

Solid Ground



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Partial-Birth Abortion Is Not about Abortion

When we justify killing of a fully developed human child through partial-birth abortion, we are not defending abortion. We're promoting something much more chilling. Even the mothers involved know what's going on.

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Nearly ten years ago I wrote that our culture was becoming morally "velocitized." The term describes something I learned in driver's training in high school. Once a driver accelerates from, say, 30 to 60 miles per hour and settles in, he gets acclimated to his new speed and loses his true sense of velocity. It doesn't feel as if he's moving any faster than he was at first.

This is dangerous on the highway, but it's deadly when it happens to the moral consciousness of a society. Years ago, Francis Schaeffer noted that what was unthinkable yesterday is thinkable today, and ordinary and commonplace tomorrow.

The barbaric procedure called "dilation and extraction" (D&X), popularly known as partial-birth abortion, is current evidence of Schaeffer's truism.

This issue has mobilized forces and stimulated vigorous responses from both sides of the abortion question. But this is no ordinary abortion debate, because this is no ordinary abortion. Many people who think they're informed still do not know what a partial-birth abortion really entails.

Nothing is hidden in D&X. The child is delivered breach, feet first. Just before the baby's head emerges to complete a live delivery, the physician takes a pair of blunt, curved Metzenbaum scissors, punctures the base of the child's skull, suctions out the brain tissue with a catheter, then completes the delivery of the baby's corpse.

This is not a piece of tissue or a mere part of a woman's body. This is a little boy or girl dangling between their mother's legs. You can clearly see sexual organs, male or female. The baby squirms and kicks. Its hands open and close grasping for something to hang on to until the moment the doctor's instrument pierces the skull. Then, of course, the body goes limp because the baby is dead.

This procedure cannot be sanitized by calling it "surgery," as the National Abortion Federation repeatedly does. The use of this term treats a baby like a disease. This is a pregnancy, not a sickness. Indeed, there often is deformity in the child, but the only cutting done is in the back of the baby's skull to end his short life, not to treat his defect. The D&X procedure does not eliminate the deformity; it eliminates the child.

Ignoring the Obvious

There is a moral quality to partial-birth abortion that is self-evident. This is why Congresswoman Pat Schroeder didn't want line drawings displayed in Congress in the early debates. Even the most benign characterizations are enough to make one nauseous.

Why do so many mothers, doctors, senators, members of Congress, accept this brutal practice? I think people defend partial-birth abortion for one reason: It's called "abortion." Abortion is sacred in this country, a woman's "Constitutional right." Therefore anything called "abortion" must be preserved.

Yet simply calling a procedure an abortion doesn't make it one. Language may change perception, but it doesn't change reality. The fact is, a partial-birth abortion is not an abortion. It's something much more insidious, something that clearly marks the velocity of our moral descent.

Abortion takes the life of a child inside the womb. In partial-birth abortion, however, the delivery is 90% complete. The child is outside her mother when she's killed. The chilling truth is clear: Partial-birth abortion is not abortion. It's infanticide.

Even the Mothers Know

Coreen Costello had a partial-birth abortion midway through her third trimester. In her testimony before the Senate she said, "Our darling little girl was going to die." The baby had a lethal neurological disorder. Therefore Mrs. Costello, a Christian pro-lifer, chose a partial-birth abortion.

Do not miss the argument here: Coreen Costello had to kill her child because she was severely handicapped and was going to die anyway. Costello even referred to her "little girl" by name, Katherine Grace. Costello was not justifying abortion. She was justifying infanticide.

Both women I heard in radio discussions said they held their babies and sang to them after their partial-birth abortions. Why would a mother gently cuddle the dead body of her aborted child? Would she cradle her extracted tonsils and sing softly to them? Would she affectionately name her spleen after it's been surgically removed from her body? "This is different," they say. "This is my baby."

These responses from the mothers themselves are tacit admissions their children were full human beings at the time of their interrupted births. If a baby's body is a human corpse after the abortion, then how can one deny the baby was a human child before he was killed? The mothers' own words and actions prove they know they have taken the life of a fully human child. This is infanticide.

Changing Tactics

Pro-abortionists know that D&X abortion is not a standard abortion, so the standard justifications, a woman's right to privacy or her right to choose, don't work. They switch to arguments traditionally used to defend euthanasia.

Graham Walker pointed out, "Schroeder and Boxer didn't stick to pro-choice logic. They didn't oppose the [partial-birth abortion] criminalization bill on the grounds that a woman's reason for choosing an abortion is no business of anyone's except the woman and possibly her doctor. Instead, they opposed the bill on the grounds that the reasons women elect this particular abortion procedure are 'good' reasons, not frivolous ones."

Since Roe, the courts have spoken. They have not allowed any meaningful restriction on any kind of abortion. Abortion is a matter of privacy and choice. Period. If partial-birth abortion is really abortion, then why any further defense or justification? Here's why: The same action taken

on the same baby at the same stage of development would be felony homicide if the child moved a mere three inches further down the birth canal.

The emerging baby is clearly not the mother's body, not a mere piece of tissue, a "conceptus," or even a fetus. It's a child's body coming forth from the mother, her own son or daughter, squirming, writhing, struggling to complete entry into the outside world.

Everybody knows intuitively what's going on here. The mother knows. The doctors and nurses know. Pro-abortionists know. They listen to heart-rending personal anecdotes by anguished moms who desperately wanted their babies, but something went wrong. Moved with emotion, they concede, "I can understand her decision. I'd do the same thing myself." Coreen Costello said, "[I] always believed abortion was wrong. Then I had one."

Such personal glimpses are moving, but unfortunately cause us to lose sight of the real question: How ought we treat physically imperfect children destined to die soon after birth? The answer now being given is the wrong one and increases the velocity of our moral decline as we slide further down the slippery slope.

Slipping Down the Slope

Ethical thinkers make a distinction between two kinds of slippery slopes. The "causal slippery slope" is like a line of dominoes falling. An action that might be morally benign in itself leads to something else that's immoral, casting a shadow on the first. For example, if pornography can be shown to cause violence against women, then pornography may be morally suspect.

The second is called a "logical slippery slope." When one thing is immoral and a second is logically similar in a morally relevant way, the moral quality of the one slips over into the other. Murder is immoral and some think capital punishment is similar enough to murder to make capital punishment immoral, too. That's how it works, at least in principle.

A logical slippery slope can slip in either direction. If one act is morally acceptable and another is logically similar to it, then arguably the second thing becomes morally acceptable, too.

Judith Jarvis Thompson justifies abortion using a logical slippery slope in this way in her famous argument, "A Defense of Abortion." Thompson describes a woman surgically connected, against her will, to a world-famous violinist who has a lethal kidney ailment. The connection is temporary, only nine months, but is necessary to save his life.

In Thompson's view, the woman is morally justified in disconnecting the violinist even though he'll die. Abortion is a meaningful parallel to unplugging the violinist, according to Thompson. Therefore, it's moral to abort a child, even if he or she is a fully human person, just like the violinist. The moral acceptability of the first act, the argument goes, logically "slips" over to the second act.

The partial-birth abortion question places America at a critical juncture in the sanctity of life debate: Which direction will we slide?

The Critical Juncture

When you start with the view that abortion is a sacred right, then by reason of a logical slippery slope, you must argue for anything called abortion. All abortions ought to be legal. Partial-birth abortion is an abortion. Therefore, partial-birth abortion ought to be legal, too. Slide a bit further and it looks like this: If partial-birth abortion is moral, and partial-birth abortion is logically similar to infanticide, then it follows that infanticide must be moral, too.

We could, however, regain our moral sanity and slide the other way. If D&X abortion is deemed morally grotesque and made illegal, then the same thing happening out of sight inside the womb in late-term abortions should be illegal, too.

Pro-abortionists know this. That's why they are fighting so hard. They want freedom of choice at any cost, regardless of the moral consequences. When they raise the alarm, "This is the first step towards making all abortions illegal," we finally have their real objection to any limitations on D&X.

It's a legitimate fear. Once one realizes partial-birth abortion is barbaric, it's going to be hard to justify any late-term abortion. On the other hand, if the courts decide it should be legal to butcher a living human child through D&X, then it becomes very difficult to condemn infanticide.

The question we now face is, "Which way will we slip?" Will we admit partial-birth abortion is really infanticide by another name? Will we then recognize that any late term abortion under cover of the mother's body is enough like partial-birth abortion to be immoral, too?

Or will we affirm partial-birth abortion even though it is de facto infanticide? Then what meaningful moral argument can be offered to deny euthanizing newborns? They both destroy a little human being. The only difference is the location of the child, in the womb or out, which is a morally trivial distinction. This is precisely the position now being aggressively advanced by Peter Singer, Chair of Bio-ethics at the center for Human Value and Dignity at Princeton.

We can go either way. That's why we're at such a critical juncture.

The Next Step for Abortion

During this debate last time around the LA Times featured a letter from Dr. Charles Plows, Chair of the Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs of the American Medical Association. He argued for the liberty to harvest organs from children born anencephalic, missing most of their cerebral cortex.

Dr. Plows called it a "life saving" policy considering the "numbers of infants born with vital organs that are incapable of sustaining life who are dying because of the lack of donors...." But the donors he had in mind were *living* children whose life would be sacrificed for their body parts.

If things get to this point, and we're already well on the way, I suspect the next step will be arguments for the safest late-term abortion technique yet: Deliver the child completely and then harvest the organs. They'll never call it infanticide, though. They'll call it a post-natal "abortion."

The Ostrich Fallacy

Justifications for partial-birth abortion remind me of the proverbial ostrich hiding its head in the sand, blocking out the world to escape trouble. We use the illustration to discredit someone who won't see the obvious. He is a fool who, like the ostrich, thinks the real world is defined by where his head is located.

Those defending partial-birth abortion treat the child like the ostrich. His head is obscured, so the rest of the world doesn't exist. How far does such reasoning go? How much of a newborn's body must be inside the mother to justify killing him? The baby's arm? His little fist? Why not just one finger?

Advocates of D&X have been hopelessly velocitized. They cannot see what's obvious to anyone not warped by the speed of our moral decline: Partial-birth abortion is not really abortion. It is

infanticide with the baby's head covered. That which was unthinkable yesterday has become thinkable today. Will it be ordinary and commonplace tomorrow?

Yours for the Kingdom,

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