

THE 5-MINUTE PRO-LIFER



Making the Case for Life Like It's Never Been Heard Before.

Burning Fertility Clinics Do Not Kill the Pro-Life Argument

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***How does it follow that because you save one human over others,
the ones left behind are not fully human and we may kill them?***

The moment you hear a pro-abortion activist brag, “I’ve got a unique argument no pro-lifer has ever answered and it’s going to destroy your case,” you almost certainly know two things: First, it’s not unique. Second, you are not in the presence of an extraordinary mind.

Enter comedian Patrick S. Tomlinson. In a series of tweets, he rehashes an old defense of abortion:¹

Whenever abortion comes up, I have a question I’ve been asking for ten years now of the “Life begins at Conception” crowd. In ten years, no one has EVER answered it honestly. It’s a simple scenario with two outcomes. No one ever wants to pick one, because the correct answer destroys their argument...Here it is. You’re in a [burning] fertility clinic. Why isn’t important. The fire alarm goes off. You run for the exit. As you run down this hallway, you hear a child screaming from behind a door. You throw open the door and find a five-year-old child crying for help. They’re [sic] in one corner of the room. In the other corner, you spot a frozen container labeled “1000 Viable Human Embryos.” The smoke is rising. You start to choke. You know you can grab one or the other, but not both before you succumb to smoke inhalation and die, saving no one. Do you A) save the child, or B) save the thousand embryos? There is no “C.” “C” means you all die. In a decade of arguing with anti-abortion people about the definition of human life, I have never gotten a single straight A or B answer to this question. And I never will. They will never answer honestly, because we all instinctively understand the right answer is “A.” A human child is worth more than a thousand embryos. Or ten thousand. Or a million. Because they are not the same, not morally, not ethically, not biologically. This question absolutely eviscerates their arguments, and their refusal to answer confirms that they know it to be true. No one, anywhere, actually believes an embryo is equivalent to a child.

Right away, Tomlinson is off the rails. Notice his first four words: “Whenever abortion comes up...” Then, in that same sentence, notice his target audience: the “Life begins at Conception” crowd.[sic] Put simply, he thinks his thought experiment defends abortion and refutes the pro-life argument that life begins at conception.

It does neither. His entire case collapses in the first sentence. The abortion controversy is about who we may intentionally kill. Tomlinson’s thought experiment is about who we should intentionally save. See the problem? Suppose I’m in a burning lecture hall with those reading this essay. I can either save all of you, my gentle readers, or my 17-year-old daughter Emily Rose. Who gets left behind? You’re toast. I’m saving her first. Does it follow that you are not human or that I may shoot you on the way out?

Let’s review the pro-life syllogism:

P1: It is wrong to intentionally kill an innocent human being.

P2: Abortion intentionally kills an innocent human being.

Therefore,

C: Abortion is morally wrong.

Suppose pro-lifers save the five-year-old instead of the embryos. How does Tomlinson's analogy refute the pro-life syllogism? It doesn't. At best, it shows pro-lifers inconsistently apply their ethic, not that they are mistaken about the science of embryology or the immorality of intentionally killing an innocent human being. Consider the reverse: Instead of saving the five-year-old, you save your own frozen embryos. Do your actions call into question the humanity of the child left behind?

Now, I don't think pro-lifers are inconsistent, for reasons I discuss below. But let's play along. Suppose pro-lifers say the unborn are human but, when called to act on their stated beliefs, shrink from ultimately affirming them. What follows? That is, how does my ultimately believing something is so make it so? It doesn't. My belief is true only if it corresponds to reality. An abolitionist in the 1860s might save the family dog over a transient slave, thus exposing the abolitionist's real beliefs about slaves. How would that in any way change the essential nature of the slave or, worse still, justify killing him? Let's go further: Suppose no whites in 1860 believe slaves are human. How does their belief about the slave determine what he is?

In short, our intuitions are not infallible. Richard Topolski and his colleagues at George Regents University surveyed 500 people with a hypothetical scenario in which a bus is hurtling out of control, bearing down on a dog and a human. "Which do you save?" The startling answer was, "that depends." Respondents asked, "What kind of human and what kind of dog?" Nearly everyone would save a sibling, grandparent or close friend rather than a strange dog. But when people considered their own dog versus strangers, votes for the dog skyrocketed. And an astonishing 40 percent of respondents, including 46 percent of women, voted to save their dog over a foreign tourist.² Are we to conclude the stranger is less human than a pet dog?

Imagine a medical center is on fire. I can save 10 frozen embryos or 1,000 terminally-ill cancer patients lying unconscious in the final stages of life. If I save the embryos, are cancer patients less human and valuable than embryos? Not at all. Rather, additional considerations guide my actions. While embryos and cancer patients are equally valuable, the embryos stand a better chance of living out their natural lives. A few will make it to birth. Thus, given the triage situation confronting me, I save the embryos.

Similar considerations guide me to save the five-year-old over the frozen embryos. Once again, both are equal in fundamental dignity. However, the five-year-old has a much greater chance at survival. Frozen embryos face challenging odds going from canister to womb to birth. Even when successfully thawed, many embryos spontaneously abort after implantation. Moreover, a five-year-old can feel pain while embryos cannot. Given a choice between letting a human being die in profound agony and letting others die with no agony at all, you save the former. Finally, there are social concerns. The five-year-old is known by family, extended family, and the local community. If he perishes, dozens—if not hundreds—are impacted by the loss. Not so with embryos, where painful grief is largely restricted to immediate family.

Of course, none of these considerations diminish the humanity of the embryo or justify intentionally killing him. Rather, they are tiebreakers when deciding to save one human being over others. A Secret Service agent will take a bullet for the president of the United States but not an ordinary citizen. And if Washington DC is attacked, he will save the president over an entire city. What does that say about the intrinsic value of those left behind?

Nothing. While all human life is sacred, the consequences of losing the president are catastrophic. The Secret Service knows this and acts accordingly. In sum, Tomlinson's thought experiment misses the point entirely. Ramesh Ponnuru writes, "The moral question posed by the burning-building scenarios is the extent to which you can show favoritism without being unjust." In these scenarios, he writes, "we might reasonably take account of all kinds of things—family ties, the life prospects of potential rescuees, the suffering they would undergo if not rescued, etc—that aren't relevant to the question: Can we kill them?"³

Precisely..

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Notes:

1. Michael Sandel, Dean Stretton, George Annas, and Ellen Goodman used it before Tomlinson.

2. Dennis Prager, "Dogs, Humans, and God," National Review, Aug. 20, 2013.

3. Ramesh Ponnuru, *The Party of Death* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2005) p.89.