

Abortion issues spark quality of life debate

By Ronald J. Rousseve

Despite their different political party affiliations, Oregon's two contenders for the governorship, Secretary of State Barbara Roberts and Attorney General Dave Frohnmayer, have both publicly acknowledged their pro-choice positions on the abortion issue.

Commentary

Most polls on the abortion controversy show about 40 percent of Americans support legal abortion under and circumstances during the early weeks of pregnancy. Such a stance places the pregnant woman's right of thoughtfully considered choice above any "rights" said to be possessed by that emerging colony of biological substance that is on its way to becoming a human being.

At the opposite end of the life continuum, the issue of euthanasia in the case of older adults who are seeking a swift and gentle conclusion to lives which have become hopelessly mired in pain and meaninglessness is also being examined from a "quality of personhood" perspective.

The Netherlands is a country which accepts the ethics of doctors assisting their patients toward a less agonizing, more gentle and dignified demise,

As reported recently (*The Register-Guard*, April 5), in Dutch society, based on guidelines carefully established by their courts in 1972, a doctor may proceed with active euthanasia after an older patient has made "repeated, unambiguous requests" to be relieved from a hopeless condition of painful deterioration which could eventuate in complete loss of control of mind and body.

I believe it can be shown that: (1) a pro-choice position on the abortion issue and (2) a stance strongly supportive of euthanasia in circumstances like those just described, can both be defended on the basis of a "quality of life" frame of reference.

Those who make moral judgments from a quality of life stance instead of a "sanctity of life" position, appeal to a set of criteria for humanness or personhood in order to establish the boundaries for quality decision. What is the essence of personhood? What functions define a person? When do these essential attributes emerge?

Joseph Fletcher, emeritus professor of biomedical ethics at the University of Virginia, contends undeniably an embryo or fetus is composed of living biological tissue. The critical question is whether it is reasonable to assign person status to such primordial em-

bryonic or fetal life. When some of the qualities which constitute actual personhood are reviewed, it is not difficult to conclude that a fetus is a sub-personal organism. Personhood status ordinarily implies some rudimentary activation of the cerebral cortex (minimal intelligence); self-awareness and curiosity; some capacity for choice and change; a sense of time and futurity; the capacity to communicate with and relate caringly to others; and the like.

Clearly the vital enabling dynamic in the onset of personhood is minimal "celebration." Prior to the beginning of cerebral activity, during the early weeks of pregnancy, the developing embryo and fetus represent only potential personhood. Accordingly, it is simplistic to equate the "rights" of such primitive life with the rights of the actual person who is pregnant.

Regarding the difficult questions about when personhood (as construed above) actually emerges, I believe we must turn to the work of eminent embryologists like Clifford Grobstein of the University of California, San Diego, for clarifying information.

Grobstein's views on this topic were outlined in an insightful conversation piece published in the September 1989 issue of *Psychology To-*

day. He has stated during fetal development "from 8 to 30 weeks, the central nervous system is so extremely immature — especially the brain — that there seems no possibility of awareness (inner experience)." This suggests that if before the 20-week mark there is no possibility of minimal psychic awareness in the fetus, then it makes no sense to claim the termination of a pregnancy during that early period represents the killing of a human being. It follows logically that the choice of the pregnant woman during that period should continue to be protected constitutionally.

Moving now to the other end of the life continuum, it seems to me what has been presented above concerning a quality of personhood perspective at the beginning of the life cycle can also be applied to mature adults whose deteriorating quality of life motivates them to seek a dignified release from the irreversible agony of meaningless decline.

When mature, psychologically healthy adults are in the prime of their lives, they exemplify the relative human contentment generated by having: (1) something to do; (2) someone or something to love; and (3) something to hope for. But what are their viable choices when even a modicum of fulfillment or satisfaction during the waning years of life is no

longer a possibility — when any semblance of joy and interpersonal engagement is gone?

Already there is growing support in America for the legal right of competent adults to choose to be disconnected from the technological marvels of modern medicine — even though activating that option will hasten death. For some, even this passive form of euthanasia is still a controversial moral issue; and unarguably the kind of active euthanasia that is allowed under certain conditions in the Netherlands is today strongly prohibited in the United States.

However, I believe there are both medical situations and circumstances of "existential decline" which can diminish the quality of an adult human being's life to such an extent that personhood (as construed above) has all but disappeared. In the face of that kind of personal diminishment, the choice of an unprolonged and painless exit from life by a sane adult may be the most compassionate and sensible way to achieve release from an irreversibly hopeless state.

At both ends of the life cycle, quality of personhood is an indispensable standard for making responsible judgments about continuance — and discontinuance.

Ronald J. Rousseve is a professor of Counseling Psychology.

Freedom

In response to Earl Gosnell (*ODE*, May 11); just because a book is "the world's most popular" doesn't mean it has the right to take away a person's freedom of choice and expression.

Jeff Sparks
Student

Lost out

In response to Earl Gosnell's letter (*ODE*, May 11), referring

to the Bible's alleged condemnation of "homosexual love," there are four rules that Gosnell (and others) should consider when quoting Biblical passages:

- (1) Be sure you know as much or more on the subject than anyone who might talk back. As a preacher's kid, I've been around the Bible my entire life, and I talk back. So much for Rule 1.
- (2) Quote the correct passage. For the Revised Standard Version, Romans 1:26 reads, "For this reason, God gave them up

to dishonorable practices. Their women exchanged natural relations for the unnatural." Even if this passage does refer to homosexuality, by referring to a single verse, you have only encompassed lesbians. Sorry, but you just lost half of the people you were trying to bash.

- (3) Don't take things out of context. The particular passage this verse comes from starts at Romans 1:18 with "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness among men who by their wickedness sup-

press the truth." This portion of Paul's letter refers to the Gentiles (the unbelievers) and specifically, those "who by their wickedness suppress the truth." What "the truth" may be here is open for debate, but it is doubtful this passage refers to Joe (or Jane) Homosexual-on-

the-street.
• (4) Think before you write. No commentary needed here.
Looks like you lost out on all four points.

James Drew
Computer Science

Letters

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