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"Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win great triumphs, even though checkered by failure, than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much, because they live in the gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat."

—Theodore Roosevelt

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# Editorial

## The Yuck Factor

The story is told of two college professors, reflecting on the election of 1984, where one says to the other, "I can't believe Reagan won. No one I know voted for him."

Dartmouth's ex-president James O. Freedman often bemoans the fact that university presidents are increasingly irrelevant to American public life. "I have increasingly realized just how important it is for presidents—and former presidents—to use the bully pulpit their position gives them," Freedman wrote in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in December. (Freedman is writing a book about the role of college presidents.) But university leaders haven't stopped speaking from their bully pulpit—Freedman himself is surely evidence of that. They are just taken less seriously by most Americans (again, Freedman is in evidence) because the political culture of universities is so far removed from mainstream opinion.

Looking at the world from the standpoint of an elite Ivy League campus, you would think that a huge majority of the population supports affirmative action, gay marriage, and a ban on handguns—there doesn't even seem to be another opinion—but you would be wrong; the reality is quite the opposite. Perhaps most striking for those confined to academe is the public consensus—in evidence now for a number of years—on abortion, a consensus that opposes the radical abortion rights advocated by campus feminists and codified in *Roe v. Wade* and subsequent decisions—abortion on demand, for any reason, at any stage of pregnancy.

A 1999 poll by the Center for Gender Equity, a feminist group, found—much to the Center's dismay—that 53 percent of American women favor prohibiting abortion either altogether or with exceptions for rape, incest, or to save the mother's life. *The Los Angeles Times'* national exit poll from the 2000 election reported that fully half of all voters believe abortion should either "be made illegal except for cases of rape, incest, and to save the life of the mother" or "be made illegal without any exceptions."

50 percent of respondents told a CBS/*New York Times* survey in 1998 that "abortion is the same thing as murdering a child"; 38 percent said it isn't. The population is about evenly split on whether abortion should be legal at all; half would ban it with the exceptions—which would mean outlawing 95 percent of all abortions.

There is remarkable agreement on a number of points, however. The Gallup poll's results from March 2000 are typical: 69 percent believe abortion should be illegal after the first three months of pregnancy, 86 percent think it should be illegal in the last three months. In 1996 the numbers were 65 and 82 percent, respectively.

The public supports laws requiring women seeking abortion to wait 24 hours before the procedure (79%), requiring doctors to inform patients about alternatives to abortion (86%), and requiring parental consent in the case of minors (78%). Two-thirds oppose partial birth abortion. Majorities say abortion should not be allowed when the family can't afford to raise a child, when they simply do not want more children, when pregnancy might interfere with the woman's career, or when the child is likely to be deaf or blind.

All told, while activists and academics support abortion in all circumstances—as a fundamental right, no less—only about a quarter of the population agrees. 71 percent says abortion should either be illegal or should be legal only in certain circumstances.

Last September, the House of Representatives passed something called the "Born-Alive Infants Protection Act," and referred it to the Senate for consideration. The Act states, simply, that children who survive abortions, who are born alive, are human beings who are entitled to medical care and the protection of the law. Most people who believe in abortion would tend to draw the line at actual birth. One would be hard pressed to argue that the mere existence of a child, living independent of the mother's body, somehow harms the mother or violates her rights—much less that the right of a distinct person to live is somehow contingent on another person's interests or convenience.

Abortion, of course, is the right to end a pregnancy. Once birth occurs, pregnancy is over; killing the baby after birth is infanticide, not abortion. Needless to say, there's

overwhelming public consensus against infanticide.

The issue is also a no-brainer among academic bioethicists, who think that infanticide is not only morally permissible, but often imperative. In the field of bioethics, there is a sharp distinction between "humans" and "persons." While humans are just one of many different animal species, a "person" is—according to the *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*, for example—"someone morally considerable who is the subject of moral rights and merits moral protection."

John Harris, the Sir David Alliance Professor of Bioethics at the University of Manchester, argues that a person is "a being that can value existence." Since infants are too young to actually appreciate their lives, killing babies doesn't really hurt them in any way: "Persons who want to live are wronged by being killed," writes Harris. "Nonpersons or potential persons cannot be wronged in this way because death does not deprive them of something they value. If they cannot wish to live, they cannot have that wish frustrated by being killed." A similar argument is often employed to justify the harvesting of organs from the comatose.

Peter Singer, now the Ida W. Decamp Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University, proposes that "a period of 28 days after birth might be allowed before an infant is accepted as having the same right to life as others." In a 1995 article in *The Spectator*, which is actually entitled "Killing Babies Isn't Always Wrong," Singer wrote, "Perhaps, like the ancient Greeks, we should have a ceremony a month after birth, at which the infant is admitted to the community. Before that time, infants would not be recognized as having the same right to life as older people." Peter Unger, a philosophy professor at New York University, calls Singer "the most influential ethicist alive."

American University philosopher Jeffrey Reiman observes that infants do not "possess in their own right a property which makes it wrong to kill them." Bioethicist Tom Beauchamp, of Georgetown, writes that some humans are "equal or inferior in moral standing to some nonhumans" in that they lack moral personhood. "Unprotected persons would presumably include fetuses, newborns, psychopaths, severely brain-damaged patients, and various demented patients," he argues. "If this conclusion is defensible," he writes, "we will need to rethink our traditional view that these unlucky humans cannot be treated in the ways we treat relevantly similar nonhumans. For example, they might be aggressively used as human research subjects and sources of organs."

One form of abortion currently practiced is called "induced labor abortion," or "live birth abortion," in which medication is used to cause a pregnant woman's cervix to open so she delivers a premature baby. The baby sometimes dies in birth, but is often delivered alive. Denied medical care, the baby typically lives one or two hours before expiring. With regard to children who survive abortions, South Africa's Department of Health issued controversial guidelines in 1997, which read, "if an infant is born who gasps for breath, it is advised that the fetus does not receive any resuscitation measures." Many health care providers refused to comply. One doctor said the regulations were "inhuman and against all my principles." Most people, in fact, react this way.

Bioethicists smugly label this reaction "the yuck factor." But what it indicates is that, while abortion remains a vexing question for most Americans, the principle conceded with legal abortion has led to clearly undesired moral consequences. And it seems, for most Americans, that the issue is not as simple as a "right to choose."

"College presidents can and must use their professional stature to promote the unhurried consideration of large questions," writes Freedman. "It is a rare privilege to have a public platform to address moral issues." One shouldn't expect the public to look to universities for moral advice, however, so long as academics persist in propagating terrible ideas. Freedman's successor, James Wright, took his vision one step further. Wright's "Social and Residential Life Initiative" aims to reclaim the College's *in loco parentis* role, to shape the moral character of its students. It remains questionable, though, that today's colleges make particularly good parents.

