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Discerning the Roles of Reason and Emotion in Classroom Conversations about Abortion

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In my experience, students enter college classrooms believing that their academic success requires aligning with certain moral stances. This is especially the case when it comes to abortion. College campuses tend to nurture intractable positions on abortion, and students feel pressured *not* to critique the campus position, whether pro- or anti-abortion.

Thus, as we set out to cultivate reasoned reflection and civil conversation on Catholic campuses after the Dobbs decision, we must first acknowledge that overall, our students have not *experienced* such reflection or conversation— neither having witnessed it among faculty and invited guests nor participated in it themselves. As educators we have a responsibility to model and foster such experiences in our classrooms, with the goal that substantive discussions about abortion and the care for vulnerable women continue among students outside class. Two dimensions of the conversation that need a great deal of care and cultivation are the role of rationality and the role of emotion in high-stakes moral discussions.

That authentic conversations about abortion should be rational is not at all obvious to students. Students have not inherited a tradition of learning that values moral truth claims and the capacity of human reason to make or measure them. They might be able to work their way from a premise to a conclusion, but they despair upon reaching it, as though their deliberative capacity simply does not matter in the face of something more authoritative: an overwhelming cultural narrative, perhaps, or the force of their or someone else's emotions. As Jacques Maritain wrote in the 1960s, our world is "growing weary of reason and ideas. It keeps on using them because it cannot do without them, but only in order to make them tools for advertising techniques, and for any kind of sham justification for reliance on the elementary fears, reflexes, and competitions of bare existence."[1] Students, then, also need help navigating the role of emotion in a moral discussion,

[1] Jacques Maritain, *The Education of Man,* trans. Donald Gallagher and Idella Gallagher (New York: Doubleday, 1962), 100.

understanding the importance of its relationship to rationality and its limits.

Students need help parsing the different levels of discourse happening in conversations about abortion. They especially need to be able to identify when *philosophical discussion* about the human person is taking place. Students tend to categorize abortion arguments as scientific or religious in nature: any appeal to data or technical medical terminology is "scientific," while any non-empirical assertion or appeal to an idea is a "religious" or "personal" argument. Yet, science, philosophy, and theology are dimensions of human knowing that together give a full picture of reality in its complexity. Whether we call it metaphysics, moral philosophy, critical thinking, or just the work of reason, this is the milieu in which most abortion discussions take place, most of the time.

Here is one example of how I help students detect the presence of moral reasoning in appeals to science and religion. A few years ago, when Texas Senate Bill 8—also known as the Texas Heartbeat Act—was being deliberated, I asked my students to report on the various responses to the bill (mostly objections) they had heard.[2] One student reported that many women do not yet know that they are pregnant at six weeks of gestation, the time fetal cardiac activity is first detected. Another mentioned the problematic title of the bill: at six weeks, according to the bill's language, not a "heartbeat" is detected but, as the *Harvard Medical Student Review* put it, "just the electrical activity of cardiac myocytes—not a fully developed heart."[3]

To address the first objection, I asked my students to fill in the missing pieces of the argument. It is true that many women do not discover they are pregnant until more than six weeks after the beginning of gestation, but what does that *mean*? Women in Texas may not be able to obtain a legal abortion if they discover their pregnancy past six weeks of gestation. This is not a religious or a scientific objection, but a philosophical one; more precisely, an objection that makes certain assumptions about the role of knowing in action.

To address the second objection, I ask my student to consider what the terms "heartbeat" and "electrical activity of cardiac myocytes" imply. The rhetorical choices betray claims about personhood—another philosophical question. The term "heartbeat" reinforces the humanity of the unborn child, implicitly supporting his or her personhood and relying upon the application of metaphysical

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[2] Texas Heartbeat Act, 87th leg. R.S., Friday May 14, 2021, chap. 62, 2021 Tex. Gen. Laws.

[3] Natalia Eugene, Anna Kheyfets, and Mackenzie Bennett, "How the Texas Heartbeat Bill Will Affect Low-Income Women of Color Across the US: A Commentary," *Harvard Medical Student Review,* Issue 7 (August 2022): 27.

principles like formal causality to biology. The scientific terminology has the opposite effect, dehumanizing the unborn child and making its own metaphysical claims about continuity in human development. Yet, in the end both terms reference the same observable phenomenon: one side cannot claim "science" over against the other. I invite my students to recognize that from the perspective of Catholic social teaching, while these terms are being debated, the needs of the unborn child and the vulnerable mother are neglected, lost in rhetoric.

Attending to the "reason" in "reasoned reflection" is necessary for continuing and reshaping a civil conversation on abortion. Ignoring the role of moral reasoning does not make it go away: instead, its domain is overrun with arguments from emotion and experience. As Maritain said, human reason is distorted into a "sham justification for reliance on the elementary fears, reflexes, and competitions of bare existence."[4]

This is not to say that there is no place for emotion or experience in moral conversations. One of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s most powerful justifications for nonviolent protest in "A Letter from Birmingham Jail" draws effectively and dramatically on his experience of racism.[5] There is a place, too, for emotion and experience in conversations about abortion. Abortion has touched our students' lives. Students in our classrooms have had abortions. Students have chosen to carry babies to term and raise them at great personal cost. Yet, as educators, one of our responsibilities is to help students move beyond thinking merely with emotions and experience.

We can coach students to be curious about their own emotional reactions: What lies behind my strong reaction to this pro-life or pro-abortion claim? Does this compelling anecdote that supports a pro-abortion or a pro-life position justify my critique of a specific moral position or legislative action? Most importantly, what can my emotional reactions and the stories I allow to shape my position on abortion tell me about how I understand freedom and human dignity and purpose? My hope is that such questions can make conversations about abortion both more measured and more creative, allowing students to think outside the low horizons of the political positions into which they sometimes feel forced.

One of the most important parts of the Catholic intellectual tradition is the assertion that humans are rational beings capable of discovering the truth and freely choosing the good. We honor this when we help students recognize their own ability to think through complex moral issues. JM

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[4] Maritain, *The Education of Man,* 100.

[5] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in *Why We Can't Wait* (New York, Harper & Row, 1963), 77–100.

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