Kid Tactics: Keeping Cool When Things Get Personal

By Scott Klusendorf

Sometimes an argument is so silly it’s best to respond like a kid.

Think back to when you were ten. In the heat of arguing with your sibling, you had a one-word answer that could stop him in his tracks. Remember what it was?

“So?”

Done right, you could end the argument in two sentences.

“You called me stupid!”

“So?”

It’s a word you need to put back in your vocabulary, only this time without the snarky attitude that usually went with it. For example, suppose you deliver a stellar two-minute defense of the pro-life view in your speech class. You argue from science that from the earliest stages of development, your classmates were distinct, living, and whole human beings. Philosophically, you contend there’s no relevant difference between the embryos they once were and the young adults they are today that justifies killing them at that earlier stage of development. Differences of size, level of development, environment, and degree of dependency are not good reasons for saying they could be killed then but not now.

Hands shoot up immediately. First up is a long-haired male bearing a huge peace sign on his tee-shirt. “Do you also oppose capital punishment? If not, doesn’t that make you inconsistent?” Next is an econ student. “Are you willing to adopt and feed all these babies you don’t want aborted? If not, who are you to say what’s right?” A split second later, the leader of the College Democrats gets a standing ovation with her take: “You’re a man. Men don’t get pregnant. What gives you the right to even talk about this issue?”

Time to fight like a kid

Each of these objections is childish and completely beside the point. Instead of answering your pro-life case, your opponents attack your alleged behavior. We call this the ad-hominem fallacy, because even if the personal attacks are true, they do nothing to refute the argument you presented. A childish attack deserves a kid-like response:

“So?”

Suppose the guy with the peace sign is right. You’re inconsistent because you oppose abortion, but support capital punishment. Now, I don’t think that’s true, but let’s go ahead and grant his point for the sake of discussion. Setting aside for the moment that the sword cuts both ways—that is, he supports abortion but opposes capital punishment,
and that makes him inconsistent—how does your alleged inconsistency mean that 1) the unborn are not human, and 2) killing them is justified? Could the unborn still be human even if you’re inconsistent? You might reply as follows:

You: Maybe you could clear this up for me. Suppose I’m against capital punishment. What’s your next move?

Peace Guy: What do you mean?

You: Does abortion suddenly become wrong if I agree that capital punishment is wrong?

Peace Guy: Well, no.

You: Then what’s your point?

In other words, “So?”

The same is true for the adoption attack. How does your alleged unwillingness to adopt a child justify an abortionist killing one? What if I said: “Unless you agree to adopt my three sons by noon tomorrow, I shall execute them!” If you turn down my ultimatum, am I justified in carrying out my threat?

Again, “So?”

The “you’re a man” objection suffers from similar flaws. First, arguments do not have genders, people do. Suppose a pro-life woman offers the same arguments as pro-life men. What’s the abortion-choice advocate’s next move? Does elective abortion suddenly become less permissible? If not, what’s the point of attacking the pro-lifer’s gender?

Second, the gender sword cuts both ways. If men can’t speak on abortion, Roe v. Wade, the Supreme Court case legalizing abortion, was bad law. After all, nine men decided it. Abortion-choice advocates should also call for the dismissal of all male lawyers working for Planned Parenthood and the ACLU on abortion related issues. Since abortion advocates are unwilling to do this, we can restate their argument as follows: “No man can speak on abortion—unless he agrees with us.” This is a classic case of intolerance.

Third, think of the bizarre rules we could derive from this argument: “Since only generals understand battle, only they should discuss the morality of war.” Or, “because female sportscasters have never experienced a groin injury, they have no right to broadcast football games.” Absurd!

When possible, use the personal attack to gently educate your critic. When he insists that you’re inconsistent for accepting death in the case of war but not in case of abortion, ask: “Suppose I am inconsistent. How does it follow that 1) the unborn are not human, or 2) that killing them is okay?” Then, explain why the two cases are not necessarily parallel. For example, a general in a just war can foresee the deaths of innocent civilians, but he does not intend them. However, with elective abortion, the death of the unborn is both foreseen and intended. Thus, the two cases are not alike in morally relevant ways.

Again, abortion advocates must offer facts and arguments to support their position. Attacking people personally, even if those attacks are true, will not make their case or refute ours.

This article was adapted from Scott’s book (w/ John Ensor) Stand for Life: A Student’s Guide for Making the Case and Saving Lives (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012).