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How we respect life is the over-riding moral issue

By *JESSE JACKSON*; *Right to Life News*, January 1977. This article is part of [no violence period](#).

The question of "life" is *The Question* of the 20th century. Race and poverty are dimensions of the life question, but discussions about abortion have brought the issue into focus in a much sharper way. How we will respect and understand the nature of life itself is the over-riding moral issue, not of the Black race, but of the human race.

The question of abortion confronts me in several different ways. First, although I do not profess to be a biologist, I have studied biology and know something about life from the point of view of the natural sciences. Second, I am a minister of the Gospel and therefore, feel that abortion has a religious and moral dimension that I must consider.

Third, I was born out of wedlock (and against the advice that my mother received from her doctor) and therefore abortion is a personal issue for me. From my perspective, human life is the highest good, the *summum bonum*. Human life itself is the highest human good and God is the supreme good because He is the giver of life. That is my philosophy. Everything I do proceeds from that religious and philosophical premise.

Life is the highest good and therefore you fight for life, using means consistent with that end. Life is the highest human good not on its own naturalistic merits, but because life is supernatural, a gift from God. Therefore, life is the highest human good because life is sacred. Biologically speaking, thousands of male sperms are ejaculated into the female reproductive tract during sexual intercourse, but only once in a while do the egg and sperm bring about fertilization. Some call that connection accidental, but I choose to call it providential. It takes three to make a baby: a man, a woman and the Holy Spirit.

I believe in family planning. I do not believe that families ought to have children, as some people did where I was growing up, by the dozens. I believe in methods of contraception -- prophylactics, pills, rhythm, etc. I believe in sex education. We ought to teach it in the home, the school, the church, and on the television. I think that if people are properly educated sexually they will appreciate the act and know its ultimate function, purpose and significance.

Only the name has changed

In the abortion debate one of the crucial questions is when does life begin. Anything growing is living. Therefore human life begins when the sperm and egg join and drop into the fallopian tube and the pulsation of life take place. From that point, life may be described differently (as an egg, embryo, fetus, baby, child, teenager, adult), but the essence is the same. The name has changed but the game remains the same.

Human beings cannot give or create life by themselves, it is really a gift from God. Therefore, one does not have the right to take away (through abortion) that which he does not have the ability to give.

Some argue, suppose the woman does not want to have the baby. They say the very fact that she does not want the baby means that the psychological damage to the child is reason enough to abort the baby'. I disagree. The solution to that problem is not to kill the innocent baby, but to deal with her values and her attitude toward life — that which has allowed her not to want the baby. Deal with the attitude that would allow her to take away that which she cannot give.

Some women argue that the man does not have the baby and will not be responsible for the baby after it is born, therefore it is all right to kill the baby. Again the logic is off. The premise is that the man is irresponsible.

If that is the problem, then deal with making him responsible. Deal with what you are dealing with, not with the weak, innocent and unprotected baby. The essence of Jesus' message dealt with this very problem -- the problem of the inner attitude and motivation of a person. "If in your heart . . ." was his central message. The actual abortion (effect) is merely the logical conclusion of a prior attitude (cause) that one has toward life itself. Deal with the cause not merely the effect when abortion is the issue.

Pleasure, pain and suffering

Some of the most dangerous arguments for abortion stem from popular judgments about life's ultimate meaning, but the logical conclusion of their position is never pursued. Some people may, unconsciously, operate their lives as if pleasure is life's highest good, and pain and suffering man's greatest enemy. That position, if followed to its logical conclusion, means that that which prohibits pleasure should be done away with by whatever means are necessary. By the same rationale, whatever means are necessary should be used to prevent suffering and pain. My position is not to negate pleasure nor elevate suffering, but merely to argue against their being elevated to an ultimate end of life. Because if they are so elevated, anything, including murder and genocide, can be carried out in their name,

Often people who analyze and operate in the public sphere (some sociologists, doctors, politicians, etc.) are especially prone to argue in these

ways. Sociologists argue for - population control on the basis of a shortage of housing, food, space, etc. I raise two issues at this point: (1) It is strange that they choose to start talking about population control at the same time that Black people in America and people of color around the world are demanding their rightful place as human citizens and their rightful share of the material wealth in the world. (2) People of color are for the most part powerless with regard to decisions made about population control. Given the history of people of color in the modern world we have no reason to assume that whites are going to look out for our best interests.

Politicians argue for abortion largely because they do not want to spend the necessary money to feed, clothe and educate more people. Here arguments for in-convenience and economic savings take precedence over arguments for human value and human life. I read recently where a politician from New York was justifying abortion because they had prevented 10,000 welfare babies from being born and saved the state \$15 million. In my mind serious moral questions arise when politicians are willing to pay welfare mothers between \$300 to \$1000 to have an abortion, but will not pay \$30 for a hot school lunch program to the already born children of these same mothers.

I think the economic objections are not valid today because we are confronted with a whole new economic problem. The basic and historic economic problem has been the inability to feed everyone in the world even if the will were there to do so. They could not produce enough to do the job even if they wanted to. An agrarian and disconnected world did not possess the ability to solve the basic economic problem. That was tragic, but hardly morally reprehensible. Today, however, we do not have the same economic problem. Our world is basically urban, industrial, interconnected, and technological so that we now, generally speaking, have the ability to feed the peoples of the world but lack the political and economic will to do so. That would require basic shifts of economic and political power in the world and, we are not willing to pay that price -- the price of justice. The problem now is not the ability to produce but the ability to distribute justly.

Psychiatrists, social workers and doctors often argue for abortion on the basis that the child will grow up mentally and emotionally scared. But who of us is complete? If incompleteness were the criteria for taking life we would all be dead. If you can justify abortion on the basis of emotional incompleteness then your logic could also lead you to killing for other forms of incompleteness -- blindness, crippleness, old age.

Life is public and universal

There are those who argue that the right to privacy is of higher order than the right to life. I do not share that view. I believe that life is not private,

but rather it is public and universal. If one accepts the position that life is private, and therefore you have the right to do with it as you please, one must also accept the conclusion of that logic. That was the premise of slavery. You could not protest the existence or treatment of slaves on the plantation because that was private and therefore outside of your right to concerned.

Another area that concerns me greatly, namely because I know how it has been used with regard to race, is the psycholinguistics involved in this whole issue of abortion. If something can be dehumanized through the rhetoric used to describe it, then the major battle has been won. So when American soldiers can drop bombs on Vietnam and melt the faces and hands of children into a hunk of rolling protoplasm and in their minds say they have not maimed or killed a fellow human being something terribly wrong and sick has gone on in that mind. That is why the Constitution called us three-fifths human and then whites further dehumanized us by calling us "niggers." It was part of the dehumanizing process. The first step was to distort the image of us as human beings in order to justify that which they wanted to do and not even feel like they had done anything wrong. Those advocates of taking life prior to birth do not call it killing or murder; they call it abortion. They further never talk about aborting a baby because that would imply something human. Rather they talk about aborting the fetus. Fetus sounds less than human and therefore can be justified.

In conclusion, even if one does take life by aborting the baby, as a minister of Jesus Christ I must also inform and-or remind you that there is a doctrine of forgiveness. The God I serve is a forgiving God. The men who killed President John F. Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. can be forgiven. Everyone can come to the mercy seat and find forgiveness and acceptance. But, and this may be the essence of my argument, suppose one is so hard-hearted and so in-different to life until he assumes that there is nothing for which to be forgiven. What happens to the mind of a person, and the moral fabric of a nation, that accepts the aborting of the life of a baby without a pang of conscience? What kind of a person, and what kind of a society will we have 20 years hence if life can be taken so casually?

It is that question, the question of our attitude, our value system, and our mind-set with regard to the nature and worth of life itself that is the central question confronting mankind. Failure to answer that question affirmatively may leave us with a hell right here on earth.

Postscript: Though Jackson's view as expressed here is consistent, Jackson himself was not -- later reversing himself for a chance at the Democratic nomination for president, as [Colman McCarthy](#) narrates.

