

A View of Abortion with Something to Offend Everybody

By Walker Percy

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Covington, La. -- I feel like saying something about this abortion issue. My credentials as an expert on the subject: none. I am an M.D. and a novelist. I will speak only as a novelist. If I give an opinion as an M.D., it wouldn't interest anybody since, for one thing, any number of doctors have given opinions and who cares about another.

The only obvious credential of a novelist has to do with his trade. He trafficks in words and meanings. So the chronic misuse of words, especially the fobbing off of rhetoric for information, gets on his nerves. Another possible credential of a novelist peculiar to these times is that he is perhaps more sensitive to the atrocities of the age than most. People get desensitized. Who wants to go about his business being reminded of the six million dead in the holocaust, the 15 million in the Ukraine? Atrocities become banal. But a 20th century novelist should be a nag, an advertiser, a collector, a proclaimer of banal atrocities.

True legalized abortion--a million and a half fetuses flushed down the Disposall every year in this country--is yet another banal atrocity in a century where atrocities have become commonplace. This statement will probably offend one side in this already superheated debate, so I hasten in the interests of fairness and truth to offend the other side. What else can you do when some of your allies give you as big a pain as your opponents? I notice this about many so-called pro-lifers. They seem pro-life only on this one perfervid and politicized issue. The Reagan Administration, for example, professes to be anti-abortion but has just recently decided in the interests of business that it is proper for infant-formula manufacturers to continue their hard sell in the third world despite thousands of deaths from bottle feeding. And Senator Jesse Helms and the Moral Majority, who profess a reverence for unborn life, don't seem to care much about born life: poor women who don't get abortions, have their babies, and can't feed them.

Nothing new here of course. What I am writing this for is to call attention to a particularly egregious example of doublespeak that the abortionists--"pro-choicers," that is--seem to have hit on in the current rhetorical war.

Now I don't know whether the human-life bill is good legislation or not. But as a novelist I can recognize meretricious use of language, disingenuousness, and a con job when I hear it.

The current con, perpetrated by some jurists, some editorial writers, and some doctors is that since there is no agreement about the beginning of human life, it is therefore a private religious or philosophical decision and therefore the state and the courts can do nothing about it. This is a con. I will not presume to speculate who is conning whom and for what purpose. But I do submit that religion, philosophy, and private opinion have nothing to do with this issue. I further submit that it is a commonplace of modern biology, known to every high school student and no doubt to you the reader as well, that the life of every individual organism, human or not, begins when the chromosomes of the sperm fuse with the chromosomes of the ovum to form a new DNA complex that thenceforth directs the ontogenesis of the organism.

Such vexed subjects as the soul, God, and the nature of man are not at issue. What we are talking about and what nobody I know would deny is the clear continuum that exists in the life of every individual from the moment of fertilization of a single cell.

There is a wonderful irony here. It is this: The onset of individual life is not a dogma of the church but a fact of science. How much more convenient if we lived in the 13th century, when no one knew anything about microbiology and arguments about the onset of life were legitimate. Compared to a modern textbook of embryology, Thomas Aquinas sounds like an American Civil Liberties Union member. Nowadays it is not some misguided ecclesiastics who are trying to suppress an embarrassing scientific fact. It is the secular juridical-journalistic establishment.

Please indulge the novelist if he thinks in novelistic terms. Picture the scene. A Galileo trial in reverse. The Supreme Court is cross-examining a high school biology teacher and admonishing him that of course it is only his personal opinion that the fertilized human ovum is an individual human life. He is enjoined not to teach his private beliefs at a public school. Like Galileo he caves in, submits, but in turning away is heard to murmur, "But it's still alive!"

To pro-abortionists: According to the opinion polls, it looks as if you may get your way. But you're not going to have it both ways. You're going to be told what you're doing.