeted alternative to abortion, does precisely that. One may simply give the child up and go on one's way. That option, like abortion, can be made to appear irresponsible, yet no one is demanding that it be made illegal—though it clearly lets biological parents off the hook.

After a decision is made to give birth and to take the child home, the law does impose certain standards of care. But if the standards aren't met, the child is removed from the home. It would be foolish and futile for the law to try to force parents to care for a child they no longer want or whose well-being is unimportant to them. The law may require financial support in cases where one parent has left the other and the remaining parent desires to care for the child, but this is a case of assistance being required of one parent to the other as part of a real or perceived contractual relationship, not a case of either parent being required to provide for a child that neither wants. However many differences there may be between a child and a fetus, and between adoption and abortion, there is no justification to be found here for placing a woman into bondage to a fetus.

Anti-abortion activists, knowing the emotional impact of lurid pictures, especially when enlarged to child size, do their best to focus on the physical act, the destruction and removal of the fetus, portraying it as an unwarranted act of aggression. But they can do this only by ignoring the context—a woman's body. A pregnant woman, unlike a mother giving up her child for adoption, cannot simply walk away from an unwanted fetus. She is literally bound to it, and so has little alternative but to use the means available to free herself from it. The obvious and unfortunate unpleasantness of the act has no bearing whatsoever on whether it is justified. Though not a pretty sight (as if anything involving surgical instruments is), using that as an argument against abortion ignores the complexity of the issue and substitutes emotional manipulation for reasoned persuasion. One can only imagine what form a campaign against open-heart surgery would take if anti-abortionists suddenly found that procedure to be at odds with their moral code.

It should be noted that what is shown in the pictures of aborted fetuses is not, even to the abortion foe, the central issue. A “morning after” pill, which would act on nothing remotely

resembling a human being, is also opposed, but graphic images of expelled fertilized ova (if such images could be found) would not fit well with the message that if it looks like a baby it must be one. If truth mattered to the anti-abortionists, they would have said from the beginning of their campaign that blood and guts and repeated references to “babies” were beside the point. But they wanted people to react emotionally, not to think.

The anti-abortionist will insist that the fetus is innocent of any wrongdoing, which is true but irrelevant. We are dealing with the issue of freedom, of who owns what, and therefore, who may control what. A lack of malicious intent does not entitle anyone to something that unquestionably belongs to someone else. However upsetting the comparison may be to some, the innocence of the fetus is similar to the innocence of a virus whose continued existence is felt to be a detriment to someone’s well-being. The virus acts according to its nature, it is not “guilty,” but it does not thereby possess a right to use or act on a person’s body in undesired ways. A fetus is not a virus, but neither is it something that can claim such a right, which even fully formed human beings do not possess.

There is guilt to be found in this controversial issue, but it falls on those who claim to be acting in behalf of the fetus. Time, energy, and money that could so effectively be used in non-coercive ways to decrease the incidence of abortion while respecting the autonomy of women are instead being used to dictatorially establish an entitlement to this nonconsensual use of a woman’s body. The goal of the anti-abortion movement is not to persuade pregnant women to choose to give birth (for persuasion implies acceptance of free agency), but to create out of thin air the authority to force them into servitude both to the fetus and to anyone claiming an interest in it. This blundering authoritarianism has created an atmosphere in which a pregnant woman is given, ironically, yet another reason to choose abortion over adoption, namely, as an act of defiance against those who would turn her womb into public property.

To get around the issue of choice, the anti-abortionist tries to sneak his conclusion in through the back door by claiming that the pregnant woman, by having engaged in sex, has given a kind of implied consent to the presence of the fetus. That this is just a diversionary tactic quickly becomes apparent when he is confronted with the pregnancy resulting from rape. Suddenly reversing himself, he abandons the need for there to be any form of consent whatsoever. No matter how the sperm encounters the egg, the anti-abortionist intends—like the rapist himself—to disregard the expressed wishes of the woman.

Even if we consider only pregnancy not attributable to rape, the act of sexual intercourse cannot be assumed to imply a willingness to become a mother. Sex, it should be unnecessary to point out, is a means to other—totally unrelated—goals, such as pleasure or emotional intimacy. A woman engaging in sex for such other purposes can hardly be presumed to have chosen either to become pregnant or to remain so if fertilization were to occur. The joining of sperm and egg is a biological process that, strictly speaking, *cannot* be willed. The most one can do is to create the conditions under which it *might* occur—conditions that *in themselves* fulfill other goals. After that, it is up to nonvolitional physiological processes which more often than not fail to result in conception. To dogmatically declare that consent to sex equals consent to motherhood is clearly a case of politically or religiously motivated wishful thinking and has nothing to do with the real world.

But doesn’t knowing of the risk involved obligate one to accept the negative consequences risked? No, it doesn’t—not if “accepting the consequences” means standing by helplessly while nature takes its course. The risk of becoming pregnant does not obligate a woman to

accept that unintended consequence any more than the risk of flying in an airplane would obligate her to forgo use of a parachute if the plane were about to crash. Similarly, if she were a doctor risking illness by treating infected patients, she would not, if infected herself, be required to submit to the disease. Nature does not have to be allowed to take its course. We interfere with the processes of nature every day. We continually take risks while having the conscious intention of also taking remedial action if unwanted effects occur.

If abortion is to be considered an exception to this standard way of dealing with unwanted effects, it is up to those who say so to explain why. Stretching the concept of “person” to include the fetus changes nothing. What must be established is that this alleged “person” has a rightful claim on the body and services of the woman in whom it exists—and this cannot be done.

There is no getting around it: life is a gift women are able to give, but it is just that—a gift, not an entitlement. The fetus is, at best, a guest in a woman’s womb. Though it may “arrive” unexpectedly, it remains there and eventually is born only through her generosity. After it is born, after it has completed the stage of its development during which it extracts its sustenance regardless of the will of the provider, after it begins to obtain the elements of life either through its own power or from those desiring to provide them, then—and only then—can it be considered to have a right to life.

The right to life and every other right in a society calling itself free must preclude involuntary servitude in all its guises. This is the deeper meaning of the Thirteenth Amendment, the full expression of the moral realization it represents.

Part 2

Although the sides in the abortion debate are not drawn perfectly along the standard liberal/conservative divide, those who feel most strongly about abortion rights and defend them most actively are usually found in the liberal camp. They feel worlds apart from those who would outlaw abortion, and they see their defense of a woman’s right to choose as evidence of their more tolerant nature. On closer examination another picture emerges.

The case made in part 1 for the constitutional and moral right to abortion is based squarely on a woman’s self-ownership and the absence of any obligation to submit to the involuntary servitude of an unwanted pregnancy. It answers the very strongest assertion of the other side—that the fetus is fully human and therefore entitled to equal rights—and shows that even if it were so, a woman’s right to abortion remains untouched. It is an argument that many of my liberal pro-choice friends might feel inclined to embrace. But they can’t.

However much liberals might agree with the logic of this defense, it is philosophically not available to them. Liberal ideology is wedded to the opposing principle, namely that human beings do indeed have the right to extract service and sustenance from others without their consent.

Modern liberalism holds that there are certain entitlements that serve as the hallmark of the civilized society. Food, shelter, clothing, education, and medical care are among the things generally put forward as important enough to require a guarantee underwritten by government.

It is not just that the liberal envisions, as a heartfelt desire, a world in which these needs are filled—a commendable hope which every person of goodwill shares. The liberal goes much further than that. He calls the possession of these things “rights” and says the need for

them *must* be filled. The force of law, in his view, may properly be engaged to ensure the outcome he envisions. In proceeding to that position, however, the liberal crosses a line that leaves him philosophically cheek to cheek with the anti-abortionist.

Note that the things the liberal wants to guarantee do not exist free in nature. They are the products of someone's labor. However much the provision of these things is desired, they cannot be guaranteed without placing an obligation on someone to provide them. Here, as in the abortion issue, legal obligations obliterate choice, but the liberal is untroubled by this when his own concerns are on the line. Then, no sacrifice is too much to demand. Preservation of the life (and even comfort) of a human being is presumed to justify whatever burden others must be coerced to accept in order to provide what is needed. Like the anti-abortionist, the liberal focuses only on the outcome he wants, not on whether he has the right to guarantee that outcome by diminishing others' choices.

There is no difference in principle between requisitioning someone's body and requisitioning someone's earnings. The former is merely more direct, personal, and blatant than the latter. They both result in service being extracted by force. The timidity that suddenly seizes even ardent advocates of income redistribution when considering similar incursions against bodily property is simply the refusal to face the principle they embrace without its makeup.

The liberal rightly objects when a pregnant woman is told the fetus she carries is a helpless human being and she therefore has a duty to place her body in its service. But the anti-abortion rationale that the liberal finds so objectionable is based on the same idea the liberal has struggled ceaselessly to establish as society's guiding principle, namely, that service to the helpless is not a matter of choice but of duty, enforced by law if necessary. The two sides differ only on the proposed beneficiaries of the denial of choice.

The label "pro-choice" that the liberal uses to describe himself is thus true in the particular, regarding abortion, but manifestly false in many other areas where forced service is at issue. When speaking of the right to food, shelter, clothing, and so on, the liberal is as adamantly, coercively, and smugly intolerant as those he criticizes at anti-abortion demonstrations. Both he and his opponent want to claim the moral high ground on their respective issues while denying choice to those expected to assume the burden of servitude. To each, his own position is self-evident and unassailable, and each tries to silence critics with accusations of selfishness and low moral character.

Yet the two are philosophical twins, each convinced his own superior moral convictions outweigh others' freedom to choose. They both actively promote involuntary servitude, and in similar ways—the abortion foe by declaring the womb a fetus's entitlement, the liberal by demanding that society itself be encased in a protective womb of another type. Those who provide sustenance to either the literal or figurative womb must do so as a duty.

The liberal clearly has his own "pro-life" agenda which he pursues with the same fervor shown by his anti-abortion counterpart. But if his agenda is to be defended, it, like that of the abortion foe, must be defended without reference to anyone's wishes but those of the individuals whose servitude is at issue. Bypassing those wishes is a show of contempt, a display of the slave master mentality, no matter how prettily disguised.

Politically popular instances of involuntary servitude are usually defended by pointing to the wishes of the general public—if the public happens to support them. (If not, the issue somehow becomes too important to be decided by a mere show of hands.) Though the support of a majority of voters may mean something politically, ethically it has no relevance.

Whether to give service or not cannot properly be decided by majority rule unless each person involved has expressly agreed to that type of decision. If, for example, a majority of black people somehow were to come to believe that slavery was not such a bad deal, it would be outrageous to suggest that blacks as a group should decide by voting whether to be placed back into it. A person can vote *himself* into servitude if he likes, but he has exactly zero authority to vote anyone else into it.

If strength of numbers is thought to justify the imposition of servitude in order to guarantee life via social welfare legislation, as the liberal believes, then it can just as properly, if the tide should turn in that direction, justify legislation to so guarantee life in the womb. To shift the analogy to another area of concern, if the support (or acquiescence) of the majority can justify protecting an egg of a particular species of bird, it can certainly justify protecting a fertilized human ovum.

Here again, the liberal's view of abortion rights shows itself to be at odds with his other views. He places great emphasis on the nonpersonhood of the fetus, with the implication that if the fetus were indeed a human being it could be rightly protected. But humanness has never been the deciding factor in the liberal's criteria for government protection. From the snail darter to the Furbish lousewort to the spotted owl and a host of other creatures, the liberal's demand for protection of nonhuman life is a matter of record. So strong is the determination to provide such protection that everything from individual members of a species to the species' eggs, habitat, and even naturally discarded feathers are guarded by law. More than one person has had federal agents knocking on the door for the crime of possessing forbidden feathers innocently picked up from a beach.

Nor is the concern for nonhuman life limited to attempts to save species from extinction. Nonendangered species raised only for specific uses, such as for food, medical research, or fur to be used in clothing will find vehement, sometimes violent, defenders in the liberal camp.

Such extremes of concern for nonhuman life can only lend fuel to demands for the protection of something that everyone agrees will become a human being. The liberal's own "pro-life" agenda again makes the anti-abortionist's job considerably easier. The claim that the fetus is not a person has, by the liberal's own standards, been made irrelevant.

Further complicating the liberal's defense of abortion has been the thoughtless repetition of stock phrases that are meant to sound like principled stands but are clearly nothing of the kind. We have all heard, for example, about a woman's right to control her own body. Though there is nothing wrong with this idea, it is being put forward by people who have shown again and again their willingness to turn their backs on it when it isn't useful. Though eager to use the idea when it helps in making a particular demand, they have no intention of allowing women a choice if what is chosen doesn't conform to a particular way of life.

Consider the issue of prostitution. A woman decides to use her body for sexual purposes for a fee. Her decision doesn't just meet with disapproval—that's only the beginning. Even those who have adamantly proclaimed "my body, my choice" proceed to disqualify her decision and to rationalize their support of laws prohibiting her from acting on it. It *isn't* her choice, they say. She needs more alternatives. She's being pushed into it by a man. It's not a *free* choice. She's a victim. She needs help. What you will *not* hear is, "Her body, her choice."

The prostitute's decision, in short, need not be respected and allowed to stand because it is not truly hers, or at least it wouldn't be if she really understood what she was doing. Sound familiar? It should—to anyone who has spent time talking to anti-abortion demonstrators. They

say the same things about a woman's decision to have an abortion. Yet liberal abortion-rights advocates want them to simply put aside their intense feelings and accept the woman's right to choose. Is this what they themselves do when distressed about other people's choices? No. They demand laws to prohibit whatever choice offends them—and they are frequently offended.

Are these defenders of abortion rights hopelessly mired in hypocrisy or was it a mistake from the beginning to believe they see themselves as more tolerant than their anti-abortion counterparts, more committed to choice per se? Perhaps they don't mean to imply anything philosophical when using the term "pro-choice" and intend it to be taken in a very narrow sense. Maybe they embrace the term only for the psychological advantages of its positive connotations and are knowingly just offering a different brand of authoritarianism in which abortion happens to be permitted simply because it matches their own preferences.

My experience has been that liberals sincerely believe they represent the overall view most in keeping with the idea of a free society. They do not consider themselves dictatorial. If that is the case, shouldn't their methods of changing society be different from those of their "anti-choice" opponents? The methods one uses are, after all, the clearest indication of how one views one's neighbors—as equals, with the right and responsibility to make choices, or as inferiors, untrustworthy and needing to be ruled.

The battle over abortion, as currently waged, has little to do with freedom. On one side are mostly religious conservatives who talk a lot about liberty but think it means all of society in slavish obedience to an ill-tempered deity who coincidentally speaks through them. On the other side are those who have been so busy ripping up the platform of liberty to make room for their own special concerns that they now have nowhere to stand to make their case.

The examples of incongruity given here are only part of a larger picture of intellectual chaos that has made defense of the right to abortion—and every other freedom—such a formidable task. Even highly educated professionals often argue more from personal preference than from principle, as if caught up in a fantasy about what they would do if they ruled the world. But it's a losing policy. Those who embrace positions based on conflicting premises are actually at war with themselves, regardless of who they think their enemies are.

The issue of abortion does not exist in a vacuum and cannot be approached without reference to the rest of one's beliefs. Whoever is not pro-choice as a matter of principle, even when what is chosen grieves him, is in no position to object when his own freedom to choose is under attack. There is no virtue in respecting choice only when what is chosen meets with one's approval. By that standard every dictator the world has ever known has been pro-choice.

Freedom of choice is always situated most precariously in areas that arouse strong emotion. The groundwork must be firmly in place as a general policy if it is to hold up when the great strain of emotion is placed on it. Put simply, the freedom to choose abortion will be secure when the freedom to choose is secure.

Afterword

Everyone claims to want the best for society. Everyone believes virtue is on his side. In every conflict, both sides are always "good," but one or both invariably fall prey to the delusion that only force, the antithesis of choice, can accomplish its goals. Once force becomes the method to bring about "good," it no longer matters what was intended. The "good" will be lost in the

ensuing turmoil. The force will be remembered and repeated.

Society's troubles are not caused so much by the problems it faces as by its heavy-handed way of dealing with them. The common mindset for appraising and selectively protecting choice—"mine good, yours bad"—is childish and self-defeating for all of us. It gets us into logically indefensible positions and fills us with a false sense of superiority that makes us all dangerous to each other's freedom.

You may not agree with how I live my life or spend my money. You may not think I'm a good person. I may have similar misgivings about you. So what? None of our negative evaluations of each other gives any of us one iota of authority to supplant another's decisions with our own. We each have ample opportunity to try to persuade others to our point of view. We can each work on our own or with like-minded others to make what we regard as improvements to life within our small sphere of influence. The resort to force should be viewed as an admission that one has run out of creative thought and craves power as a substitute.

Contrary to popular view, respecting choice does not mean one condones or approves of what is chosen. To see it as such presumes the authority to permit or deny. We are not each other's parents.

Nor is respect for choice the equivalent of ignoring problems or withholding help from where it seems needed. "Caring" is not shown by spending other people's money or diminishing other people's freedom. "Doing something" does not mean forcing one's neighbor to do something.

Those who are troubled by abortion or other disapproved behavior can preach their values and put their time and resources where they will be most effective in creating wider options. Those who are troubled by poverty or illness can do the same.

There will be some—they sometimes upset us the most—who appear not to be troubled by anything at all and will do nothing to advance the solutions we desperately wish to see applied. That is their choice.

In short, we can have a disintegrating nation of intolerant, self-important, dictatorial reformers, all trying to slap the shackles of the law onto anyone reluctant to serve their narrowly defined versions of "the good"—or we can have freedom, with all its imperfections and all its possibilities. That is *our* choice.

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