**Abortion and Soundbites: Why Pro-Choice Arguments Are Harder to Make**

<https://areomagazine.com/2019/07/23/abortion-and-soundbites-why-pro-choice-arguments-are-harder-to-make/>



* Posted on July
* 7 minute read
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Arguments are nowadays often presented as soundbites: as slogans, tweets, memes and even gifs. Arguments developed in detail often meet the response *TL;DR* (*Too Long, Didn’t Read*). This is unfortunate—especially when tackling the topic of abortion. Soundbites make many pro-life arguments seem stronger than they really are, while the complexities of pro-choice arguments can’t be readily reduced to soundbites.

**Pro-Life Soundbites**

Abortion is wrong because:

* fetuses are human or human beings.
* human beings have rights.
* human rights protect all humans.
* we should advocate for equality, including equality for unborn human beings.
* abortion ends a life.
* abortion is killing.

These soundbites can sound good because human beings *are*generally wrong to kill; human rights *do*protect human beings; human rights apply to *all*humans; equality *is*a good thing; and ending lives and killing *are*often wrong. Denying these things often results in silly assertions: that fetuses in human women aren’t human or aren’t alive, or that abortion doesn’t involve killing, etc.

That these soundbites are based on what seems to be common sense can make these simple cases against abortion seem strong.

**Pro-Choice Presentations**

Presentations of pro-choice perspectives often begin with abstractions:

* What does *human* mean? Does everything human have rights?
* Why do human beings have rights? What makes humans have rights?
* Do human rights really protect everything and everyone that is human, or all human beings?
* Do basic human rights include a right to someone else’s body? How could someone gain that right? What kind of rights to assistance do human rights entail?
* Denying equality among human beings is very bad, but is equality sometimes inappropriate or even wrong? What does *equality* mean?
* When is killing *not*wrong? Does killing ever raise few, if any, moral issues whatsoever?

Since pro-choice positions depend on more precise and complex theoretical thinking, they are harder to effectively communicate—especially when audiences and discussion partners will not—or cannot—seek to understand more deeply and carefully.

**Pro-Choice Soundbites**

Consider some common pro-choice soundbites:

* My body, my choice.
* A woman can do whatever she wants with her own body.
* People who oppose abortion just want to control women.
* If you’re against abortion, don’t have one.
* Abortion is just a medical procedure.
* Abortion is a personal choice.
* Every child a wanted child.
* Abortion is [not up for debate](https://www.vogue.com/article/abortion-bans-female-sexual-wellness-reproductive-rights-new-york-times-open-letter?fbclid=IwAR23HCFDqMv5Gy9ZKFb-h_aoc_-TQV9O-7ysieIUlmdkeUObO_ErrQtRB1Q).

The problems with these soundbites are obvious to anyone who doesn’t already accept them.

* No. You cannot choose to use your body to murder someone.
* No. You cannot do everything you want with your own body: you cannot murder someone.
* No. If women are doing something that should be illegal, they should be controlled, just as anyone else should.
* No. You wouldn’t say *Against child abuse? Then don’t abuse children!* so this response is foolish.
* No. If abortion is wrong, it’s not a mere medical procedure.
* No. We can’t or shouldn’t make certain personal choices, if those choices are profoundly wrong.
* No. That a child is unwanted wouldn’t entitle anyone to kill that child.
* No, abortion is up for debate. What do you think we are doing in talking about it?

Not every pro-choice soundbite generates these reactions, but many do. Pro-choice soundbites just don’t have the same initial plausibility as pro-life soundbites.

**Critiques of Pro-Life Soundbites**

Pro-choice critics don’t argue that pro-life soundbites are *completely*wrong. Pro-choicers argue that, if we look at the details, their initial plausibility fades: thinking them through reveals that the ideas don’t have the implications their advocates think they do.

* If *human* means *biologically human*, that means that random human cells and tissues have rights, which they don’t. So just because fetuses are biologically human doesn’t mean they have rights.
* We can ask why human beings have rights: why do rocks and vegetables not have rights? A long-influential family of theories of rights proposes that we have rights because we are conscious and feeling beings. This theory suggests that pre-conscious embryos and early fetuses don’t have rights.
* While people say that all human beings have rights, they don’t. Human corpses don’t have rights. Brain-dead human beings do not have the rights we have: letting their bodies die would be wrong if they had, say, the right to life. Babies born missing most of their brains seem to not have the rights that regular babies have: it’s hard to see why letting them die, even when they could be kept alive, would be wrong, since being alive does them no good. Not all human beings have features that rights are supposed to protect, so it seems that not all human beings have rights. So just because fetuses are human beings doesn’t, in itself, mean they have rights.
* The right to life is not a right to everything someone needs to live—especially someone else’s body. Explaining if, how and why a fetus would have a right to a pregnant woman’s body is a challenge.
* Denying equality among humans is very bad. But advocating for equality between human beings and, say, isolated human cells or organs (or plants or bacteria) would be wrong. And what does *equal* mean? Not everything is equal: there is such a thing as justified, reasonable discrimination: there might be good reasons to deny that human embryos and early fetuses are equal to us.
* Killing random cells, bacteria, plants, etc. is often not wrong at all. There is killing that’s wrong and killing that isn’t wrong: just because abortion is killing doesn’t mean it’s wrong.

Identifying these problems requires showing that things are more complicated than they seem. It requires seeing that some common ways of understanding aren’t quite correct and might even be harmful.

There are, of course, more sophisticated arguments against abortion. These often appeal to claims about human embryos and fetuses’ *essence* or essential properties, their *rational natures* and their being the same *kind* of beings that we are. These abstract claims and arguments are harder to evaluate. However, close critical examination reveals that these abstract arguments do not succeed: they raise more questions than they answer.

**Critical Thinking and Abortion**

Developing strong critical thinking skills requires training and practice.

In our recent short, introductory, open-access book on abortion, [*Thinking Critically About Abortion: Why Most Abortions Aren’t Wrong & Why All Abortions Should be Legal*](https://www.abortionarguments.com/), we review a lot of bad arguments and ways of understanding abortion, from all sides. Our main positive arguments for pro-choice perspectives, briefly stated, are these.

* It is wrong to kill adults, children and babies because they are conscious, aware and have feelings. Since early fetuses entirely lack these characteristics, it is not inherently wrong to kill them, so most abortions are not morally wrong, since most abortions are done early in pregnancy, before consciousness and feeling develop in the fetus.
* Furthermore, since the right to life does not include the right to someone else’s body, a fetus might not have the right to the pregnant woman’s body—therefore she has the right to not allow the fetus use of her body. This further justifies abortion, at least until technology allows for the removal of fetuses to other wombs. Since morally permissible actions should be legal, abortions should be legal: it is an injustice to criminalize actions that are not wrong.

These arguments are not new, but they are new to most people, since most people are not familiar with the philosophical literature on abortion. Versions of these are likely to be the [best arguments for pro-choice perspectives](https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/defense-of-abortion/6F03DDDA424F9AADB6D8AF6162005F75) out there.

**Soundbite-Free Advocacy**

So, what can a pro-choice advocate do? Here are some ideas:

* Don’t provide soundbites. You’re better off saying nothing than giving what sounds like a bad argument—perhaps because it *is* a bad argument.
* Very clever and creative people could develop good pro-choice soundbites. These are likely to be based on abstract and theoretical considerations. But developing any such soundbites in an echo-chamber, with little reflection on how they would be received by the outside world, is a strategy for failure.
* Denying that the issues can be reduced to soundbites might do some good: acknowledging complexity can help.
* We’d all like to engage and persuade everyone, but it might be best to focus on people who are able and willing to engage complexity: judges and legal officials are generally able and willing to do that; elected politicians are less likely to. Focusing on audiences willing to listen and productively discuss would reduce discouragement and frustration. Many people are well-meaning and willing to engage the issues in serious, respectful and responsible ways. But these discussions aren’t likely to be fruitful if they appeal to soundbites.

This isn’t about persuasion in the sense of manipulation, public relations or anything that could be called *sophistry*. We want to move people towards reasonable, justified messages.

While pro-life soundbites often move people, they do not seem to move people towards views that are ultimately justified by strong evidence and arguments: we believe this can be demonstrated by reasoning rigorously, patiently and critically about those arguments. Our book’s subtitle is *Why Most Abortions Aren’t Wrong & Why All Abortions Should be Legal* because we believe that critical thinking reveals that this view is supported by better arguments than its opposite. Soundbites don’t help show that, to most people. We need to find out what will.



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