

Abortion: Issues and Controversies: A Freshman Seminar at Furman University

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ABSTRACT: This paper is a personal narrative about a freshman seminar on abortion, taught between 2008 and 2012, at Furman University. The seminar was multi-disciplinary in content and required readings in medicine, embryology, psychology, law, religion, feminism, and film. The paper reviews the process of developing the course and moving it through the faculty approval process as well as the experiences of professor and students in the classroom. Speculation on the impact of the course concludes the paper.

ABORTION IS AN OCTOPUS, lodged in the dark heart of civilization, an octopus whose tentacles extend in many directions. Years ago this image formed in my imagination against the background of my teaching as an art historian and my experiences with pro-life work. As I researched in preparation for a freshman seminar, first taught in the fall of 2008, on abortion, I found ample material for the course everywhere I looked. In the circle of human experience, the octopus's tentacles reach to the rim at virtually every point on the horizon.

Background

Until 2008, Furman University, a medium-sized liberal arts college in Greenville, S.C., had a curriculum whose general education requirements were, on the whole, traditional. In 2008, after a year-long effort at curriculum revision, the general education requirements changed significantly. Discipline-based requirements were replaced with methods-based requirements. Requirements in empirical studies were set instead of in science and social science, and requirements in textual analysis instead of English. These changes paralleled and

enabled the expansion of the methodologies of critical theory, post-colonialism, and gender in the curriculum. An institution with deep roots in the South Carolina Baptist world, Furman was slower than many colleges to follow the trajectory from the pursuit of knowledge grounded in objective reality and absolutes to the construction of “knowledge” on the basis of subjectivity, interests, methods, and the politics of power.

In company with one-third of the faculty, I voted against adopting the new curriculum, but I did see an opportunity in it that the old curriculum did not provide. This came in the form of the new curriculum’s program of First Year Seminars. These seminars were intended to use the passions of the Furman faculty for ideas and discovery to ignite the interests and passions of students.”¹

Design and Approval of the Course

The Administration and First Year Seminar Committee actively sought faculty to supply courses for this program. Faculty were encouraged to venture outside their disciplines into any subjects or topics about which they felt passionate. It occurred to me, passionate pro-lifer that I am, that I could develop a First Year Seminar on abortion, a course that could never have been fitted into the discipline of art history. I decided that my knowledge of the subject, relatively broad but limited in depth, was best suited to teaching the issue as a multi-disciplinary introduction. I compiled readings on biology, medicine, psychology, sociology, Supreme Court decisions, philosophy, religion, feminism, and film. I suspected that the campus climate would hardly be friendly to my endeavor. I first thought to entitle the course “Abortion: The Passions and the Reasons” but decided that the word “passion” (although it was pervasive in literature and discussions about the seminar program) might be too inflammatory. I settled on the more intellectualized title “Abortion: Issues and Controversies.” I wanted as much distance as possible between myself and passion when this course was considered by the First Year Seminar Committee and when it came

¹ Furman University, *First Year Seminar Guide 2013-2014*, p. 3, <http://www2.furman.edu/academics/fys/Pages/FirstYearSeminar.aspx>.

up for a vote at Faculty meeting.

In fact, the course easily passed through the First Year Seminar Committee (of which I was a member at the time) in the company of seminars with titles such as “Go to Hell: Exclusion and Damnation” and “The Mathematics of Games and Gambling.” Of the 120-some seminars proposed, mine was the only one on the topic of abortion.

The general faculty meeting was a different matter. Numerous seminars were up for approval at the faculty meeting in February of 2008. Mine was the only one that generated discussion. The meeting happened to be on Ash Wednesday, and so I had one black mark against me before the faculty meeting even began. Three main objections were voiced by three different faculty members. The first two concerned my qualifications. One colleague objected that as an art historian I was not qualified to teach the wide range of material in the proposal. Another said, in effect, that the course was really a philosophy course and that I should not be teaching it because I was not a philosopher. A third objection involved my pro-life views. I was known to be pro-life, said the critic, and would be biased in my presentation of the material. She was of the opinion that I should be allowed to teach the material only if I did so from a certain perspective. The first two objections were answered from the criteria for the First Year Seminar program. Faculty passions, not expertise, were supposed to be the primary drivers of content in these seminars. The third objection was answered from arguments for academic freedom. So the seminar was approved.

I have offered the seminar four times since 2008, each time with 10 to 12 students enrolled. The syllabus has been streamlined and revised in the course of these offerings, but it has not fundamentally changed. My text for the course is *The Abortion Controversy*,² a substantive anthology that considers abortion from a number of disciplinary perspectives. This was supplemented with much additional material from other sources.

² Louis P. Pojman and Francis J. Beckwith, *The Abortion Controversy: 25 Years After Roe v. Wade, A Reader*, 2nd Edition (Belmont CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1998).

The Students and the Professor

Furman's student body tends to be conservative, in part because the school's heritage is Baptist and in part because Furman still draws its student body primarily from the South. Usually about one-third of the students in the class identify as pro-choice to varying degrees and about two-thirds as pro-life. The brightest students are a little, but only a little, more likely to be pro-choice than are the other students in the class.

The very first question was whether, in the interests of minimizing student anxieties and encouraging free discussion, it was better to reveal my beliefs to the students or to conceal them. I have tried it both ways, and I really think what matters more than my opinions is my demeanor. Maintaining a low-key, friendly atmosphere, restating fairly and calmly the views students express, and responding to them with respectful comments and questions goes a long way towards encouraging discussion.

Content of the Course

I introduce the course with a short segment on logic, taken from Peter Kreeft's textbook *Socratic Logic*.³ Although logic is far too difficult and complex for the students to absorb as a method in the brief time that I can allot to it, my hope is that exposure to the subject gives them the awareness that reason as well as passion can be brought to bear on important issues. The past two times I have taught the course I have shown the film *Judgment at Nuremberg* early in the term. The film raises issues relevant to the debate on abortion, issues about the denial of evil and accountability for it, the deliberate killing of the innocent and helpless, and the monstrous consequences of the idea that the end justifies any and every means. For my students, World War II is very distant, and the equation between Hitler and evil is straightforward. The moral dimension of the issues is therefore clearer than when similar issues are embedded in the ambiguities and emotions of the present.

I considered many diverse factors in laying out the sequence of the topics. After the introductory unit, the course is organized, generally, to

³ Peter Kreeft, *Socratic Logic*, ed. Trent Dougherty, 2nd ed. (South Bend IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2005).

move from the concrete to the abstract, from the objective to the subjective, from cause to effect, from science to religion. In all units in which opinion is a factor, I try to include an equal number of pro-choice and pro-life voices. I end with film because it is a change of pace and because it synthesizes and integrates faith, reason, senses, and emotion.

Several class sessions are spent reviewing embryology and surgical and chemical abortion procedures. For these units we read chapters from a college-level embryology text and from a textbook written for medical students, entitled *A Clinician's Guide to Medical and Surgical Abortion*.⁴ In the unit on Supreme Court decisions we consider Blackmun's opinion and Rehnquist's dissent in *Roe v. Wade*, plus various commentaries on the case, including those of Catharine MacKinnon and Justice Ginsburg.⁵ I aspire to include *Gonzales v. Carhart* in this unit but that would crowd the agenda. *Roe* is plenty to digest.

Unit four on personhood and rights is mainly philosophical. In the organizational scenario that I have laid out, this unit should go at the end of the course, but I put it in the middle because I regard the philosophical issues as the core material. I want students to consider these issues after they have acquired some background but before they begin to tire of the term and turn all their attention to Thanksgiving and Christmas. The most difficult piece we read is Michael Tooley's essay "In Defense of Abortion and Infanticide."⁶ He lays out convoluted arguments, defines multiple complex principles, and includes a scenario

⁴ Maureen Paul et al., *A Clinician's Guide to Medical and Surgical Abortion* (New York NY: Churchill Livingstone, 1999).

⁵ Catharine MacKinnon, "Roe v. Wade: A Study in Male Ideology" in Pojman and Beckwith, *The Abortion Controversy*, pp. 95-104, reprinted from Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987). Ruth Bader Ginsburg, "Some Thoughts on Autonomy and Equality in Relation to *Roe v. Wade*," in Pojman and Beckwith, *The Abortion Controversy*, pp. 105-13, reprinted from *University of North Carolina Law Review* 63/2 (1985).

⁶ Michael Tooley, "In Defense of Abortion and Infanticide" in Pojman and Beckwith, *The Abortion Controversy*, pp. 209-33. Expanded version of Tooley's essay in *The Problem of Abortion*, ed. Joel Feinberg, 2nd ed. (Belmont CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1984).

constructed around injecting the brains of kittens with a magic potion that will make them rational.

The fifth unit is on the question of the effects of abortion, both psychological and physical. We read both women's testimonials and published studies by David Fergusson, Joel Brind, Angela Lanfranchi, the American Psychological Association, and the National Cancer Institutes.⁷

In the final unit, we view and discuss four films, two pro-life – *Bella* and *A Distant Thunder* – and two pro-choice – *Cider House Rules* and *Vera Drake*.

The Students' Experience

What do students learn in this course? Surprisingly, most of my students know very little about the basic facts of human development, and especially the fact that it proceeds after conception far more rapidly than one would suppose. Many are shocked to find that eight weeks after conception, before many abortionists will even perform a Dilation & Evacuation abortion, the story is no longer one of the gradual emergence of human form and function in an embryo but of growth in the size and weight of a formed, functioning fetus. Most students find the material on surgical and chemical abortion procedures revolting. They are horrified by the violence of Dilation & Evacuation, Dilation

⁷ David M. Fergusson, L. John Horwood, and Elizabeth M. Ridder, "Abortion in Young Women and Subsequent Mental Health," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 47/1 (2006): 16-24. Joel Brind, "The Abortion-Breast Cancer Connection," *Issues in Law and Medicine* 21/2 (2005): 109-35, reprinted from *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 5/2 (2005). Angela Lanfranchi, "The Science, Studies and Sociology of the Abortion Breast Cancer Link," *Issues in Law and Medicine* 21/2 (2005): 95-108, originally published in the *Research Bulletin*, vol. 18/2 (Spring 2005). American Psychological Association, *Task Force on Mental Health and Abortion: Report of the Task Force on Mental Health and Abortion* (Washington, D.C., 2008). See also <http://www.apa.org/pi/wpo/mental-health-abortion-report.pdf>. National Cancer Institute, "Cancer Facts: Abortion, Miscarriage, and Breast Cancer Risk," *Issues in Law and Medicine* 21/2 (2005): 159-60, reprinted from National Cancer Institute, *Cancer Facts: Abortion, Miscarriage, and Breast Cancer Risk*, date reviewed: 03/21/2003; Editorial changes made: 5/30/03; available at http://cis.nci.nih.gov/fact/3_75.htm, accessed 10/13/2005.

& Extraction, and the various induced labor abortions. Of these procedures they were almost totally ignorant.

Roe v. Wade is familiar to them by name. Some have even read parts of the decision prior to this seminar, but most have not. Most agree that the broad and fundamental right of privacy that Blackmun found in the U.S. Constitution is simply not there. Many agree with Ginsburg that the argument for abortion should have been based on equal protection rather than on the right of privacy.

They accept the simpler pro-life personhood arguments. Noonans's assertion, for instance, that any being is human if it is conceived by human parents, makes sense to them. Many students are strongly attracted to Gensler's Golden Rule argument against abortion. Schwarz's more complicated argument, that a person is anyone with either basic or latent inherent capacities to function as a person, does not gain as much traction with them. Even the most pro-choice students find Michael Tooley's piece absurd. They do not even attempt to answer his arguments or to refute his principles; they simply dismiss them.

Of all the positions that they find faulty, Catharine MacKinnon's view that in effect all sexual relations between men and women are rape, that privacy is simply the sphere in which men can rape women with impunity, and that, therefore, abortion-on-demand should of course be available – this argument is universally and vigorously rejected by pro-choice and pro-life students, by men and women. I cannot recall a single student who has accepted MacKinnon's argument. They also reject as a false analogy Judith Thomson's scenario in which a developing fetus in its mother's womb is likened to an unconscious violinist plugged, willy nilly, into a random passerby for nine months in order to use the passerby's kidneys.

Very few students have ever heard of the ABC link prior to the class. They have no idea that there is a link between abortion and breast cancer, to say nothing of abortion raising the likelihood of subsequent premature births, ectopic pregnancies, and many other serious problems. Many have only a vague notion that abortion may possibly cause a woman emotional distress. Like the information on abortion procedures, the information on risks has an immediate and powerful impact on them. They think women should know of the risks, especially the risks to physical health.

In the unit on film, *Bella* generally has the most impact. Students love the characters and story. Having dealt with so much horrifying subject matter and many oppressive attitudes, they are hungry for something upbeat and hopeful. They are generally put off by the surrealism of *A Distant Thunder*, which I like very much. They engage with the characters and the romance at the expense of the arguments in *Cider House*, and they almost completely overlook the very carefully crafted meta-narrative in *Vera Drake*.⁸

Conclusions

No dramatic conversions have happened in my class. I have refereed no fistfights or yelling matches. If student evaluations and their essays for the final exam are to be believed, the general drift of students who take the course is in the pro-life direction. This is not because they have accepted and internalized sophisticated arguments but because they have gained basic, factual knowledge about abortion procedures and about the risks of abortion and because they do not see realistic, plausible pro-choice arguments. Unconscious violinists, the bizarre proposition that all male-female sexual relations are rape, and fantasy scenarios featuring brain-injected kittens cannot compete with the reality that abortion is bloody violence or with the common sense of the Golden Rule. I have not hidden the convincing pro-choice arguments from them. There are none to hide. What then does the pro-choice position, as expressed by my students, hinge upon? I have no great insights, but I wonder if they are not deeply imprinted by a double helix, of which one strand is rugged individualism and the other a Nietzschean affirmation of the supremacy of will.

What have I learned? First, I was very surprised and somewhat disappointed that the course really hinges on facts, not philosophical arguments, as I had expended much time and energy in learning and

⁸ For an analysis and discussion of *Cider House Rules*, see Jeff Koloze, "Cinematic Treatment of Abortion: *Alfie* (1965) and *The Cider House Rules* (1999)" in *Life and Learning XVI: Proceedings of the Sixteenth University Faculty for Life Conference at Villanova University 2006*, ed. Joseph W. Koterski, S.J. (Washington, D.C.: University Faculty for Life, 2007), pp. 463-78.

digesting those arguments. Second, I learned that the abortion textbook has no pictures of fetuses. There are grainy transabdominal ultrasound images in which, with one or two exceptions, no embryo or fetus is readily identifiable.⁹ In drawings that illustrate the correct ways to manipulate instruments during surgical abortion procedures, the fetus is either absent or is depicted as a featureless bean. A number of photographs of abortion instruments are presented. Photographs of feathery tissue removed during abortions, some in color, are included, but photographs of aborted fetuses are absent. How can a textbook on abortion fail to illustrate the object of the procedure? Would a textbook on appendectomies or on the removal of brain tumors fail to include images of the appendix or the tumors? In this case, indeed, a picture is worth a thousand words, not in what it shows but in what it denies.

Finally, I come away with an eerie sense, not totally quantifiable, that abortion is unnatural. I almost feel sorry for abortionists. They are like fish trying with all their might to swim upstream in a mighty river. Human development is a seamless, vigorous, continuum in which abortion procedures slip and slide. None of the procedures is neat and tidy; in fact, all are messy. None is really fitted to its object; there is a sort of *ad hoc* element about all of them. All are difficult to do well, all entail risks that snowball in gravity as development proceeds apace. I can see that it is almost better, from the late term abortionist's perspective, to let the doggone thing be born, and then kill it.

And so I find myself staring into the dark, cavernous heart of the octopus, into which I hope that my seminar sheds a few rays of light.

⁹ See, for example, Paul et al., *A Clinician's Guide*, Figures 4-4 through 4-12, pp. 44-50. Figure 4-7, p. 45, depicts an ultrasound image in which the silhouette of an eight-week fetus is identifiably human. This is not, however, an image of an abortion procedure. Figure 10-3, p. 133, depicts a transabdominal ultrasound in which forceps in utero grasp the head of a fetus, but the image is so vague as to be unreadable without explanation.