

**DEFENDING LIFE: A MORAL AND LEGAL
CASE AGAINST ABORTION CHOICE BY
FRANCIS J. BECKWITH**



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Review

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Reverend Richard John Neuhaus, Editor-in-Chief, First Things

"Like a superhero fighting on hostile turf with one arm tied behind his back, Francis J. Beckwith confronts every argument - popular, legal, and philosophical - that comes out against the pro-life position and fends them off one by one with steadfast rationality and exuberant invention. Between punches, drawing on the science of embryology and on philosophical anthropology, he develops a gracious and luminous case for the simple goodness of human life and the basic equality of all members of the human community from the moment of conception. Readers will judge for themselves whether or not he delivers a knock-out, but after working through *Defending Life: A Moral and Legal Case against Abortion Choice*, no one can honestly hide behind such conceits as that all educated people support abortion, that nothing but blind faith rejects abortion rights, or that we are faced with a tragic choice between intelligence and life."

James R. Stoner, Jr., Louisiana State University

"Using an argument rooted in nondiscrimination and equality of persons, Beckwith deftly combines the analytical tools of philosophy, jurisprudence, and science to construct a brilliant case for governmental protection of the unborn. Critics will have difficulty refuting the logical conclusion that emerges from his basic premises."

Carol Swain, Vanderbilt University

"Francis Beckwith's *Defending Life* directly confronts, with careful analysis of specific texts, a wide variety of arguments made by prominent scholars who favor abortion rights, including Judith Thomson, David Boonin, Dean Stretton, Eileen McDonagh, Paul Simmons, and Stuart Rosenbaum. Those who read the book may not agree with Beckwith, but they will have no ground to complain that he has not taken the arguments

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Defending Life is the most comprehensive defense of the prolife position on abortion ever published. It is sophisticated, but still accessible to the ordinary citizen. Without high-pitched rhetoric or appeals to religion, the author offers a careful and respectful case for why the prolife view of human life is correct. He responds to the strongest prochoice arguments found in law, science, philosophy, politics, and the media. He explains and critiques Roe v. Wade, and he explains why virtually all the popular prochoice arguments fail. There is simply nothing like this book.

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The case against abortion

By Bill Muehlenberg

This is certainly the newest pro-life work to appear, and arguably among the best. It not only lays out the legal, rational, moral and philosophical case against abortion choice, but it more broadly makes the case for human equality and the sanctity of life.

Beckwith is an American professor of law and philosophy who has written extensively on these issues previously. This volume brings together years of thinking and debating on this contentious issue. It is an invaluable resource for all those wishing to stand up for human life at all stages of development, and to counter the arguments of the pro-choice brigade.

The first third of the book paints with broad brush strokes, examining moral reasoning, legal considerations, and political dimensions of the abortion debate.

The second third of the book looks more closely at the abortion debate per se, looking at the science, the morality and the arguments involved in the debate about abortion.

The final third of the book extends these considerations to recent developments in bioethics, including cloning and stem cell research.

The second and longest section of this book does many things, including carefully dismantling the various arguments put forward by the pro-abortion camp. All the leading pro-abortion thinkers, such as Thompson, Boonin, Stretton, and Dworkin are taken on, with their positions carefully assessed and interacted with.

On the broader issue of human equality, Beckwith argues for the substance view which states that a human being "is intrinsically valuable because of the sort of thing it is and the human being remains that sort of thing as long as it exists". That is, an individual "maintains absolute identity through time while it grows, develops, and undergoes numerous changes".

Various functions and capacities, whether fully realised or utilised do not constitute a person. Thus a human being is never a potential person, but is always a person at different stages of development, whether potential properties and capacities are actualised or not.

This view stands in stark contrast to the utilitarian and functionalist views held by most pro-abortionists. They argue that personhood is not inherent or intrinsic, but based on certain capacities and functions, be it consciousness, sentience, self-awareness, the ability to reason, and so on.

As to the specifics of the abortion debate, Beckwith responds to the numerous objections raised by pro-abortionists over the years. For example, consider the argument often heard, involving the hard cases of rape and incest. These are certainly tragic events, but in no way can they be used to justify an abortion.

First, such cases are extremely rare, making up just a tiny fraction of all abortions. Second, to argue for the legalisation of abortion because of these extreme cases would be similar to arguing that we eliminate traffic laws because in some rare cases they need to be violated, as in rushing a loved one to hospital.

Third, it simply begs the question by assuming the unborn child is not fully human. Fifth, to justify abortion in these circumstances is to argue that it is acceptable to forfeit a life for the alleged benefit of another. But a basic ethical intuition argues that we may not kill one person to possibly save another. John may desperately need a vital organ of Mary to stay alive, but he has no right to demand it, especially if it entails killing her in the process.

The more recent, and difficult, cases of embryo research, human cloning and stem cell therapies are also examined, looking at the various justifications given for them, and their pro-life responses. Similar issues arise here concerning the nature of personhood and the inviolability of life.

Beckwith closes by laying out his case as it has been argued throughout: the unborn are full members of the human community; it is wrong to kill members of that community; abortion kills the unborn entity; therefore abortion is morally wrong.

The three hundred pages of tightly-knit argumentation and logical-constructed reasoning take on nearly all the major justifications for abortion. All are found wanting - morally, legally, and philosophically. Beckwith is to be praised for assembling in one volume some of the best pro-life argumentation around.

47 of 53 people found the following review helpful.

Outstanding Contribution to Abortion Debate

By Scott Klusendorf

Beckwith's primary purpose is to provide a thorough defense of the pro-life position and its grounding in the "substance view" of human persons--a view he claims best explains human equality. He writes: "This book is, in a sense, then, not really a book about abortion, but rather, a book about human equality." Frank contends that the larger metaphysical question--who are we?--should be answered by enlarging our definition of the human family to include the unborn. His secondary purpose is to examine the relationship between abortion and law, politics, and public discourse.

The pro-life argument Frank defends can be outlined as follows:

1. The unborn entity, from the moment of conception, is a full-fledged member of the human community.
2. It is prima facie morally wrong to kill any member of that community.
3. Every successful abortion kills an unborn entity, a full-fledged member of the human community.
4. Therefore, every successful abortion is prima facie morally wrong.

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 deals with moral reasoning, the law, and politics. Part 2 is the core of Frank's case for the pro-life view, which includes both the scientific and philosophic considerations.

Part 3 takes on cloning and embryonic stem-cell research.

The thrust of the text is philosophical and jurisprudential rather than religious. In each case, the arguments presented pass the test of public reason. That's not because he thinks theology doesn't count as real knowledge (indeed, he argues elsewhere it does). Rather, he's cutting-off secular critics who unjustly dismiss pro-life arguments with the wand of "faith"--which they define as non-rational and subjective.

Frank sums up the current controversy this way: "At the end of the day, the abortion debate is about who and what we are and whether we can know it."

33 of 37 people found the following review helpful.

People are People no Matter How Small

By G. Passantino

Dr. Francis J. Beckwith's *Defending Life* is simply the best, most comprehensive, most logically sound examination of abortion & the meaning of personhood available in print today. Excellent summaries of the book are available elsewhere, so let me focus on some unique features.

First, Dr. Beckwith argues for a definition & moral value to humanity that provides a defense for innocent humans in a wide variety of circumstances, not just those who are tiny & preborn. The general philosophical arguments used here are helpful for evaluating human value among those in undeveloped, famine plagued regions of the world; among populations of hardened, committed career criminals; among those yet to be conceived several generations after our pollution-promoting public policies; & those who are physically and/or mentally disabled, etc.

Second, Dr. Beckwith treats abortion rights advocates with respect & honesty, not merely fairly representing their views & arguments, but even improving their arguments when he can & yet showing that even the best abortion rights arguments fatally undermine basic human rights based on the nature of humanity. A number of years ago, I role-played an abortion rights advocate in a public debate with Dr. Beckwith. He was concerned that his opponent be formidable & insightful, but he couldn't find an available true advocate he thought would do a credible enough job. I gave it my best shot (& Dr. Beckwith kindly said I was his toughest opponent to date), but Dr. Beckwith's arguments remained compelling & invincible. That generous respect & yet actual superiority is reflected in this book.

Third, Dr. Beckwith's sharp wit makes this book a serendipitous pleasure to read as well. Without demeaning his opponents or trivializing the issues, he is able to broach illustrations packed with humor & allude to cultural comedy to make telling points. As Dr. Beckwith's students will attest, he is nothing like the typical boring philosophy professor.

Fourth, this book provides such a wide spectrum of issues, arguments, & approaches that if you only have one book on the subject in your library, you should have this one -- even (or especially) if you are an abortion rights advocate.

Regardless of your familiarity with the subject or other volumes you might possess, you can't afford to miss getting & studying your own copy of *Defending Life*.

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