

Toddler Tactics

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Use “Trot out the Toddler” to simplify the abortion issue for those who think its complex. It’s easy to use and frames the argument around the one question that really matters, “What is the unborn?”

Pro-life advocates contend that elective abortion unjustly takes the life of a defenseless human being. This simplifies the abortion controversy by focusing public attention on just one question: Is the unborn a member of the human family? If so, killing him or her to benefit others is a serious moral wrong. It treats the distinct human being, with his or her own intrinsic worth, as nothing more than a disposable instrument. Conversely, if the unborn are not human, elective abortion requires no more justification than having a tooth pulled.

This is not a debate between those who are pro-choice and those who are anti-choice. Every pro-life advocate that I know is vigorously “pro-choice” when it comes to women choosing a number of moral goods. They support a woman’s right to choose her own health care provider, to choose her own school, to choose her own husband, to choose her own job, to choose her own religion, and to choose her own career, to name a few. These are among the many choices that pro-life advocates fully support for the women of our country. But some choices are wrong, like killing innocent human beings simply because they are in the way and cannot defend themselves.¹ No, we shouldn’t be pro-choice about that.

Assuming What You are Trying to Prove

Advocates of elective abortion generally believe that the unborn are not fully human.² But instead of proving this conclusion with facts and arguments, many people simply assume it within the course of their rhetoric. We call this “begging the question” and it’s a logical fallacy that lurks behind many arguments for abortion.

A person begs the question when he assumes what he is trying to prove. Suppose federal prosecutors confronted you with this question: “Have you stopped cheating on your taxes?” Obviously, the question is unfair. It assumes that you have broken the law, which is in fact the very point prosecutors are trying to prove. Your defense attorney would be outraged, insisting that they prove guilt with facts and evidence rather than assume it with rhetoric.

¹ Greg Koukl, *Precious Unborn Human Persons* (Lomita: STR Press, 1997)

² True, a small number of abortion advocates at the academic level (most notably, Judith Jarvis Thomson, Eileen McDonagh, and David Boonin) bite the bullet and concede for the sake of discussion that the unborn are in fact human, but that abortion is justified anyway. I do not find their arguments persuasive and I have dealt with them elsewhere.

Arguing that abortion is justified because a woman has a right to control her own body assumes there is only one body involved—that of the woman. But this is precisely the point abortion advocates try to prove. Hence, they beg the question.

Or, take the claim that no one knows when life begins, therefore abortion should remain legal. But to argue that no one knows when life begins, and that abortion must remain legal through all nine months of pregnancy, assumes that life does not begin until birth—the exact point abortion advocates try to prove. This is hardly a neutral position. It is a clear case of begging the question.

Trot out a Toddler

Here's how to clarify things. If you think a particular argument begs the question regarding the status of the unborn, ask yourself if this justification for abortion also works as a justification for killing toddlers or other humans. If not, the argument assumes the unborn are not fully human, like toddlers.

Now, it may be the case that the unborn are not fully human and abortion is therefore justified. But this must be argued with evidence, not merely assumed by one's rhetoric.

Suppose, for example, that a friend justifies elective abortion this way: "Women have a right to make their own private decisions. What goes on in the bedroom is their business and no one else's."

When you hear this, don't panic. Trot out a toddler:

Pro-lifer: Okay, you say that privacy is the issue. Pretend that I have a two-year old in front of me (hold out your hand at waist level to illustrate this). May I kill him as long as I do it in the privacy of the bedroom?

Abortion-advocate: That's silly--of course not!

Pro-lifer: Why not?

Abortion-advocate: Because he's a human being.

Pro-lifer: Ah. If the unborn are human, like the toddler, we shouldn't kill the unborn in the name of privacy anymore than we'd kill a toddler for that reason.

Abortion-advocate: You're comparing apples with oranges, two things that are completely unrelated. Look, killing toddlers is one thing. Killing a fetus that is not a human being is quite another.

Pro-Lifer: Ah. That's the issue, isn't it? Are the unborn human beings, like toddlers? That is the one issue that matters.

Staying Focused

Notice that you've not yet argued for the humanity of the unborn. You'll do that in a moment. For now, all you are doing is framing the issue around the question, What is the unborn? That is the crux of the debate.

As the conversation continues, keep trotting out the toddler each time your friend assumes the unborn are not human. That will keep the discussion focused on the one question that really matters: the status of the unborn.

Abortion-advocate: But many poor women cannot afford to raise another child.

Pro-lifer: When human beings get expensive, may we kill them? Getting back to my toddler example, suppose a large family collectively decides to quietly dispose of its three youngest children to help ease the family budget. Would this be okay?

Abortion-advocate: Well, no, but aborting a fetus is not the same as killing children.

Pro-lifer: So, once again, the issue is, What is the unborn? Is the fetus the same as a human being? We can't escape that question, can we?

Abortion-advocate: But you're being too simplistic. This is a very complex issue involving women who must make agonizing decisions.

Pro-lifer: The decision may be *psychologically* complex for the mother, but *morally* it is not complex at all. When black children are denied schooling and other community services, do we spin a tale about complex and agonizing decisions for the white people in power or do we condemn the evil of racism?

Abortion-advocate: Abortng a fetus that is not human is one thing; discriminating against a black person is quite another.

Pro-lifer: So we're agreed: If abortion kills a defenseless human being, then the issue wouldn't be complex at all. The question remains: What is the unborn?

Abortion-advocate: Enough abstract philosophy. Let's talk about real life. Do you really think a woman should be forced to bring an unwanted child into the world?

Pro-lifer: The homeless are unwanted; may we kill them?

Abortion-advocate: No, but your forgetting something. It's also not fair to the child to bring him into a family where he is not wanted. He's better off not being born.

Pro-lifer: You're still missing the point. Suppose the toddler we've been discussing is unwanted. In fact, by the time he's five, he'll be abused and neglected. Should we kill him now to spare him future trouble?

Abortion-advocate: No, I suppose not.

Pro-lifer: But why shouldn't we kill him?

Abortion-advocate: Okay, I see where you are trying to go here, but it's not the same thing. Toddlers and fetuses are not the same.

Pro-lifer: That's the issue, isn't it? Are they the same? If the unborn are human like the homeless, then we can't kill them to get them out of the way. We're back to my first question, What is the unborn?

Abortion-advocate: What about mentally disabled fetuses? You know, we can detect that problem before birth now, allowing the mother to avoid the difficult task of raising a handicapped child with multiple defects. Surely you would agree that no woman should be forced to raise a child like that.

Pro-lifer: Actually, I agree: We can kill the unborn—including those with physical disabilities—IF. If What? If they are not human. Again, we're back to just one question, What is the unborn? Let's trot out our toddler and see if your objection works as a justification for killing a three-year old. Suppose I have in front of me a small boy who is mentally disabled. He's not very bright, cannot speak or understand much of what we say, and has a strange looking head to boot. Would it be morally permissible to kill him because he's, as you would put it, a damaged human being?

Abortion-advocate: No, we cannot do that. A damaged human is not a non-human. We should treat him with care as we do all human beings that have injuries or cannot speak for themselves.

Pro-lifer: I agree. However, if the disabled unborn are human, like the disabled toddler, we shouldn't kill them for not meeting our standard of perfection anymore than we would kill a three year-old for that same reason. Again, we are back to just one question, What is the unborn?

Abortion-advocate: Okay, I see your point, but you still shouldn't force your morality on women. Every woman has a right to decide what is right and wrong for herself. When you force your views on women, you are demonstrating that you don't trust them to make their own responsible choices.

Pro-lifer: You don't really believe what you just said, do you? I mean, you'd feel very comfortable forcing your morality on a mother who was physically abusing her two-year-old, right?

Abortion-advocate: But again, the two cases are not the same.

Pro-lifer: Oh? Why is that?

Abortion-advocate: Because you're assuming the unborn are human, like toddlers.

Pro-lifer: And *you're* assuming they're not. So the issue is quite simple, isn't it? It's *not* about forcing morality; it's *not* about privacy; it's *not* about economic hardship; it's *not* about unwantedness. It's just one question: What *is* the unborn? Now, this does not mean that I'm right about the unborn and you are wrong. Abortion may in fact be perfectly moral. But we cannot answer the morality question until we answer the factual one, What kind of being is the unborn? My only claim here—and it's a very modest one—is that we mustn't assume the unborn are disqualified from membership in the human family without first making a credible argument.

Toddler Tactics for Tough Questions

Trotting out a toddler may not answer a given question fully, but many times it will focus the debate back on the issue that matters: What is the unborn? That's a good starting point for resolving the matter, as the example below indicates:

Abortion-advocate: But what about a woman who's been raped? Every time she looks at that kid she's going to remember what happened to her. If that's not hardship, what is?

Pro-lifer: I agree that we should provide compassionate care for the victim and it should be the best care possible. That's not at issue here. It's your proposed solution I'm struggling to understand. Tell me, how should a civil society treat innocent human beings that remind us of a painful event? Is it okay to kill them so we can feel better? Suppose, for example, that the mother of a toddler approached you with the following request: "My two-year old son was conceived through rape. His father brutally violated me. To be honest, I've tried my best to love my son, but every time I look at him, I'm painfully reminded of that horrible rape. I'd like you to eliminate him to help ease my painful memories. I'm sorry, I just can't bear to look at him any longer." Should we oblige her so that she can feel better?

Abortion-advocate: No, I wouldn't do that.

Pro-lifer: I wouldn't either. But again, isn't that because you and I both agree that it's wrong to kill innocent human beings, even if they do remind us of a painful event?

Abortion-advocate: But you don't understand how much this woman has suffered. Put yourself in her shoes. How would you feel?

Pro-lifer: You're right. I don't understand her feelings. How could I? How could anyone? I'm just asking if hardship justifies homicide? Can we, for instance, kill toddlers who remind us of painful events?

Again, my claim here is really quite modest. If the unborn are members of the human family, like toddlers, we should not kill them to make someone else feel better. It's better to suffer evil rather than inflict it.³ Personally, I wish I could give a different answer, but I can't without trashing the principle that my right to life shouldn't depend on how others feel about me. In the end, sometimes the right thing to do is not the easy thing to do. And in this case, what's right depends on the question, What is the unborn? We can't get around it.

Advancing the Conversation

When you are finished discussing the status of the unborn, engage your friend with some gentle questions that will get him or her thinking. Here are three you should use:

1. Help me understand your view. What is your belief about the unborn?
2. How did you come to that conclusion about the unborn? What evidence led you there?
3. Have you considered that a credible case can be made for the humanity of the unborn using science and philosophy, not religion? If that case can be made, why shouldn't you accept it?

Greg Koukl develops these types of questions at length in his tape series "Tactics in Defending the Faith" available from Stand to Reason. But for now, each question above allows you to gently access a person's view prior to making our own case.

Finishing Touches

Once you've framed the discussion around the status of the unborn, you can make a scientific and philosophic case for the pro-life position.

Scientifically, we know that from the earliest stages of development, the unborn are distinct, living, and whole human beings. Leading embryology books confirm this.² Prior to advocating abortion, former Planned Parenthood President Dr. Alan Guttmacher was perplexed that anyone, much less a medical doctor, would question these basic scientific facts. "This all seems so simple and evident that it is difficult to picture a time when it wasn't part of the common knowledge," he wrote in his book *Life in the Making*.³

Philosophically, there is no morally significant difference between the embryo you once were and the adult you are today. Differences of size, level of development, environment, and degree of dependency are not relevant in the way that abortion advocates need them to be.⁴ (See "Abortion Debate: A Short Defense of the Pro-Life Position" for more on this. Get the article at www.prolifetraining.com.)

³ Peter Kreeft, *The Unaborted Socrates* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993)

⁴ See Stephen Schwarz, *The Moral Question of Abortion* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1990)

Greg Cunningham is correct: For too long, “the pro-life movement has been shouting conclusions rather than establishing facts.” Trotting out a toddler” helps brings moral clarity to the abortion debate. It allows you to engage friends and critics in conversation so that you do not talk past each other.

Finally, trot out the toddler helps you live by three key rules I’ve found helpful in conversation:

- Engage, don’t enrage: Keep the tone civil by asking good questions.
- Argue, don’t assert: Make a persuasive case rather than a heated one.
- Convince, don’t condemn: Give them something to think about rather than someone to hate.

Admittedly, one conversation is seldom enough to convert people on the spot. That’s okay. Sometimes clarifying the issue is enough to get friends and critics thinking. Once that happens, you’ll have opportunity to engage them again. To use a baseball example, you don’t have to hit a home run with every conversation. Sometimes just getting on base is enough. And you’ll certainly do just that when you trot out your toddler.

Review Questions:

- What do pro-lifers contend about abortion? How does this help simplify the debate?
- Why is the pro-choice/anti-choice distinction not a fair one?
- In what ways are pro-lifers “pro-choice?” When it comes to choosing abortion, what makes that choice right or wrong?
- Why do appeals to “privacy” and “choice” miss the point in the abortion debate?
- What does “begging the question” mean? Why is this a logical fallacy?
- What assumption seems to lurk behind many of the typical defenses for abortion?
- When your friend says that women have a right to choose or have a right to control their own bodies, what assumptions is he making about the unborn?
- How does “trot out the toddler” help simplify the debate? What is its primary purpose?
- A friend says, “Poor women cannot afford another child should therefore have a right to an abortion.” What is she assuming about the unborn? Use a trot out the toddler example to show that the status of the unborn is the real issue in the debate, not the poverty of the mother.
- When abortion advocates argue for abortion in cases of rape, what are they assuming about the unborn? What question can you ask to expose that assumption? (Or, if you prefer, come up with a trot out the toddler example to focus the debate back on the real issue, what is the unborn?)
- What are the three rules of discussion to live by?
- What are the three questions you can ask to help advance the conversation? Why are these questions useful?

Resources at www.prolifetraining.com:

- How to Defend Your Pro-Life Views in 5-Minutes or Less
<http://prolifetraining.com/Five-Minute-Prolife.pdf>
- Abortion Debate: A Short Defense of the Pro-Life Position
<http://prolifetraining.com/abortion-debate.pdf>
- Five Bad Ways to Argue for Abortion
<http://prolifetraining.com/abortion-arguments.pdf>

Book Resources:

- Peter Kreeft, *The Unaborted Socrates: A Dramatic Debate on the Issues Surrounding Abortion* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983)
- Greg Koukl, *Precious Unborn Human Persons* (Lomita: Stand to Reason Press, 1997). Call 1-800-2-REASON to order.