

**U.S.**

# Feminism and Abortion

Pro-choice arguments, the author says, reflect the ambitions, hypocrisies, and contradictions of contemporary feminism

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Sandra Day O'Connor has observed that "Roe v. Wade is on a collision course with itself." Justice O'Connor was referring to medical advances since 1973 that make it easier both to destroy potential life and to preserve it. Her meaning is vividly illustrated by those rare but disturbing cases in which a second- or third-trimester abortion yields a living infant, which must then be either killed or rushed to another part of the hospital for the latest in neonatal care.

But Justice O'Connor could just as well have been referring to the contradictions at the heart of contemporary feminism. Like the majority of Americans, I have reservations about both the pro-choice and the pro-life extremes. But I also feel that there is an imbalance between the degrees of criticism aimed at the two sides: not enough attention has been paid to the twisted logic of pro-choice rhetoric. This essay will try to redress that imbalance, by first sketching the course of recent feminist history and then dissecting some of the hypocrisies and contradictions used by pro-choice advocates to justify the absolute right to abortion.

Contemporary feminism began as a revolt against the traditional female role as it was experienced by the generation of college-educated women who in the 1950s attempted to make a full-time occupation of domesticity. To a large extent it was inspired by Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which began as a survey of Friedan's former classmates at Smith and grew into a polemic about the psychological frustrations experienced by women who exchanged the relatively egalitarian world of the college

campus for the "comfortable concentration camps" of middle-class suburbia. Restless and sometimes envious of their husbands' careers, Friedan's "trapped housewives" wanted to pursue the basically liberal goal of freedom and autonomy on an equal basis with men. Soon a movement arose to break out of the stifling private sphere inhabited by females and enter the breezy public forum dominated by males.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the forum. Try as they would, the feminists of the 1960s and 1970s could not extirpate the reality of gender differences. For the radical fringe, the persistence of such differences was proof that female oppression was the most deeply ingrained injustice in history—"metaphysical cannibalism," Ti-Grace Atkinson called it. But mainstream feminists did not feel drawn to this sisterhood, which was based on hatred for the essential experiences of womanhood. Beginning in the universities, many of them sought ways to accept gender differences without sacrificing equality.

### **From Equality to Superiority**

These efforts at first had an unassailable logic. Objecting that the apocalyptic visions of the radicals dehumanized women as passive victims, scholars in the field of women's studies began upgrading the image of traditional womanhood in history, literature, and the social sciences. The political philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain describes the process this way:

"Another strain of feminist thought, best called 'difference feminism,' questioned the move towards full assimilation of female identity with public male identity and argued that to see women's traditional roles and activities as wholly oppressive was itself oppressive to women, denying them historic subjectivity and moral agency."

For some feminists, this upgrading led to a new acceptance of domesticity. For others, it led to a new and more subtle radicalism, as they persuaded first themselves and then the university that the differences between the

sexes extended to modes of thinking—not just in women's studies but in every other subject, from aardvarks to zymology. And lest this new difference be confused with the old one that relegated women to mental inferiority, a number of scholars were on hand to suggest that the female mode was superior.

One influential book was the psychologist Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (1982). Gilligan concluded, from a study of moral reasoning in both sexes, that men reason from public-oriented ideas of individual rights and fair play, while women reason from private-oriented ideas of responsibility and caring for others. When the book was published, some of Gilligan's Harvard colleagues observed that this distinction—between justice and mercy, broadly construed—is as old as the Western philosophical tradition. At the same time, other scholars were reminding feminists that an idealized notion of nurturing, peaceloving womanhood was the keystone of both the nineteenth-century bourgeois family and the "moral uplift" movement that spawned helping professions like social work.

But these comparisons were spurned by those academic feminists who preferred to believe that social science had proved the existence of a separate, and morally superior, female mind with a distinctive set of values. Once upon a time university women had argued that scientific reason had no gender, and that aesthetic imagination was androgynous. But no longer. It wasn't in their interest. Instead, they had every incentive, material and otherwise, to join the feminist guild and subscribe to this new strain of feminist thought—best called "superiority feminism." Here feminism took an unfortunate turn, because a sense of superiority is hard to control. It is one thing to upgrade the image of heroines in Victorian novels, and quite another to adjust your opinion of unliberated housewives, Bible-quoting ministers, and conservative Republicans lobbying against the Equal Rights Amendment.

When it comes to politics, feminists still claim today, as Friedan claimed in 1963, that the frustration of the few is shared by the many. Yet even back in

1963 this claim was mistaken, because the peculiarly stifling circumstances described in *The Feminine Mystique* simply didn't obtain for most women. And today, despite a rise in female employment and a decline in family stability, there are still a great many women who spend their married lives in the same community where they grew up, who don't aspire to college and career, and, perhaps most important, who don't envy their husbands' work experience. The majority of men and women who must earn their living in ways that are not especially stimulating or enriching still embrace the ideal (if not always the reality) of women's providing for their families what Christopher Lasch has called a "haven in a heartless world."

To sum up, in the family and the workplace feminists deny the legitimacy of gender-based divisions of labor. "We are individuals," they intone, "and our role in homemaking and breadwinning must be identical to that of men." In the academy, however, feminists deny the possibility of gender-free research. "We are women," they intone, "and our values and thought processes are different from and better than those of men." For a long time this inconsistency showed up only when an especially ornery antifeminist—or perhaps the house-husband of a professor of women's studies—compared the two separate spheres. But today it shows up in the heat of political debate, as pro-choice activists switch back and forth between the two kinds of feminism to defend the absolute right to abortion. Few activists take time to ponder the contradiction between a feminism that denies gender and one that institutionalizes it. Like most political actors, they use rhetoric for its persuasiveness, not its logic. But as I hope to show in my discussion of pro-choice reasoning, doublethink is not all that persuasive.

### **Who Owns Whose Flesh?**

The original pro-choice argument is rooted in the classical liberal affirmation of every man's right to own his own body. Critical of liberalism for its failure to extend this right equally to women, pro-choicers define abortion as the essence of every woman's right to own her own body. In

Abortion & The Politics of Motherhood, Kristin Luker's 1984 study of attitudes on both sides of the abortion debate, one activist put it this way: "we can get all the rights in the world...and none of them means a doggone thing if we don't own the flesh we stand in."

The obvious objection to this argument is that a fetus is not just part of a woman's body. For a while pro-choicers tried to meet this objection by dehumanizing the fetus. Some still do. For example, Jane Hodgson, the Minnesota physician who is currently challenging that state's parental-notification law before the Supreme Court, told *The Washington Post* that one way to reassure a patient after a first-trimester abortion is to show her the pan of "uterine contents." Dr. Hodgson also refers to the object of such a procedure as "a few embryonic cells." By using such phrases the seventy-four-year-old Hodgson is echoing the tones of an earlier era. In the face of the passionate rhetoric of the pro-life movement, to say nothing of public opinion, which has never wavered in its support of tighter restrictions on later abortions (a position that does not deny the fetus humanity so much as assign it greater weight as it becomes more likely to develop into a child), pro-choice activists have nothing to gain from using such clinical and dehumanizing language.

The more up-to-date pro-choice arguments are rooted in superiority-feminism's elevation of the "private" morality of women over the "public" morality of men. In this spirit pro-choicers define abortion as an intensely personal experience that no man can judge. Bella Abzug anticipated this view in 1980 when she attacked Jimmy Carter's "'personal' objections to abortion" as "biologically inappropriate." With this phrase Abzug reveals the bogus logic of declaring the subject of abortion off limits to men. Since when has biology determined the arenas in which human beings can make moral judgments?

In a similar vein pro-choicers define abortion as a family matter that is no business of politicians'. Thus the claim, made before the Supreme Court by the American Civil Liberties Unions that the Minnesota law requiring

notification of both parents in cases of teenage abortion "tramples on the integrity of families." And thus Planned Parenthood's insistence that cuts in federal funding for abortion counseling are "an outrageous assault on the American family."

To clarify the doublethink in such rhetoric, consider the language used by the Appellate Division of the New York State Supreme Court last year in ruling against two pro-life activists who tried to prevent an abortion on a comatose woman named Nancy Klein. The abortion had been sought by Klein's husband, in consultation with her parents and her doctor, in the hope that it would increase her chances of recovery. The court said that "absolute strangers to the Klein family, whatever their motivation, have no place in this family tragedy."

Appropriate though this language may be to the unhappy case of Nancy Klein, it is also misleading, in exactly the same way that the pro-choice activists' pro-family, anti-government rhetoric is misleading. "Absolute strangers" are not the only people who "have no place" in abortion decisions. If Klein had not been in a coma, she would have been legally entitled to decide between destroying and preserving this unborn life without consulting either its father or its grandparents. All the pro-family rhetoric in the world cannot change this blunt fact. After *Roe v. Wade* abortion is not a family decision. It is the decision of one class of individuals—pregnant women—who have been designated, in Orwell's pithy phrase, "more equal than others."

### **The Materfamilias**

Granted, there is nothing new about granting a class of people with life-or-death power over their families. Such is the original definition of patriarchy. In ancient Rome, for example, a great many political, economic, and religious powers resided in the male heads of tribes, clans, and households. Among these was the power to commit infanticide. If a newborn was deemed healthy and supportable by the paterfamilias, it was

initiated into the family with the proper rites. If not, it was smothered or drowned.

In Rome infanticide was not considered murder, any more than abortion is considered murder by the majority of Americans today. But the Romans regarded infanticide as a very grave act, which is why it could be performed only by the paterfamilias. In the sense that our present abortion law vests the pregnant woman with the power to commit a similarly grave act, it's tempting to dub her the "materfamilias." But of course she is nothing of the kind. The stern powers of the paterfamilias were fused with stern duties, such as atoning for crimes committed by the members of his household. In the organic metaphor we've inherited from the Romans (by way of Christian views of natural law), the "members" and the "heads" of families and other social institutions are bound by ties so powerful that they can be severed only by a kind of amputation.

Since the seventeenth century this organic metaphor has been challenged by liberalism's depiction of social institutions not as organisms made up of consanguine parts but as contractual arrangements between consenting individuals. The feminists' complaint against liberalism is that it has never, despite its contractual ethos, stopped conceiving of the family as an organic institution. As the political philosopher Susan Moller Okin has put it, liberalism still takes a "prescriptive view of woman's nature and proper mode of life based on her role and functions in a patriarchal family structure." That is why the chief goal of feminists like Okin is to restructure the family as a totally contractual arrangement from which anyone, but especially any woman, may withdraw at will.

But is this goal morally defensible? There's a very good reason why liberalism has never stopped seeing the family as an organic institution. Beginning with John Locke, liberalism has understood that not all human ties are contractual—most notably the tie between a parent and a child. Locke distinguished between legitimate political power, which may extend to life and death because it derives from the consent of the governed, and

parental power, which may extend only to preserving the life of the child, because it does not, and cannot, derive from the consent of the child.

This crucial distinction collapses every time pro-choice arguments flip-flop between the language of individual rights and that of nurturant femininity. Pro-choicers begin by asserting equal rights for women—a line of reasoning that challenges the organic basis of family relationships. But equal rights are not enough when it comes to abortion, a decision that must balance women's rights against those of others, such as fetuses and family members. So pro-choicers define women's rights as more than equal, on the grounds that female decision-making partakes of a special moral wisdom. But what is the source of that wisdom? Not women's character or achievement as individuals but their membership in a class whose nature it is to care for others—a definition of womanhood that is nothing if not organic.

### **Bring on the Bull**

By such maneuvering, pro-choice advocates can usually avoid admitting that the relationship between a woman and a fetus is not contractual. But if not contractual, then it must be organic—an outcome that leaves pro-choicers with only two options. They can deny the humanity of the fetus, which (as we've seen) is both unpopular and unproductive. Or they can change the subject.

Because the comparison between maternal and fetal consent favors the fetus, the logical solution is to shift to a comparison that favors the woman—that is, between the degrees of consent exercised by men and women having sex. In its wisdom (which has remained remarkably consistent over the years), public opinion tolerates legal abortion in cases of coercive sex, such as rape and incest. But this consensus isn't good enough for those pro-choice activists who have an overriding rhetorical need to stress female, as opposed to fetal, helplessness. Their hypocrisy peaks when, after granting women life-and-death power over the unborn, they

depict sexual relations as beyond women's control—in rhetoric that harks back to the old militant equation of sex and rape, as expressed by the activist who told Kristin Luker that without abortion, women would have "about as many rights as the cow in the pasture that's taken to the bull once a year. "

This is not to suggest that the activists counsel sexual restraint. Like most "progressive" people, they have a horror of appearing prudish. Nor do they want to revive the old double standard that gave men more sexual liberty than women. Yet their dislike of male irresponsibility makes it tricky to advocate similar behavior in women. Perforce, they resolve the conflict by taking the "me first" ethic of the sexual revolution and cloaking it in the "caring" verbiage of superiority feminism. Here is Luker's summary of the pro-choice view of sex:

"Because mobilizing such delicate social and emotional resources as trust, caring, and intimacy requires practice, pro-choice people do not denigrate sexual experiences that fall short of achieving transcendence. They judge individual cases of premarital sex, contraception, and infidelity according to the ways in which they enhance or detract from conditions of trust and caring. In their value scheme, something that gives people opportunities for intimacy simply cannot be seen as wrong."

Does this mean that when Hank Williams sang "Your Cheatin' Heart," he was really singing about a practice mobilization of delicate trusting and caring resources by a person given an opportunity for intimacy? More likely, Hank meant that the human objects of trust, caring, and intimacy shouldn't be batted around for practice, like so many interchangeable tennis balls. Since the main purpose of such verbiage is to rationalize self-indulgence, it's no wonder that such verbiage also dominates feminist discussions of the higher morality of abortion.

### **Family Pictures**

Take Carol Gilligan's "concepts of self and morality" in a group of women considering abortion. There's nothing objectionable about her claim that women faced with unwanted pregnancies tend to weigh "selfishness" against "responsibility." But there's plenty objectionable about her tortured efforts to interpret abortion as always a responsible decision. According to her discussion, the women who were Catholic concluded that the "honesty and truth" of their own desires was worth more than the Catholic "conventions that equate goodness with self-sacrifice." The single women, mired in dead-end affairs with exploitative Don Juans, decided that destroying their lovers' potential offspring was a way of affirming their self-esteem. And one twenty-nine-year-old married woman reasoned that it was selfish to bear her child and adult to abort it.

In Gilligan's view, a woman is not permitted to put the needs of other people first, because "self-sacrifice" is the linchpin of female oppression. Instead, she is expected to ascend to a higher level of enlightened self-regard, where the act of putting her own needs first is tantamount to striking a blow for women's freedom. But what if the other people involved are also women? Consider the scenario of the pregnant teenager who decides, against the wishes of her mother, to abort a female fetus. In the one instance, she is depriving an older female of a grandchild. In the other, she is depriving a younger female of life. Compared with such deprivations, the idea of striking a blow for women's freedom seems pretty abstract, impersonal, and public—rather like Gilligan's stereotype of male moral reasoning.

The above scenario may not be typical, but neither is it as lurid as the picture of the American family currently being drawn by pro-choice activists opposing the various state laws that are trying, in the wake of the Supreme Court's Webster decision, to restore the attenuated interests of other family members in the life of the unborn. Again, the goal of pro-choice rhetoric is to emphasize female helplessness. But because the battleground is now the family itself, the rhetoric of abuse and violation

gets applied to the parents of minors seeking abortions. In a full-page ad in The New York Times, Planned Parenthood explains "What's Wrong With Parental Consent" as follows: "Indeed, after hearing evidence of family conflict and brutal violence, an appeals judge wrote 'compelling parental notice...is almost always disastrous.'"

Never mind the deliberate confusion of "parental consent" with "parental notice." Just look at the model of family life offered by pro-choice activists and their allies as the basis for law. On the one hand, minors should have complete sexual license, because younger people need to practice those all-important skills of trust, caring, and intimacy. On the other hand, parents should be kept in the dark, because older people cannot be trusted to refrain from brutal violence. A favorite variation on this theme is the tale of the molesting father who murders his daughter after learning that she is pregnant with his child. The activists don't want the law to make provisions for these grim exceptions; they want it to enshrine them as the rule.

### **Fewer Females?**

We now arrive at the real legacy of feminist doublethink, with its contempt for the values of the unliberated majority and its misplaced faith in the superiority of female moral reasoning. Substitute "feminist superiority" for "female superiority," and the actual tendency of the movement becomes clear. Not only does feminist doublethink accord women the exclusive power to terminate potential life while absolving them of any responsibility for having conceived life in the first place; this doublethink also extends its influence, by way of the helping professionals and judges under its sway, over the poor, the confused, and the underaged, who are urged to heed the feminist message over the advice of their own families.

Nor is this power being exercised in the name of a clearly defined kinship group, as was the power of the Roman paterfamilias. Rather it is being wielded in the name of all women, a category that includes not only the majority of people who disagree with the pro-choice position on abortion

but also half the potential lives being aborted. It's a measure of feminist fanaticism that only recently have pro-choice activists announced their unwillingness to defend abortion as a method of sex selection. Perhaps it occurred to them that sex-preferential practices have historically favored the male, and that by sanctioning such abortions, they are quite likely causing fewer females to be born. If this was their reasoning, then it's time to stand back and watch feminism collide with itself.

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