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### The issue of abortion: Our metaphysical problem | Opinion

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“Human reason has the peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which it cannot dismiss... but which it also cannot answer, since they transcend every capacity of human reason.” – Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781)

One of the great divides in the abortion debate is over the status of the fetus. This is particularly true during the first trimester when over 90% of all abortions are performed. Speaking abstractly, some argue that during this first trimester the fetus is a potential human being in the moral and legal sense, but “not yet” (in the sense that an egg is not yet a chicken).

Others argue that the fetus “is already what it will be” (a human being in the full moral and legal sense) and that destroying the fetus, even from the moment of conception, is no different, morally, than killing a 2-year old child in the privacy of your back yard.

This concept of potentiality played a significant role in Ancient and Medieval Western Metaphysics. But there is no microscope in the world, no scientific method, that can see which meaning of “potential” is correct. Is it potential in the ordinary sense of “is not yet” (having ice cream and milk does not yet make a milk shake) or potential in the more presumptive sense of “is already what it will be” (possessing, perhaps, a human soul from the moment of conception)?

Like many metaphysical problems, this can become a matter of belief and conviction for many of us; and it is but one of many ways that people of principle and good will can disagree about the issue of abortion.

Yet once politicized, one side sees murder; the other choice. The metaphysical crux in this case is the existential choice of how one views the concept of potentiality. And that view is ultimately a matter of choice regarding which interpretation might align with your comprehensive worldview (e.g., prioritizing the woman in one and the fetus in the other).

On a more personal level, there are those who see the pregnancy as the presence of a beautiful child and a living human being; and there are those who see the pregnancy as a personal crisis, a tragic situation that must be dealt with as best one can. And then there are those who share a thousand nuanced feelings in-between.

But now the states and the Supreme Court itself have embarked on a scholastic journey to determine the priority of one interpretation over the other.

The tragedy of the abortion issue is that it is beyond the scope of reason to deduct which meaning of potential is correct. It cries out for a pragmatic solution fit for a modern pluralistic society. Unfortunately, we are now moving toward a country in which abortion is murder in one state and choice in another.

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#### Unpublished Postscript

Kant described situations where reason involves itself in endless and unresolvable controversies as “antinomies of pure reason.” Classic examples are 1. God exists; 2. God does not exist and 1. there is a soul; 2. there is no soul. This plays out in the abortion debate as follows: (1) The fetus is *not yet* a person in the moral and legal sense and (2) the fetus *is* a person in the moral and legal sense (since it ‘*is* already what it *will be*’ i.e. a person in the moral and legal sense).

These are the assumptions behind the assumptions in the issue of abortion and the reason why both sides will talk past each other *ad infinitum*.