

Ellis, J. (1998, November 29). [It's ok to kill babies? And that's fit to print?](#) Human Life Review, Winter 1998.

OVERVIEW

First came the article in the November 2, 1997 The New York Times, Sunday Magazine, by MIT professor of psychology, Stephen Pinker, who has also written [How The Mind Works](#), a book on evolutionary psychology. Pinker's New York Times article was in response to several killings of newborn babies by their mothers. Pinker developed this argument:

To a biologist, birth is as arbitrary a milestone as any other...The right to life must come, the moral philosophers say, from morally significant traits that we humans happen to possess. One such trait is having a unique sequence of experiences that define us as individuals and connect us to other people. Other traits include an ability to reflect upon ourselves as a continuous locus of consciousness, to form and savor plans for the future, to dread death, and to express the choice not to die. And there's the rub: Our immature neontates (newborn babies) don't possess these traits any more than mice do.

(Pinker goes on to say)...several moral philosophers have concluded that neontates are not persons, and thus that neonticide should not be classified as murder...The facts don't make it easy (to outlaw the killing of infants).

Then came a rebuttal from Washington Post columnist, Michael Kelly (a former editor of The New Republic). Kelly summarizes Pinker's argument in the following way:

Mothers who kill their newborn infants should not be judged as harshly as people who take human life in its later stages because newborn infants are not persons in the full sense of the word, and therefore do not enjoy a right to life. ([1997, November 6]. Washington Post).

Kelly further pointed out that Pinker seemed to be going beyond the logic of pro-life advocates by saying that life does not necessarily begin at birth.

A third article is that of John Ellis (see above). He is amazed that his

Lexus/Nexus search for response to the Pinker article yielded only the single response (that of Michael Kelly). Was no one else offended? Ellis' article includes these conclusions:

To argue that "the facts don't make it easy" to outlaw legitimately the killing of infants is profoundly troubling on almost every level...More incredible is the deafening silence that followed the column.

Imagine for a moment that a distinguished MIT professor had written a piece for The New York Times Sunday Magazine arguing that doctors who perform partial-birth abortions should be arrested on charges of second-degree murder. A majority of Americans believe partial-birth abortion is morally proximate to murder...Such an article, in the unlikely event of its publication, would have caused an uproar...Newspaper columns would have been written expressing outrage and consternation.

But publish an article that basically advocates the decriminalization of infanticide, and the media world yawns before moving blithely on to the next thing. The right-to-life movement has long argued that once a society adapts to the idea of aborting fetuses, it would soon entertain the idea of killing infants. This argument used to be thought specious...doom-saying of the overworked imagination...(but) it must now be regarded as true.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. When do you believe life begins? Who should decide this for your society?
2. What difference do you see in responsibility for (or reprehensibility of) the initial aborting of a fertilized egg by using an IUD (Intrauterine device), aborting a one-month fetus, having a partial-birth abortion in the 9th month of pregnancy, killing a new-born baby, and killing a 16-year-old?
3. What do you think about the disposal of fertilized eggs that were created during the IVF process (in vitro fertilization).
4. What is your reaction to the little you read here of Pinker's article?
5. What do you think of Kelly's and Ellis' reaction and response to that article?
6. If you were on a jury in a trial of an unmarried 17-year-old mother who has killed her new born infant, and it was proved and admitted that she had done it, what sentence would you favor?

7.How can we prevent the killing of newborn children?

IMPLICATIONS

- 1.It is apparent that the ethical issues of today's societies are becoming more and more complex, that viewpoints about moral issues are increasingly divergent, and that there is a general loss of respect for life.
- 2.These are issues that need to be discussed in school and in youth groups.
- 3.Young people today want to discuss these issues. They are looking for adults who are genuine and have strong convictions...with which they may agree or disagree.
- 4.It is not enough to voice our moral opinions to young people; we must give them the opportunity to express their own opinions and work toward truth that will stand in a pluralistic, secular society as well as be a guide for them in their personal and religious lives.

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