

Beyond the Abortion Wars

A Way Forward for a New Generation

Charles C. Camosy

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Introduction: Is There Anything Left to Say?

I just searched for “abortion” in Google books — and got 7,270,000 results. This number does not include the innumerable magazine articles, blog posts, pamphlets, newspaper stories, and editorials that have been written on this subject. Could there *really* be anything else left to say? And besides, isn’t abortion just one of those polarizing, intractable issues that is useless to talk about? Most people are stubbornly dug into their positions and will almost certainly not change their minds; so the only thing that is likely to come from engaging in a discussion on the topic is an uncomfortable and unhelpful confrontation. It is the kind of issue that can divide families and strain friendships. In a *Wall Street Journal* editorial that was written just after the 2013 verdict against abortion-provider Kermit Gosnell, Dan Henninger wrote: “No other public policy has divided the people of the United States for so long and so deeply. Abortion is America’s second civil war.”¹

To get a taste of the how deep the division and polarization is in some quarters, here are four particularly telling examples that I have selected from the innumerable stories that could have made the same point:

- In March 2013, the student government association at Johns Hopkins University denied a local pro-life student group official club status. They claimed that being pro-life violated their harassment policy, and they directly compared pro-life students to white supremacists.²
- In March 2010, pro-life Democrat Congressman Bart Stupak, who had just led the charge to add substantial pro-life provisions to the Affordable Care Act, was mocked as a “baby killer” by his Republican opponents because they believed that the bill covered the use of the “morning-after” pill.³

- In July 2012, the best-selling author and award-winning journalist Caitlin Moran appeared on *The Cycle* on MSNBC and claimed that her decision to have an abortion was “quite easy,” much like decisions she made about coloring her hair.⁴
- In May 2012, Bishop Daniel Jenky of Peoria, Illinois, cited President Obama’s “radical pro-abortion agenda” as a reason to compare his path to that of Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin.⁵

If this is the pathetic state of the debate — if we refuse to acknowledge complexity and nuance — then what is the point of engaging in it? It seems to be governed, not by careful and open presentations of arguments and evidence, but by out-of-control identity politics. Not to add fuel to an already roaring fire, but don’t the arguments also usually divide right along religious and gender lines? Isn’t it the case that Christian (and particularly Catholic) men and conservatives are going to be pro-life, while women and (particularly secular) liberals are going to be pro-choice, and there just isn’t much anyone can do about it?

Beyond the Conventional Wisdom

Many people hold something like the view I just described. As a result, even those who care deeply about abortion are sometimes fatigued, resigned, and simply don’t want to talk about it anymore. I get something like this view from dozens of my students every semester. I get it from members of the media during interviews. I get it from audience members attending my public lectures. I get it from my fellow academics. It is a reasonable view to hold, and I sometimes feel pulled in that direction. But it is not my view.

While it is true that much has been written about abortion, it turns out that only a tiny minority of pieces are actually worth reading. Most authors have already decided what the answer is before engaging the evidence and arguments, and they use empty rhetoric in an attempt to “win” and impose a particular point of view. Very few pieces are even aware of what their opponents are actually arguing, much less engaging it in a fair and careful way. The result is confusion and mischaracterization, which, in turn, leads to caricatures and stereotypes; this, in turn, leads to polarization and disengagement. Pro-choicers are supposedly “pro-abortion” and “anti-life.” But most women who have abortions already have chil-

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dren, an odd place to be for those who are anti-life. Furthermore, a clear majority of pro-choice people I know are personally opposed to abortion (and often very strongly opposed) but struggle to find a workable way to use government to limit abortion access without imposing huge and medically dangerous burdens on women. Pro-lifers, on the other hand, are supposedly “anti-freedom” and “anti-women,” but this is complicated by the fact that women are more likely than men to describe abortion as morally wrong. Indeed, women often see far more clearly than do men how the legal choice to have an abortion can push them into situations where they are anything but truly free. As we will see in chapter 5 of this book, men are often at the center of the coercion, so it is not difficult to understand why men support a “woman’s right to choose” at higher levels than do women.

Therefore, one important reason we need a new book about abortion is because (with a few significant exceptions, several of which are cited in this book) most of what is being written just isn’t very good. But there is another important reason: especially with the rise of the “Millennials” and Hispanics in the United States, abortion-related views and laws are in the process of changing. I’ll cite the polls that support this claim in the next chapter, and they will show that while most Americans want to keep some abortions legal, a record low number of people describe themselves as pro-choice. Millennials are leading the charge: while trending in favor of gay marriage, they are also trending pro-life, especially when compared to Generation X and the Baby Boomers when they were young. While there seems to be very little support for totally banning abortion, the overwhelming majority of laws being passed in several states have been restricting abortion in significant ways. Especially when we project how things will look given our demographic shifts over the next decade, the question to ask is not “Will our national public policy on abortion change?” but “What will the coming change look like?” I wrote this book, in part, as an attempt to wrestle with this question.

One of this book’s central arguments is that confusion and polarization, which feed and build on each other (especially with ratings- and hits-driven media coverage highlighting extreme views), have created the *illusion* that we have a hopeless stalemate in the abortion debate. By attempting to unpack the complexity and confusion, and also taking time to understand the major positions in the debate, I will try to show that a majority of Americans actually agree about broad ideas with respect to abortion morality and law. Though our public debates are often dominated

by the extreme and simplistic positions, the vast majority of Americans have fairly complex and moderate views about abortion. I will propose a new public policy that is not only consistent with the beliefs of this broad majority of Americans, but one that will attract even more support over time as Millennials and Hispanics continue to take their rightful places of power in our culture. Before getting to the policy proposal, however, I will spend some time unpacking the complexity of the abortion issue itself and show that my proposal is supported not only by public opinion but by the best ideas and arguments about abortion.

The Complex Reasons Women Have Abortions

It is no secret that popular media have a real struggle communicating complexity. Thus they struggle not only to accurately describe what Americans think about abortion, but also the complex reasons many women have abortions. People like Caitlin Moran can go on MSNBC and compare the decision to have an abortion with coloring their hair, but the reality for most women is far messier and cannot be captured by a headline or Tweet. Though there are obviously exceptions to the rule, social-science data indicate that women who have abortions are subject to a number of coercive forces, and their stories often pulse with a sense of brokenness and tragedy.

Consider, for instance, the terrible story of a graduate student named Charlotte Coursier.⁶ Just getting over a sexual relationship with a university professor, she became pregnant (despite using contraception) with her next boyfriend. This young man then informed Charlotte that he was “not ready to be a father” and would support her decision to terminate her pregnancy. Despite canceling her first appointment, she eventually went through with the abortion. She was depressed for weeks after the procedure, which she described as “murdering her child.” The professor with whom she had had the previous relationship then reentered the picture, sending her harassing emails, which caused her boyfriend to end the relationship. Devastated about both her abortion and breakup, Charlotte hanged herself.

This story is tragic on so many levels, but it demonstrates the complexity, brokenness, and tragedy that often accompany a woman’s choice to have an abortion. A critic may wonder aloud whether I’ve cherry-picked a single story to make a point, and it is true that one story all by itself shows virtually nothing. But as you read this book, please take note of the

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number of times (particularly in the chapter on abortion and women) I cite statistics showing that this story — while on the dramatic end of the spectrum — reveals many important things about why many women have abortions. Furthermore, consider that *New York* magazine ran a 2013 feature in which they told similar stories of women who have had abortions.⁷ Here are two representative examples:

Heather, 32

Tennessee, 2011 and 2013

I already had two daughters. Neither was planned, and it never, ever, occurred to me to terminate those pregnancies. I was brought up with a very religious background. Now I've had two abortions, and if my family knew, my relationship with my family would be gone. My first was two years ago. My husband and I were having financial problems and were considering separating. I just had to shut my conscience down. The doctor was grotesque. He whistled show tunes. I could hear the vacuum sucking out the fetus alongside his whistling. When I hear show tunes now, I shudder. Later, he lost his license. A few months ago, I got pregnant again. My in-laws have been helping us out financially, so we have no choice but to involve them in our decisions. They gave us \$500 cash to bring to the clinic. I felt very forced. I felt like I was required to have an abortion to provide for my current family. Money help is a manipulation. I'm crazy in love with my daughters — imagine if I did that to them? It's almost too much to open the door of guilt and shame because it'll all overcome me. In the waiting room, there was a dead silence that's hard to describe. Everyone was holding in their emotions to a heartbreaking degree. Truly pro-life people should go light on the judgment, because shame motivates abortions.

Madeline, 18

Minnesota, 2012

I didn't think I was ready for sex, but my boyfriend pushed it. Rape feels too strong, but it wasn't really consensual. I didn't think about the whole condom thing. I was going to a Catholic high school, and in health class we never talked about sex. The scariest part of the whole experience was not having anyone to share it with. I was in AP classes and couldn't concentrate. I'd look around and think, *No one knows*. At night I'd think, *What if I wait too long and then suddenly have this baby?* I tried to plan out telling my parents, but my mom's religious

views scared me. I read on the Internet that minors can get a judicial bypass, but I was nervous it would take a long time — when I lay down and sucked in, there was a little bump on my tummy. Finally, I got up the courage to tell them. Both my parents took me. It’s a two-day process. I was at twenty weeks, just a few days away from being too late. During the ultrasound, the technician told me how big the head was — it was the most scaring thing. The next day, the procedure took fifteen minutes. I slept for the rest of the day. I was grateful my parents were there. It cost about \$2,000, so I definitely couldn’t have done it without them. I feel bad that it was so far along developed. In my government class, we spent a whole week on abortion. It was awful.

Most of our public discussion of abortion focuses on a woman’s “choice” or “decision.” But any honest and informed attempt to discuss the issue must explore the various ways women are pressured into having abortions. Individuals like boyfriends, parents, and bosses are coercive, to be sure, but the very *social structures* of most of the developed world also push women to have abortions. And our current discussion of abortion needs to be far more aware of this fact.

The Place of Religion and Politics

I’m a Catholic theologian. Many infer from this that I am “conservative” on abortion and uncritically “pro-life.” This inference is part of the media-driven polarized discourse I referred to above, but it simply does not reflect reality. American Catholics overall aren’t much different on abortion than the rest of the population. They describe themselves as “pro-choice” (and even have abortions themselves) at a rate similar to the rest of the population at large.⁸ And anyone who is familiar with academic theology and religious studies at major universities knows that the consensus and energy is actually directed against “pro-lifers.” In my experience, a clear majority of (especially senior) academic theologians need little encouragement to voice their skepticism of the pro-life movement and pro-life activism. Furthermore, most nationally prominent academic theologians and scholars of religion are anything but conservative. While a few refuse to use secular political categories, most would not hesitate to identify as somewhere on the “liberal” spectrum. While I do believe that the argument I put forward in this book is consistent with defined Catholic doctrine, I certainly did

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not arrive at it uncritically, and I do make the argument in this book in the face of significant social and professional pressure to take a position more in line with “pro-choice” academic orthodoxy.

The focus on “religion” in our discussion of abortion is everywhere, and most often in very unhelpful ways. For instance, a significant number of pro-lifers will simply say something about how “the Bible says” abortion is murder, as if this is supposed to count as an argument in our public sphere. For starters, the Bible says no such thing. But even if it did, it is unclear how this will convince non-Christians or impact public policy in a secular country that promotes freedom of religion. On the other side, some pro-choicers wish to reduce the pro-life position merely to someone’s private “religious opinion,” which has no business being imposed on others. But this fails to account for the many arguments against abortion that are not dependent on explicitly religious claims. This book is one of them. I’m putting forth an argument that is capable (at least in principle) of convincing those of any faith or no faith.

Furthermore, whatever one believes about the central issues in the abortion debate (the nature of the human person, the nature of human rights, the nature of women’s reproductive rights, what counts as wrongful killing, the role of the law, etc.), one must always begin with basic principles that are not based on science or other evidence. These foundational principles just “grab” or “claim” you as being true based on what I would call “faith” — but what others might call something like “intuition.” If you are a utilitarian, for instance, you have faith in at least two foundational doctrines: (1) “ethical behavior requires producing the best outcomes”; and (2) when measuring these outcomes, “one counts as one and none more than one.” If you are an American neoconservative, your faith lies in the fundamental goodness of the ideas present in the founding documents of the United States, and you believe that they should be energetically exported to other parts of the world. If you are a humanist, you have faith in the idea that all human persons have a special dignity, which requires that we treat them equally. Foundational first principles in the abortion debate are hardly limited to those who are explicitly religious. All participants in these debates bring faith claims to the table. As we will see in chapter 4, religious people should not receive special discrimination just because they are explicit and up-front about their faith claims.

Interestingly, when push comes to shove, it seems that the faith claims and intuitions of one’s *political party* generally trump those of one’s *religion*. According to University of Notre Dame social scientist David

Campbell, “For many but not all Americans, when they’re faced with this choice between their politics and religion, they hold fast to their politics and switch religion, or more often switch out of their religion.”⁹ More often than religion, it is secular politics that drives the abortion debate, even in its views of those who identify as religious people. It is hardly surprising, then, that Catholics have views about abortion that are similar to those of the rest of the population at large. It is often their secular political values — and not those of their religion — that are actually running the show.

But for reasons we will explore in the next chapter, American secular politics is confused and incoherent, particularly when it comes to abortion. Perhaps due to that confusion, the final candidates for the 2012 presidential election did their best to avoid the issue. Mitt Romney, the former pro-choice governor of Massachusetts who ran as a pro-life presidential candidate, said virtually nothing about abortion during the campaign. If anything, he sent pro-choice signals, particularly when he told the *Des Moines Register*, “There’s no legislation with regard to abortion that I’m familiar with that would become part of my agenda.”¹⁰ Even in victory, and despite huge pro-life legislative gains across the country in recent years, Obama and the Democrats sent few signals that they have any intention of advancing an agenda that involves abortion rights.

Somewhat ironically — given that Republicans are supposedly the pro-life party — the same cannot be said of Republicans. CNN’s Republican analyst Alex Castellanos, in a 2012 election postmortem, chided his fellow conservatives for foolishly embracing big government on “social issues.”¹¹ In his own postelection analysis, John McCain said that conservatives should “leave [abortion] alone.”¹² In a *Washington Post* op-ed, a former member of the Reagan administration said that, “as for morality, our party should live it, not legislate it.”¹³ Just as this book was about to go to press, the Nevada state Republican Party explicitly dropped pro-life language from their platform.¹⁴ The sentiment is picking up so much momentum that groups like GOP Choice have new openings. In applying what they understand to be conservative principles to abortion-related issues, they make the following claims:¹⁵

- Individuals and families have the right to unfettered access to reproductive choices, from education to abstinence, contraception, motherhood, adoption, and safe legal abortion.
- There is nothing more fiscally conservative than the proven cost-savings of preventative health policies and initiatives.

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- Choice is not a political issue and the government should not be in the business of legislating private behavior or personal medical decisions.

These arguments must puzzle pro-lifers who have hitched their wagon to the Republican political machine, but it is difficult to deny the consistency of the group's reasoning. It is baffling that Republicans, the party of government staying out of the private lives of individuals, have been so energetically standing for big government regulation of some of the most personal choices that one can imagine.

On the other hand, it is equally mystifying that Democrats, the party that claims to advocate the use of government power in the interest of justice for the most vulnerable, can engage in sloganeering about private "choices" without considering how vulnerable populations on the margins might be hurt by those choices. When it comes to abortion, pro-choice liberals reverse course and become suspicious of government intervention into the private lives and choices of individuals. (For anyone wanting an important and detailed history of how this strange situation came to be, the important work of William Saletan is absolutely essential.¹⁶) They must have difficult relationships with groups like Democrats for Life, Feminists for Life, Latinos for Life, The Radiance Foundation (one of several African-American pro-life groups), Pro-Life Pagans, and the Pro-Life Alliance of Gays and Lesbians. But much like GOP Choice, it is not difficult to understand their logic. Given that they are interested first in nonviolence and social justice for the vulnerable, they are less likely to use the language of "freedom" and "privacy" and "autonomy" that is typical of the pro-choice movement. Perhaps not surprisingly in light of these tensions, a 2011 Gallup poll found that 27 percent of Democrats describe themselves as pro-life, and even 44 percent claimed that abortion should be legal in "few or no circumstances," this while 28 percent of Republicans describe themselves as pro-choice, and 63 percent claim that abortion should remain legal.¹⁷

Speaking about Abortion

How we choose to speak about abortion is almost as important as the ideas and arguments we put forward. Certain words are fair, are precise, and they invite honest and open debate, while others are unfair and imprecise, close off serious conversation, and even invite an aggressive and

defensive response. I've learned this (sometimes the hard way) in previous attempts to build common ground among those who disagree about abortion. In 2010, for instance, I served as the founding member of an organizing committee for an international conference at Princeton University, which brought some of the best minds in the English-speaking world together to find "new ways to think and speak about abortion."¹⁸ I have also developed an important working relationship — and even friendship — with Peter Singer, perhaps the world's best-known living philosopher and a supporter not only of the choice for abortion but even infanticide. In part because we've taken the time to have careful arguments (for each of the last three fall semesters he has invited me to have an abortion debate in front of three hundred-plus undergraduates in his "Practical Ethics" course at Princeton), we have discovered that our disagreement about abortion — though deep — is actually about only one or two fairly narrow issues.¹⁹

I have developed a similar relationship with a feminist reproductive-justice activist whom I met through the Princeton conference. Again, in part because we chose our words carefully and respectfully, we discovered huge areas of common ground amidst the issues on which we disagree. In one case, she and I were able to cooperate in bringing together a group of (largely pro-life) theologians to work together with (largely pro-choice) reproductive-justice advocates in filing an amicus brief in a terrible case involving an immigrant woman who was shackled while in labor.²⁰ The goal of dramatically changing the social structures of our culture so that pregnant women are given the respect and resources necessary to keep their children is one that people on multiple sides of the abortion debates should have in common.

So let's get to the point: How should we speak about abortion? The answer to this question is important not only for our public discourse going forward, but also for the words I will use in this book. Some have objected to my use of the term "prenatal child" in previous books because it implies that the fetus has a high moral value — a value that they reject. They point out that virtually no one uses this term to refer to the "fetus," and that we should use the scientifically accepted term that is without bias. But others object to using the term "fetus" precisely because of its artificial and cold nature. They point out that in virtually no other context do we use the scientific language — even in the doctor's office. When an OB-GYN physician gives a pregnant woman an update, she doesn't say, "Your fetus is doing great." She says, "Your baby is doing great." Similarly, a pregnant

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woman never says, “Honey, the fetus kicked me!” She says, “Honey, the baby kicked me!” And no one, of course, has ever heard of a “fetus bump.” A pregnant woman has a “baby bump.”

While we must admit that pro-lifers sometimes use the term “baby” in the abortion debate as a calculated rhetorical strategy to raise awareness about the value of the child, those who are pro-choice sometimes use the word “fetus” with precisely the opposite goal in mind. It is easier to connect to the value of a “child” and more difficult to connect to the value of a “fetus.” Perhaps this is why some pro-choice-leaning media use the term “fetus” in very odd situations. For instance, in a case where a woman was discovered to have given birth to a child and put the dead body in a bag, *CBS News* ran the following headline: “Shoplifting Suspect Found with Dead Fetus in Bag.”²¹ Not long after this story, a baby was found on a conveyor belt at a laundry facility, and the UPI headline was, “Remains of Fetus Found at Illinois Laundry.”²² Bizarre, no doubt, but this is the craziness that comes with the words we use in the abortion debate.

I have asked hundreds of my medical ethics students which word we should use in order to be fair and precise. We’ve spent hours arguing about it. But in part because we want to do justice to the concerns of all participants, I’ve yet to have a class that has agreed on a word to use. My compromise solution in class has been to sometimes use the word “fetus” and sometimes use the word “prenatal child,” and this will be my practice throughout this book as well.

In speaking about abortion, as in other areas of life that involve complexity, we should avoid simplistic and binary language. Not only is it wildly imprecise and irresponsible to operate as if complex problems have only two possible answers, but it also entrenches opposition to “the other side” into the very framework of the debate. Let’s take “pro-life vs. pro-choice” as an obvious binary example given that we have already seen some of the problems with this way of thinking. If I call myself pro-life in the context of the abortion debate, it follows that my pro-choice opponent is *not* pro-life. But, as a matter of fact, this is often not the case. Most pro-choice people favor protecting some prenatal children (especially later in pregnancy); and they often hold pro-choice views, not because they don’t respect life, but because they don’t think the law can protect the fetus without seriously threatening the rights of the mother. Some advocates for reproductive justice, though they generally favor broad abortion rights, are working to reduce the demand for abortion.

On the other hand, those who call themselves pro-choice are im-

plying that their opponents are against choice. But this is problematic as well. Most pro-lifers favor women having the legal right to choose abortion (especially when it does not aim at the death of the fetus) in several situations, including when their lives are threatened and when they have been raped. Furthermore, as mentioned above, many people are pro-life not because they want to limit women's freedom but because they think legalized abortion has coerced many millions of women into having unwanted abortions. They are suspicious of abortion rights as something that, paradoxically, limit women's freedom.

So while the terms "pro-life" and "pro-choice" sometimes stand for something in our culture, I believe this language overall hides and distorts more than it reveals. Its imprecision leads good people to imagine themselves opposed to others with whom they actually share much common ground. It is thus unsurprising that the Public Religion Research Institute discovered the following in a 2011 poll:

Seven-in-ten Americans say the term "pro-choice" describes them somewhat or very well, and nearly two-thirds simultaneously say the term "pro-life" describes them somewhat or very well. This overlapping identity is present in virtually every demographic group.²³

I have used the terms "pro-life" and "pro-choice" several times in this book already, and I will continue to use them, but I will now use quotation marks to indicate the imprecise nature of the terms. Sometimes, at least if we want to avoid awkward ways of speaking and writing, we must use the lazy binaries that we would otherwise reject. But if and when we use them, we should be very aware of their limitations and dangers.

Two other binaries that we need to be careful about when we speak of abortion are "religious/secular" and "liberal/conservative." For starters, we should be careful about our culture's tendencies to lump all three of these binaries into a kind of "super binary." We imagine that on one side of the abortion debate are "pro-life" religious conservatives and on the other side there are "pro-choice" secular liberals. But again, these political binaries set people against each other by their very nature and hide more than they reveal. It causes our culture to miss the fact that many liberals consider themselves broadly against abortion, while many conservatives prefer to see government stay out of the private lives of pregnant women. We also saw above that plenty of religious people are "pro-choice" while many secularists are "pro-life." The issues about which people disagree in

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the abortion debate are simply too complex to be captured by these kinds of lazy and imprecise binaries. And as we shall see shortly, our political and religious social structures are changing so that even the conventional wisdom will soon become outdated.

Here are a few more quick suggestions for speaking and thinking about abortion. I propose them both for our broader public discussion and as rules to which I will hold myself accountable in making the argument of this book.

- *Humility.* We are finite, flawed beings with a history of making serious mistakes — especially when it comes to complex and emotional subjects like this one. We need to enter into abortion discussions and arguments with this at the very front of our minds, reserving the right to change our mind when confronted with new evidence and ideas.
- *Solidarity with our conversation partners.* This involves active listening, presuming that one has something to learn, and (if possible) getting to know them personally. Never dismiss another’s ideas because of their gender, race, class, sexual orientation, or social location. Similarly, never reduce them to what you suspect are their “secret personal motivations.” Instead, give your conversation partners the courtesy of carefully responding to the actual idea or argument that they are offering for your consideration, especially if you are calling the idea or argument into question.
- *Avoiding dismissive words and phrases that erect fences.* It might feel good to score rhetorical points and get high fives from those on “your side,” but doing so is one of the major contributors to our polarized discussion. Let us simply stop using words and phrases like “radical feminist,” “war on women,” “abortionist,” “anti-woman,” “heretic,” “anti-science,” “anti-life,” “anti-choice,” “pro-abortion,” and so on. Instead, we should use language that engages and draws our conversation partners into a fruitful discussion of ideas.
- *Leading with what we are for instead of what we are against.* Not only is this the best way to make a convincing case for the view we currently hold, but it dramatically lessens the defensiveness of those we are “against.” This practice also often reveals that many of us are ultimately after very similar things (such as women being able to choose to keep their baby), and we simply need to be able to talk in an open and coherent way about the best plan for getting there.

This section may have felt like I'm asking people to tiptoe around difficult issues in a politically correct way. Far from it. What I'm doing in this book — and what I'm asking people to do in the abortion discussion generally — is to *go directly after the most difficult issues*. That is the only way forward. But if we do this, it means we need to think and speak about these difficult issues fairly, precisely, and in ways that invite fruitful and honest engagement. The stakes are so high (1.2 million prenatal children aborted each year for “pro-lifers,” and a fundamental threat to hard-won women's rights for “pro-choicers”) that we must choose our language carefully if we are to have the kind of constructive engagement necessary to move forward.

My Plan for This Book

In the first chapter, I will build the case for many of the points made here in the introduction. I will discuss some of the history of the abortion debate, how it ended up in the strange place it is today in the United States, and the hopeful signs for a more coherent and fruitful way forward. My hope is that this will convince readers that we are on the verge of a new moment in the abortion debate, and that it leaves us more open to rethinking the status quo and to the arguments that come later in the book.

Having shown some of the historical reasons the debate over abortion got so confused, I will spend the next several chapters unpacking the complexity of the debate by pulling each major issue out of the confusing mess and addressing it on its own terms — from the moral status of the fetus, to questions about whether it is ever acceptable to kill (or refuse to aid) the prenatal child, to a specific consideration of abortion rights and women's freedom, and whether anything about the moral questions can or should be reflected in law or other public policy.

Finally, based on both public opinion and moral conclusions, I will propose a new public policy on abortion: the Mother and Prenatal Child Protection Act. This proposal will not only reflect the broad views of a solid majority of Americans (both “pro-life” and “pro-choice”), it will also be consistent with currently defined Catholic doctrine.²⁴ I will conclude the book by suggesting some values and strategies to help our American culture reimagine the ways we think and speak about abortion — so that we can move forward together.

The path I've laid out is a difficult one. Entrenched political and me-

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dia/corporate interests will strongly resist this kind of shift. Many are too embedded in the fight to imagine it any other way, and sometimes their very identity is strongly connected to the dysfunctional way we currently think and speak about abortion. If we are honest, we must admit that our most influential political parties, interest groups, and media organizations have something close to a need to see abortion through the old binary and polarized lenses. How else will they frighten their donor base into giving them money and turning out to vote each election cycle? How else will they produce television ratings and website hits?

But in the chapter that follows, I argue that this old way of thinking about abortion is confused, unsustainable, and actually the result of historical accident. And oh yes, it's on the way out.