



Newsletter Collection

The Equal Rights Argument

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Common Ground and Uncommon Conversation

A Forgotten Key Opens Minds



STEPHEN WAGNER'S MONTHLY UPDATE

REPRINT: DECEMBER 2005

Note: I originally sent this letter to supporters on December 5, 2005 while working at Stand to Reason (www.str.org).

Dear Friend,

Hostility...listening...sparring. A young woman from Kansas State and I had cycled through this typical conversation pattern. But by the end of the conversation, she was sharing her email address with a smile. As she departed, a young man standing nearby struck up a conversation with me.

“That was amazing,” he began. “I’ve heard the pro-life position a thousand times, but never like that. I believe if people hear that kind of argument, you will persuade many.”

Even in the face of a compliment, I guess I can’t help but act according to habit. I asked a question: “What made my argument effective?”

“Most people start with the Bible, but you made a very reasonable case.”

Let’s ignore this student’s implicit assumption that a Biblical reference is not reasonable. Why did he find my argument so appealing? I didn’t start with uncommon ground, like the Bible or the status of the unborn. I began by discussing human rights:

“Look around this campus at all of the born people. Would you agree that each person has the same basic rights, that each should be treated equally?”

Why begin this way? Because I know almost everyone I talk to believes in the basic human rights of all born people, regardless of differences or disabilities. I find common ground:

“But if all of us should be treated equally, there must be some quality we all have equally that justifies that equal treatment, right? What is that characteristic? It can’t be that all of us look human, because some have been disfigured. It can’t be that all of us have functional brains, because some are in a reversible coma. It can’t be the abilities to think or feel pain, for some think better than others and some don’t feel any pain. It can’t be something we can gain or lose, or something of which we can have more or less. If something like that grounds rights, equal rights don’t exist. And if we look at the whole population of America, almost 300 million people, there is only one quality we all have equally – we’re all human. We have a human nature and we all have it equally. You either have it...or you don’t.” [I owe this insight and the structure of this argument to J.P. Moreland.]

Then I relate my argument to modern-day concerns:

“Why are sexism and racism wrong? Isn’t it because they pick out a surface difference (gender or skin color) and ignore the underlying similarity all of us share? We should treat women and men, African-Americans and whites, as equals and protect them from discrimination. Why? Because they all have a human nature. But if the unborn also has that same human nature, shouldn’t we protect her as well?”

Only in the last sentence do I even so much as mention the unborn. That’s by design. I spend the least time talking about the most contentious topic. Seems backwards, doesn’t it? Shouldn’t we spend the majority of our time talking about things we disagree about? Don’t I want to change minds, after all?

Of course I want to change minds. But if I’m wise, I’ll spend most of my time discussing things about



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which we already agree. And more importantly, I'll discuss *why we should* agree about those things. Much confusion lies behind vague agreements about human rights and discrimination. If our friends can get clear on why born people matter, they are much closer to seeing why the unborn matter too.

And there's a hidden benefit in finding common ground: it's fun. With all of the anger about the pro-life position in our culture, who wants to spend all his time hearing scoffing and fielding glares? I'd much rather have a few moments to bask in the harmony of shared values.

To be sure, I'm not going to avoid the uncomfortable fact that I think abortion is wrong and that no healthy society can kill its weakest members. But why point to our differences when our points of agreement provide such fruitful discussion? And if agreement is so enjoyable, why do we so often ignore it? In a future newsletter, I'll explore the importance of common ground in more detail. For now, check out my super-quick version of the above argument, the *One-Minute Pro-Life Apologist*.

It's easy to forget that the most enjoyable part of a conversation is agreement.

I thank God for arguments that build common ground. They not only make my job easier, they help the students I train feel more comfortable interacting with strangers. And I thank God for the common ground you and I share: the desire to reach hearts and minds on abortion by training students. Earlier this month, I spoke to more than 800 teenage girls in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania about abstinence and modesty. Through tears, one girl shared that she had never heard anything like what she heard that night. And she had never seen abortion pictures either. The result? She and her friends are planning a strategy to radically change how their campus thinks about abortion.

As we begin this season of Advent, let's thank the Lord for blessing our efforts (and our arguments) in this past year. I can't wait to see what He'll do in the next.

For the Kingdom,

Stephen

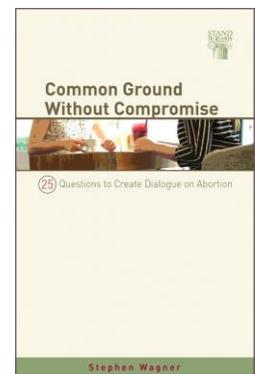
Steve Wagner

Update: What's Happened Since December 2005 with the Equal Rights Argument

Some of you reading this reprint have faithfully supported my work from before December 2005 when this letter was originally published. Since that time, my mentor Scott Klusendorf (www.prolifetraining.com) featured it prominently in his book, *Case for Life*, and I included a version of the material from the letter in my own book, *Common Ground Without Compromise* (www.commongroundbook.com).

My July 2013 letter ("A Good Conversation Is...a Mirror") featured another example of the Equal Rights Argument helping to change a mind. Recently, JFA trainer Tim Brahm noted that it is the most persuasive argument he's ever used to defend the unborn, and he made a powerful case that we should prioritize training *every JFA volunteer* to understand and use the Equal Rights Argument. I agreed, and we're right now in the process of training our staff to implement this decision by mastering a teaching section and mentor-led, interactive small group activities.

I'm especially grateful to Tim and his brother Josh Brahm (Right to Life of Central California) for finding new and helpful ways to explain and illustrate the argument this year. See their blogs for examples (www.timothybrahm.com, www.joshbrahm.com). In addition, the JFA staff training team has discussed and workshopped the argument, as well as using it more purposefully in conversations on campus. The feedback from this team of skilled dialogue artists has been very positive, and it's enabled us make the material more understandable to JFA's volunteers so they can be more helpful to the people they engage in conversation.



Although I can't take credit for creating the argument, I am gratified that a small newsletter I wrote in 2005 could have this sort of ripple effect. Thanks for helping to make this happen. – Steve Wagner, September 2013

See Steve's blog, *Human Beings Matter More* (www.hbmm.net), for things to read, see, and hear.



Dear Friend,

When I'm on a college campus with the Justice For All Exhibit, one of the challenges I regularly face is trying to convince passersby to stop and have a conversation.

On the first day of our Georgia Tech outreach in mid-March, I decided to try something different. A young man named Garin walked by the JFA Exhibit, and I asked him if he had an opinion about abortion. He shrugged his shoulders and said, "Not really." As he kept walking, I called out after him, "Do you have an opinion about racism? Do you think racism is wrong?" He was by this time about thirty feet away from me. He stopped, turned around, and said, "Yes."

Tim: Me too. Do you think sexism is wrong?

Garin: Yes.

Tim: I agree with you. Why do you think racism and sexism are wrong?

Garin: [walking back towards me] I'm not sure.

Tim: I think racism is wrong because it takes a surface difference, like skin color, and treats it like it's more significant than the fundamental thing we have in common: that we're all human. It's the same thing with sexism. When a man says women are inferior to men, he is disregarding the fundamental similarity between them, that they are both human.

Garin: Yeah, I think I agree with that.

Tim: I've been trying to make sense of this really weird fact about the world. Could we agree that at least all of the people outside the womb in Atlanta deserve equal treatment, that we all have equal rights regarding basic things like the right to life?

Garin: Of course.

Tim: It seems obvious that that's true, but it's pretty weird if you think about it. I mean, think about how different we all are. Some of us are really big, others are pretty skinny. Some of us are tall, others are short. Some of the people on this campus are probably smarter than the two of us, others probably less so. If we're all so different in so many ways, how could we justify demanding that we treat each other equally? It seems like there must be something that we all have in common that demands equal treatment, and it must be something we all have equally. Could we agree on that?



During a lengthy tour of the Exhibit, I explained the various panels to a Georgia Tech student named Nikhil while my dad and other volunteers observed.



Garin: Yes, and the obvious answer is that we're all human.

Tim: Yeah, I think that's the best answer. We all have humanness in common, or a human nature. And if that's true, then anything that has a human nature deserves the same protection that you and I have. Do you think the unborn is human?

Garin: [pointing at one of the pictures on the Exhibit] Well it's obviously human. I guess I never thought about it that way.



We recently began to incorporate the Equal Rights Argument into our regular *Abortion: From Debate to Dialogue* seminar. In this picture I'm teaching the argument at a recent seminar at First Baptist Church of Woodstock.

After discussing some of the common reasons people have abortions, Garin gave me permission to explain the different panels of the Exhibit to him. After thinking about our conversation and looking at pictures that showed the results of abortion, he said he had a lot to think about, but definitely wasn't okay with abortion. He knew that in order to make sense of his certainty that people deserved to be treated equally, there must be something we have in common to explain that. If a human nature is what we have in common that gives us our equal rights, and the unborn has that same human nature, then the unborn deserves the same protection we deserve.

There are many excellent arguments for the pro-life view, but the Equal Rights Argument is one of the most powerful that I have ever used. I have had many conversations where I obviously had the stronger argument but for some reason the person was unconvinced. This argument's greatest strength is its ability to connect with people and persuade them. I have only been using it for about six months, and surprisingly often I hear, "Wow, that is a really interesting point; I've never thought about it like that before," or "I think you're right; I guess humanness is what makes us valuable." I have even heard a few adamantly pro-choice people admit that it's one of the best arguments they've ever heard and that they have no response to it.

We spend a great deal of time at Justice For All talking about the importance of finding common ground in a conversation in which there is disagreement. We try to create an atmosphere where there can be both grace and truth, where we can have a productive dialogue instead of a mere debate. You can make progress, even if all you do is

refute the other person's arguments against the value of the unborn; but you can stop their argument in its tracks by also providing a good reason to believe as you do. And if you argue for it from one of their own deeply held beliefs, like the importance of equal treatment, you are much more likely to persuade them.

You may be wondering, "But what if they don't give up so easily? What if they insist that it is not humanness that gives us our value, but rather some other property that you and I have equally but that the unborn doesn't have at all?" It's true; not everyone is as accommodating as Garin. In my experience, most people argue for an alternative theory that has to do with some sort of thinking ability. You may have even heard people say that the unborn isn't a person because it isn't conscious, self-aware, thinking, rational, or something else along these lines. Truth be told, these kinds of arguments used to scare me, because at face value they are not absurd. Although they appear more difficult on the surface, they typically have a particular flaw that is easy to expose. In a future letter, I'll explain.

Further Study

If you'd like to learn more about how to use common ground in conversations about abortion, I highly recommend my colleague Stephen Wagner's book *Common Ground Without Compromise*. Go to www.commongroundbook.com for more information, including a free eBook version.

In Christ,
Tim

P.S. Steve Wagner credits J. P. Moreland with the specific way we at JFA have framed the Equal Rights Argument.



Dear Friend,

A few months ago I told you about my conversation with a Georgia Tech student named Garin. I argued that if we deserve equal rights, then there must be something the same about us that demands that we be treated equally. If the thing that is the same is humanness, then abortion is wrong, because the unborn have humanness and hence would deserve the same kind of protection the rest of us deserve. (Click on the April 2013 newsletter link at www.jfaweb.org/Timothy_Brahm to read Part 1 of this series.)

Garin was convinced quickly, because it seemed obvious to him that humanness is the way to explain equal rights, and he agreed the unborn is included. But what if a pro-choice person argued for an alternative explanation for equal rights that *doesn't* include the unborn? The most plausible way for a pro-choice person to do this is to use what my colleagues and I call *threshold arguments*, which argue that the unborn is not a person, or is not a valuable human being, because in order to have value, you must cross a specific threshold.



For instance, a pro-choice person might say you have to cross the threshold of being able to think at all. He can't just say thinking makes you valuable, because that wouldn't explain equal rights. After all, some people think better than others. (Witness the comments under any YouTube video for an illustration.) But if he is careful, and he says you just need to have your first thought or be able to think *at all* in order to be valuable, then you have a way to explain why all born humans have equal rights but why the unborn doesn't (at least early in pregnancy).

This may sound overwhelming, but fret not! As Trent Horn has written, the problem with threshold arguments is that they will always either include too many, such as animals, or exclude too many, such as newborns. A few hours after my conversation with Garin, I had the opportunity to expose this problem with threshold arguments by telling a story that I call *The Zoo Shooting*.

I overheard a student named David insisting to one of our volunteers that the unborn can't be a person because it isn't conscious. I joined the discussion and talked with David for forty minutes about consciousness and the validity of reasoning using moral intuitions. The next day he came back to continue our conversation, and he clarified that what he really had meant was that in order to be a person, you have to be self-aware. I said,

Tim: I agree that the unborn isn't self-aware. David, can we agree that at least all of the born people deserve equal rights, regarding basic things like the right to life?

David: Yes.

Tim: I'm trying to figure out the best way to make sense of that. If all of these different people deserve equal rights, then there must be something the same about us that demands we be treated equally. We need to figure out what that is, because anything that has it should be protected. I think the best way to explain it



is that we're all equally human. It sounds like you believe it's that we're all equally self-aware. While I think one could potentially understand self-awareness in a degree way, it seems like you just mean "having any self-awareness at all." Am I understanding you?

David: Yes, if you're self-aware, then you deserve equal rights, but if you aren't self-aware then you don't.

Tim: Okay, that's helpful. I think both of our views can explain this one piece of data we agree on, that all of the people walking around us deserve equal rights, because we each have something in mind that all of them have equally. I think it's that we are human, while you think it is that we have self-awareness. [But I think there is a second piece of data that my view can explain that your view can't. Suppose that tomorrow you and I decide to go to the zoo to blow off some steam after a long conversation about philosophy. We're standing in front of the gorilla cage when a madman runs into the zoo with a gun and fires off six shots before he is apprehended.]* The first bullet kills the world's unluckiest cockroach. The second bullet goes into the bushes and kills a possum. The third bullet goes into the gorilla cage and kills Koko the gorilla. The fourth bullet kills a human newborn, the fifth a toddler, and the sixth bullet kills a middle-aged woman. My question is, how many acts of homicide should the madman be charged with? I think it should be three, namely the three humans. On your view, I think we still get three, but we get **the wrong three**. Koko the gorilla is included and the newborn is not included. Koko can recognize herself in the mirror and even communicate with sign language, but an infant isn't self-aware until something like six months after birth. If the thing that gives us our equal rights is being self-aware, don't we have to say that someone who kills a gorilla has done something just as wrong as someone who kills a toddler or middle-aged human? And don't we have to say that it isn't murder to kill a newborn?

After struggling with these questions for about twenty minutes, David finally admitted that if the newborn isn't self-aware at six months, then it's okay to kill it. I spent the last thirty minutes of our conversation trying to help him see this view as the ugly thing that it is.

Threshold arguments will always fail because we aren't valuable based on the kinds of things we can do; we're valuable based on the kind of thing we are, a human being made in the image of God.

An Easy Transition to Religion

One of the strengths of this line of argument is its versatility. You don't have to be religious to know *that* humans are more valuable than animals, so if you don't want to transition to discussing religion, you don't have to. But if you struggle to transition from talking about abortion to talking about your faith, asking *why* humans are more valuable than animals is a great way to do it.

Remember that I said threshold arguments always either include animals or exclude newborns. Notice that this particular threshold of self-awareness had *both* weaknesses. If self-awareness makes us valuable, then it's justified to kill infants and some animals should have equal rights to humans. I have had similar conversations over a dozen times this year, and each time the pro-choice advocate is faced with an insurmountable challenge: He or she must come up with some kind of functional ability that a newborn has but no animal also has.

The Equal Rights Argument begins by establishing that our value cannot be based on something that comes in degrees, then makes a strong case that our value is based on our humanness, which doesn't come in degrees. *The Zoo Shooting* shows that alternative accounts of our equal rights fail, unless one is willing to grant to animals the same rights humans have or deprive newborns of rights.

Here's what I think is happening under the surface of the discussion. Threshold arguments will always fail because we aren't valuable based on the kinds of things we can *do*; we're valuable based on the kind of thing we *are*, a human being made in the image of God. That's why it's obviously more wrong to kill a newborn who can't do much, than it is to kill a dog who can do much more, and why it is wrong to kill an unborn baby.

I'm grateful to be able to work full-time defending the rights of the unborn. Thanks for standing with me.

In Christ,
Tim

*I told David the story of *The Zoo Shooting* when we were discussing "consciousness" on the first day of our two-day conversation, so on the second day when I referenced it I didn't have to repeat this bracketed portion. I have included it here for the sake of clarity.



Greenpeace

Update from Jacob Burow - June 2013



I noticed a man who seemed out of place on a college campus. He was in his forties, at least. His long hair was in a ponytail, and he was sporting a Greenpeace tee-shirt. It looked like he was asking people to sign a petition.

I was debriefing one of my students about his conversations, when “Greenpeace” came and sat near me on our concrete bench. When I noticed that he was studying our large, towering exhibit, I decided to strike up conversation.

“Greenpeace, huh? Do you work for them, or do you just like the tee-shirt?”

“Oh, I work for them.”

“What do you do?”

“Advocacy. Save the trees; save the whales; that sort of thing. But we don’t have an official position on abortion.” I smiled at the way he tacked on that last sentence.

“So, do you have a personal opinion on abortion?”

“Sure! I am pro-choice. I don’t think abortion is really great, but I think the decision should be left up to the mother.”

“Do you think any decisions are wrong?”

“Of course,” he said matter-of-factly, “I’m not a relativist.”

“I guess so, if you are willing to say that we are treating whales badly.”

“True. So, I assume that you work for this organization, right?”

“Yes, we are here to create dialogue about abortion, to have conversations like the one we are having.”

“So what is your main argument against abortion?”

“My main argument is that a fetus has the same right to continue living that you and I enjoy.”

“But how can you say that about something that doesn’t even have a brain?”

“Great question! Let me ask you this: do you believe that all of us

born people here on campus deserve equal rights, or equal treatment?”

“Yes, of course.”

“I agree with you, but what is it that is the same about all of us that would demand we all be treated equally? On *what* do you base your argument for equality?”

He was silent for a couple of minutes. I mean literally—it was two minutes. I resisted the temptation to interrupt him because I could tell he was thinking hard on the question. I glanced at my student to see if he was following along. We bit



Discussing abortion with a Colorado State University Student

our tongues and continued to wait. What he said next was profound.

“I guess equality is based on the fact that we are all living and all human.”

“Isn’t that living and human as well?” I pointed at the picture of an eight-week-old embryo on our exhibit. Greenpeace was silent for a few seconds, thinking it over.

“Yes, it is living and human. That is a good argument that I have not thought about before.”

Greenpeace had to leave at this point, but before he did he thanked me for the conversation, and we exchanged proper introductions. His real name was Mark.

I admit that when I saw the Greenpeace tee-shirt I was not expecting such a reasonable conversation. I was impressed by Mark’s honesty and thoughtfulness. Once again I was reminded that we should never make assumptions about people. I was encouraged that people like Mark are out there, ready to talk and think about serious issues. I was also glad that Mark found the case for equality to be compelling.

The Equal Rights Argument as I used above



works well in conversation. One reason is that most people agree that humans are more valuable than animals. If that is true, then something like having a brain can not be the thing that make us all equal, because animals have brains as well but we are still more valuable. Mark was smart enough to think through those issues, and accurately distilled it down. Because he already believed that humans are more valuable, being living humans is the only thing he could find that makes us equal to each other, yet still more valuable than animals.

I want to encourage you to start a conversation about abortion, and see if you can present the equal rights argument in a non-argumentative way. I have given you an example above. If you reread the conversation, you will see that I asked questions, listened, and found common ground. We call these the Three Essential Skills for having a good conversation. You will find that practicing the Three Essential Skills will transform a debate into a dialogue.

Thank you for your prayers and support!
God bless,

Jacob Burow



Our Summer interns have arrived! Above are pictures of some of them doing outreach at Wichita State University. During their five weeks here, we will be honing their skills as mentors and speakers. We have four seminars upcoming that they will be leading in Kansas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana. Please pray for them as they go through this experience! On the left, C.K. and Joanna engage a student in conversation. On the right, Katie and Hannah talk to a WSU student.



We're Going to Go Tell Everyone!

Catherine's JFA Update, May 2013



Dear Family and Friends,

Our dear friends Paul and Cheryl Wilson have been activating their pro-life community in Tucson, Arizona for a number of years by arranging and promoting JFA seminars and outreaches and assisting in the mentoring process.

Last month the Wilsons arranged an outreach event at the Pima County Fair. Arizona Right to Life purchased the booth space, the Wilsons gathered 50 volunteers, and JFA brought trainers and outreach tools. Below I describe one of the many fruitful discussions we had at the fair.



Paul Wilson (*far left*) and other JFA volunteers converse with fair-goers in Tucson.

Thank you for helping us *make abortion unthinkable!*

In Christ, 

“Wow - come look at this! That is so cool,” said a teenage girl. It was late Sunday night, and we were about to close the booth down at the Pima County Fair. It had been a busy day, conversing with the fair-goers and training the new JFA volunteers to do the same. I looked up and saw four Latino teens—three girls and a boy—cooing over the life-size fetal development models on our table.

I smiled and told the teens that that was how big they were when they were in their mothers’ wombs. “No way! Really?!” They started talking over each other, asking me questions about fetal development, so I asked if they wanted a biology lesson. “Sure!” Pointing up at our kiosk with photos of developing children in the womb, I talked about how we know from science that the unborn is a living human from fertilization.

I then asked, “What do you think about abortion?”

“It’s wrong,” they all said.

“Always? No exceptions?” I asked.

There was a little hesitation, and then two of them said, “No exceptions.” But two were quiet.

Often people’s hesitancy is an indication that there is more they have to share, but they’re not sure they want to. I made a guess as to what might be on these teens’ minds and asked them, “What about rape?”

Boy: “That’s what I was gonna say! What if a woman got raped?” So we talked through this sensitive issue. (To read more about how to approach this critical concern, go to www.jfaweb.org/catherine/news_2010_03.pdf).

“So, when is abortion legal?” one of the girls asked me. “Like, how late can a woman get one?” I read the conclusions of the *Roe v. Wade* decision from our fact sheet, and we discussed its meaning.

“Wait,” she said, “So, you can get an abortion through all nine months? That’s just not right!” she said.

Another girl said, “Yeah, that’s way too late. If you’re going to get it, you need to do it before...*then!*” All in unison pointed at the board, but each pointed at a different stage of development.

I laughed. “Okay, why *then?*”

One girl responded, “Because it’s so developed after that.”

Another said, “It’s like a child at that point.”

“That’s true,” I said, “the unborn is more developed later in pregnancy. But is it our level of development that makes us valuable?”

“No...but...well...” They all seemed a bit perplexed by the thought.

So I asked, “We agreed earlier that it’s not okay to kill an 18-month-old child; why is that?”

“Because it’s so cute, and you can hold it and everything,” said one of the teens.

“Is that why it’s wrong to kill it? Because it’s cute?” Blank stares. “Why is killing wrong?” More blank stares.

I decided to ask a question I’d heard one of our newest staff members, Tim Brahm, ask in a conversation that morning: “Let’s look at it this way: Are you against racism?” Emphatic yeses all around. “Why? What makes racism wrong?”

“Because you’re judging someone based on the color of their skin,” came the response.

“Yes” I said, “Isn’t it wrong to take a surface difference like skin color and treat it like it’s more important than the thing we share in common: that we’re all human?” They all agreed. “Are you against sexism?”

“Yes!”

“Why?”

“Same reason,” one of the teens said.

“See,” I said, “we all believe we should treat each other equally—with equal dignity and respect—even though we’re all so different from one another. Why is that? What is it that we all have the same that demands we be treated equally?”

The young man spoke up at that point and said, “We’re equally human.” I just smiled, and the boy looked at the kiosk, and then at me. After a long pause, his whole face lit up and he exclaimed, “Whoa!! You’re blowing my mind right now!”



A family stops by our booth at the Pima County Fair.

I laughed and said, “So if we should all be treated equally because we’re equally human, and the unborn is as human as we are, shouldn’t the unborn be treated equally, too?”

“Yes!” they all shouted.

One girl said, “You should be up there with that microphone telling everyone this!”

I just looked at them all and said, “Well, it’s in your hands now. Now that you know this, what are you going to do?” I handed each of them a JFA Exhibit brochure, a facts sheet, and the contact information for local pregnancy resource centers.

“We’re going to go tell everyone we know! Thank you!” they shouted as they hurried off.

A Good Conversation Is ... a Mirror

What Changes People? (Part 1)

STEPHEN WAGNER'S MONTHLY UPDATE

JULY 2013



Dear Friend,

It was a special treat. In many conversations, I simply must trust God to help a person change his mind *after* the conversation. In one conversation at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) in March, though, I watched a young man named Jason look into a mirror and change his mind – three times.

Jason had talked to someone at our outreach the previous day, so when I asked him where he drew the line on human rights, he was ready with an answer. “At eighteen weeks,” he said. Through a few minutes of clarifying questions from me, he stated that he believed the unborn was a human being biologically, but that the basic right to life began when brain processing was such that the unborn could respond to sound.

He had another reason to draw the line at about eighteen weeks, though: viability. Again, I asked a few questions to clarify what he meant, and he confirmed that he meant that when the unborn could survive outside the womb, even if she required technology, she would have the basic right to life.

“Doesn’t progress in technology move the point of viability earlier and earlier?” I asked.

“That’s a really good point,” Jason pondered. He and I agreed human rights could not be determined by a criterion that could be moved from year to year by technological advances. The first change of mind.

I then raised a problem for Jason to solve. “If all of us walking around the campus deserve equal treatment, we must have something the same about us that demands that we be treated equally. But what is the same about us?”

He had raised the possibility that “brain processing” was the thing that made the unborn valuable at about eighteen weeks. I asked if he meant brain processing itself. When he said, “Yes,” I pointed out that brain processing is something that comes in degrees – we can have more or less of it. Since it’s not something we all have equally, it cannot ground equal rights. He saw the problem.

I gave him another option, though. If he framed his explanation for equal rights as “that we have brain processing at all” then it *would* be an all-or-nothing property that could potentially ground equal human rights. It *was* true that all of the adults whose rights we were discussing in the vicinity of the outreach at UTSA did have the property of “having brain processing at all,” and they had that property equally. If Jason was right that this adjusted criterion was the reason for basic rights, then that would account for the equal rights of adults, and it would account for the fact that infants also share those equal rights. In fact, the basic right to life would then extend into the womb to approximately the point he had picked, at eighteen weeks.

I pointed out, though, that this would present an additional problem: then many animals, such as dogs,



Photo by John Michener

Jason and I ponder pictures of human development and work to discover what gives us equal rights.



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would also have equal rights to the rest of us, because they also have the property of “having brain processing at all.” Jason made a predictable move at this point and added two additional criteria. “You don’t just have to have ‘brain processing at all’ to have equal rights. You also have to be viable and human.”

I asked him if he could give me an independent reason to believe that value should be based on these *three* things in combination. I was looking for an independent reason other than “It saves my view that the unborn should only be protected after eighteen weeks, and that whatever rights animals deserve, they shouldn’t be equal to humans.”

He saw the point of my question, and he quickly saw what philosophers would call the *ad hoc* nature of his argument. His only reason for adjusting his argument was to save it from the implications I drew from it.

I could see the wheels turning. My explanation for equal rights was also on the table – human nature. But the implications of that view were also clear: if human nature is the thing that we all share equally that demands that we be treated equally, then the unborn should be treated equally, too, because the unborn has that same human nature.

“Okay, you’ve convinced me,” he said. “I agree that abortion should only be legal if the mother’s life is in danger.” A second change of mind.

Unlike many students I talk to, who feel they have to put on confident airs or defend their arguments at all costs, Jason clearly wanted something more than to impress me. He wanted to understand truth. He got the truth, and I ended up impressed with him anyway – especially with his humble spirit.

I hadn’t taken a posture of trying to change Jason’s mind. Our conversation functioned more like a mirror, reflecting back to Jason what I heard him telling me. He responded like the happy young chap about to make a business proposal who barely remembers to check the mirror and finds a spot of mustard left unceremoniously on his chin by his lunchtime liverwurst. No one wants to be oblivious to his real state of affairs. There were two factors, though, that especially caused my mirror to be helpful to Jason:

- Without the *skills of clear thinking*, the mirror would have failed to reflect certain portions of the image properly. Because I knew the questions to ask, the exact image emerged for Jason. Mastering clear thinking skills takes work, but you can learn to create a helpful reflection for someone like Jason. I suggest starting with two avenues of study: Participate in JFA’s training program and make a habit of reading the articles by my friends at Stand to Reason (www.str.org).
- The image would have become blurry or distorted like that of a carnival mirror had I not had an *attitude of humility and goodwill*. If I needed to show Jason my intellectual prowess, he might have felt the need to take me down a peg or two. If I had belittled his views or mocked them, it would have made it harder for him to take the truth seriously. He might have felt the need to defend turf, and he would have been distracted from the truth altogether.

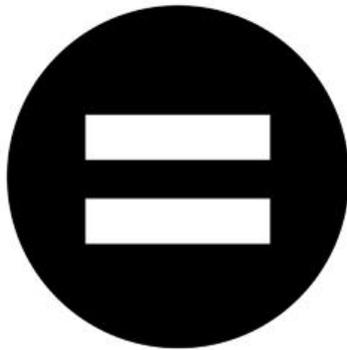
Throughout our conversation, I brought an attitude of partnering to find truth together. I considered his arguments as if they might be true. Because he was worth my time, his arguments were worth my best efforts to evaluate them with him. He looked in the mirror that our conversation was presenting to him, saw his views for what they were, and decided to make a change right then.

I sensed that our work was not finished, though, because Jason and I had not yet confronted the two thorniest aspects of the abortion question: bodily rights and rape. These concerns become especially thorny when combined as an argument for abortion. Instead of assuming the conversation had been sufficient as a mirror, I decided to turn it into a window. That’s when Jason had his third moment of truth. I’ll explain in a future letter.

My conversation with Jason wouldn’t have been possible without you. Thanks for helping me construct a mirror for him.

Warmly,
Stephen

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