

## HOW NOT TO ARGUE ABOUT ABORTION

So intense is the moral controversy over abortion that partisans — both abortion liberals and abortion conservatives — are tempted, for rhetorical effect, to rely upon ill-considered arguments. But to do so, whatever one's moral position, is counterproductive; confidence in intellect and integrity is shaken, even true conclusions may be undermined. The price of using bad arguments is high.

The terms “liberal” and “conservative” have special meanings in this realm: conservatives here — those who view the fetus as a person from conception, condemn the killing of the fetus as profoundly wrong, and who call themselves “pro-life” — are often quite liberal in other matters; liberals here — those who hold that whatever one's view of abortion only the pregnant woman has the moral authority to decide upon an abortion for herself, and who call themselves “pro-choice” — are often quite conservative in other matters. Adopting this common usage, my aim is to expose bad arguments on both sides.

### 1. Liberal Fallacy

I begin on the liberal side. One argument very commonly presented by liberals goes like this:

We liberals believe it is permissible for a woman to terminate her pregnancy because the pregnancy is hers alone, and therefore moral decisions pertaining to it are rightly hers to make. Our conservative opponents believe abortion not permissible, basing their conclusion upon moral beliefs about the fetus that we think mistaken. Neither side can prove the other wrong. To restore social harmony all parties should agree to forgo coercion — as is done in religious disputes — and to respect the rights of others to be guided by their own principles. No one need condone what he thinks evil; all are free to express moral judgments openly and forcefully, of course. But we must not persecute those whose practices we think immoral. Liberals must respect