Part II

The Morality of Abortion
The Moral Meaning of Abortion

The reason abortion is such an irritable issue in American public discussion is that the very act — the surgical procedure itself and the decision that sets the act in motion, has important and often severe consequences at nearly every level of human experience. It touches on the meaning of motherhood and of human obligation, the meaning of sexual intimacy and the structure of family life, the meaning of human life itself. Regardless of one’s position on the abortion issue, everyone finally agrees that struggle over abortion takes us to the core of what our society is and will be.

There are those who would try to dismiss the significance of abortion, but even they admit to making implicit judgements about the rightness and wrongness of the act. In the survey, for example, of those who said that they knew someone who had had an abortion, roughly half (46%) said it was the right thing to do in that particular case and the other half (43%) said it was the wrong thing to do. As one might expect, the views differed sharply and in predictable ways according to how they position themselves on the abortion issue. While this raises the question of ethics concretely, the ethical issue quickly becomes much more complicated.

It is the task of this chapter to begin to explore the subtleties and complexities of public opinion as it bears on the morality of abortion. The focus of our inquiry in this chapter is summarized by two questions: what is the philosophical and ethical significance that people impute to the act of abortion? And, how do they come to this view?

Findings:

1. The Matter of “Murder”

Perhaps one of the reasons why the debate over abortion is polarized in America is that polarizing language is used. Pro-Life advocates believe abortion is “murder,” while Pro-Choice advocates do not.

Survey research has only solidified this impression by asking simplistic “either-or” questions. A CBS/New York Times poll conducted in April, 1989 posed the issue this way — “Is abortion murder? Yes? or No?” — and found that slightly more Americans said yes it is (48%) than no it isn’t (40%). Similarly, a Los Angeles Times poll of women conducted one month earlier that year found the same general pattern but slightly more polarized: 58 percent said it was murder compared to 34 percent who said it was not.

The question, like the word “murder,” is laden with meaning that must be “unpacked,” as it were, to really understand the ethical significance that people impute to the act.

The Ethical Meaning of Abortion

When asked to choose from a series of statements about the ethical meaning of abortion,

- 37 percent said that, “abortion is just as bad as killing a person who has already been born; it is murder.
- 12 percent said that, “abortion is murder but is not as bad as killing someone who has already been born.
- 28 percent said that, “abortion is not murder, but it does involve the taking of human life.”
• 16 percent said that, “abortion is not murder; it is a surgical procedure for removing human tissue.”

• 7 percent responded “can’t say.” (See Figure 2-1)

An overwhelming majority of Americans, then, impute serious ethical significance to the act of abortion. Only one in six would dismiss the act as a mere “surgical procedure.”

As one might expect, where one has placed oneself on the abortion issue explains much of the variation in ethical judgement. For example, three-fourths (77%) of all strongly Pro-Life believe that abortion is just as bad as killing a person who has already been born. By contrast, half (49%) of all the strongly Pro-Choice believe that it is just a surgical technique for removing human tissue. The plurality of those who identify themselves in the middle or moderately on one side or another lean toward viewing abortion as the taking of human life but that this is not murder. Indeed, even one-third of the strongly Pro-Choice take this precise position.

2. The Matter of Personhood

The question that leaps to mind at this point is, what explains such diversity of opinion? The most generous (and probably accurate) assumption one can make is that people come to different conclusions about the meaning of abortion because they have fundamentally different ideas about who or what is being aborted. This, in fact, appears to be the case.

The Meaning of Persons

When asked what in their opinion was the most important thing distinguishing persons from other forms of life, a very small number of Americans (1%) believe it had to do with membership in a community; a very small number (5%) believe it has to do with the capacity of emotions, such as compassion or jealousy, and a very small number believe it has to do with the ability to work and be productive. (See Figure 2-2)

Overwhelmingly, however, public opinion was almost completely polarized:

• Half (49%) believe that the most important thing distinguishing persons was their “ability to think and reason.”

• Just over one-third (36%) believe that persons are distinguished by the notion that they “were created by God in his own image.”

These views were fairly evenly spread across socio-demographic groups with the exception of region, education and issue identification. College educated respondents and those from the east and west and the moderately to strongly Pro-Choice were more inclined to define personhood by rational criteria while the more poorly educated, Southerners and the strongly Pro-Life were slightly more inclined to define personhood according to “theistic” criteria.

When They Become Persons

If persons are distinguished in these ways, when does it happen? When does the “fertilized egg inside a mother’s womb first become a person?” (See Figure 2-3)

• Nearly 6 in 10 believe that a fertilized egg becomes a person at conception. This view is held almost unanimously by the strongly Pro-Life, 86 percent of whom held this view. The number decreases, as one would expect, the further a person distances himself from the Pro-Life position, and yet the plurality of opinion in each of the other positions holds this view. Even one-fifth (22%) those identifying themselves as strongly Pro-Choice maintain this view.

• About one in six (16%) believe that the fertilized egg becomes a person at “quickening” — when the mother first feels movement inside her womb. Roughly one-fifth of each of the “middle” categories of self-identification on this issue hold this view as do 15 percent of the “strongly Pro-Choice.”

• About one in eight (13%) believe that personhood begins the moment that the baby could survive on her own. This was the position taken by the plurality of the respondents who identified themselves as strongly Pro-Choice (34%).

• Finally, less than one in ten of all those surveyed believe that personhood begins at birth. (Less than 1 percent said that this was the case only when doctors concluded that the baby is healthy). Yet the “strongly Pro-Choice were more than three times more likely to identify this as their own.
In general, respondents show a fair degree of consistency between their views of the fetus and their ethical judgement about abortion.

- Of those who believe that abortion is as bad as killing someone already born, nearly nine out of ten view personhood occurring at conception. Only a very few who believe that abortion is murder in the strongest sense of that word, then, believe that personhood takes place later. (The few who do place it at the time of first movement.)

- At the other end of the ethical continuum, of those who judge abortion as little more than a surgical procedure for removing human tissue, one-fourth (24%) believe personhood does not take place until the moment of birth and an additional one-third (36%) believes that the fetus becomes a person at the time when the baby can survive on its own. Interestingly, 14 percent of these respondents also believe that personhood begins at the moment of conception.

- The majority of those who take a “middling” position — that is, who believe abortion is a kind of murder or at least the taking of human life — also believe that personhood begins at conception. With some variation, the remainder in these more shaded and middle ethical positions generally believe that a fetus becomes a person at quickening.

In general, then, the American public is fairly conservative in its philosophy of the fetus. This leads to a certain ethical conservatism as well. Americans generally do not like the idea that the act of abortion is taking away a person’s life. It is fair to say that this is why most of those who view abortion as just surgery, view life beginning much later in the pregnancy.

3. Balancing Rights

This general conservatism toward the fetus is reflected again in the way the general public responded to the following question: At what point in a pregnancy do you feel that the unborn child’s right to be born outweighs the woman’s right to choose whether she wants to have a child?

- Half (50%) of all surveyed said that the right to be born outweighs the right to choose at the moment of conception, one-sixth take this to be at quickening, one-sixth, at viability, and 8 percent take this to be at birth. At least at this philosophical level, then, two-thirds of the public are completely opposed to abortion after the first trimester. And most of the rest are opposed to abortion (again at this philosophical level), after viability. Those who do take the balancing point to be the viability of the fetus or later, are disproportionately pro-choice in their commitments.
An effort to go beyond the present impasse in the abortion debate in an ethically meaningful and politically responsible way requires that the sociological reality must be faced squarely: personal prejudices aside, the morality of abortion is not clear cut for most Americans. Certain circumstances of life, often if not always unanticipated, periodically force us to decide between one moral good and another, or to choose from the lesser of two moral evils.

This chapter takes up the morality of abortion issue again. But here we leave the philosophical questions of human life and personhood behind and pick up the issue in terms of the practical situations that, for many Americans, make the rightness or wrongness difficult to ascertain. The questions pursued in this chapter then are, under what particular circumstances do Americans find abortion morally acceptable or unacceptable? What are the real-life points of tension that make the morality of the issue grey and unclear?

Findings:

1. Tough Cases

A large number and wide range of questions from the Life Choices Survey are dealt with in this chapter. All of these are clustered together in terms of the particular circumstance in which a decision has to be made. In all of these circumstances, we begin by asking about their general moral stand: is abortion acceptable or unacceptable in certain situations in the first trimester; if they say it is, is it also acceptable in the second trimester? (See Figures (3-1, 3-2, 3-3)

Rape and Incest

Among the hardest of cases, for most survey respondents, were the circumstances created by rape and incest. The situations are different, of course, and yet at the level of moral judgement, the general public responded identically to them. In both circumstances, seven out of ten said that abortion would be acceptable during the first three months of pregnancy; one fourth (or 24 percent) said it was not; and 6 percent said they were uncertain.

- The strongly Pro-Life are virtually alone in saying that rape and incest are not reasons for justifying abortion. They were just more than twice as likely as the general population to say that abortion is unacceptable in these circumstances. Of course, the moderately and strongly Pro-Choice were virtually unanimous in claiming the acceptability of abortion in this situation. But even three-fourths of those who claim to be neutral on the issue as well as three-fourths of the moderately Pro-Life say it is acceptable.

Is it as acceptable in the second trimester? Only about half (48%-54%) of those surveyed said it was in the second.

An almost identical spread of public opinion was found in this survey's replication of the National Opinion Research Corporation question: Should it be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if the woman became pregnant as a result of rape. Again, roughly 7 out of 10 respondents (72%) said yes, 2 of 10 said no, and less than 1 out of 10 (or 8%) said they did not know.
Here again, the balance of public opinion was in favor of the idea, with the only group substantially dissenting being the strongly Pro-Life, only 41 percent of whom favored the idea.

Health Problems: the Mother

The most difficult situation of all results when the mother’s life is endangered by the pregnancy. When such a situation exists, an even greater number of respondents (80%) said that abortion would be acceptable.

• In this circumstance even a majority of the strongly Pro-Life (64%) believe abortion is acceptable. Once more, however, the balance of public opinion is even more accepting of abortion in this situation.

Do Americans believe that an abortion intended to save the mother’s life is still acceptable after the first trimester? While the survey shows a greater reticence in the public, more than half (56%) of all of those surveyed still say that it is acceptable.

What about the situation when the danger is not life threatening, but simply the possibility of damage to the mother’s mental or emotional health? Public opinion is still generally supportive of abortion, yet not with the strong consensus that existed when the danger was life threatening. In this case, just over half (55%) found it acceptable.

• Here again, the balance of opinion (even among the moderately Pro-Life) is in sympathy with the mother. Around 80 percent of the moderately and strongly Pro-Choice find it to be acceptable.

The idea of second or third trimester abortions for women in this situation, however, completely changes the balance of public opinion. For most surveyed, and particularly the neutral and Pro-Life respondents, this was not acceptable.

Health Problems: the Baby

The issue of abortion becomes even more complicated when it involves a deformity or a genetic abnormality in the fetus. Overall, when respondents are asked to deal with this as a general moral principle, their response is one thing; when it is applied to their own personal situation, their response is another. The exception to this is found in the “extremes”: the strongly Pro-Life consistently maintain the unacceptability of abortion in these cases for themselves and for others. By contrast, the strongly Pro-Choice consistently maintain the acceptability and, in some cases, desirability of abortion in these cases. Consider the following:

When asked, for example, if they personally “felt an abortion would be acceptable or unacceptable if there is a strong chance of serious deformity in the baby,” 6 out of 10 respondents (58%) said it would be acceptable during the first trimester; 45 percent said it would be acceptable after that.

• Nearly 9 out of 10 (87%) strongly Pro-Choice and 8 out of 10 (82%) moderately Pro-Choice accept this, compared to only 25 percent of the strongly Pro-Life.

• The balance of opinion in the middling positions, once again, tilts toward acceptance, though it is not as strong when considering abortion after the first three months.

So too, 61 percent say that a pregnant woman should have a legal right to an abortion if there is a strong chance of serious defect. Here again, with the exception of the strongly Pro-Life, the balance of public opinion leans toward favoring such a law.

Once the decision has been made to give birth to a handicapped child rather than having the abortion, however, a plurality of those surveyed (60%) believe that keeping the child is the right thing to do.

• One should keep in mind that the hypothetical situation described in this question concerns a decision made by another woman and not themselves or their partner. But even in this situation, 40 percent of the strongly Pro-Choice disagree, saying that keeping the child was the wrong thing to do.

How do people feel about infant deformity when an intangible situation becomes a personal problem?

Thirty-seven percent of those surveyed say that they would have an abortion if a test showed that their own baby had a serious deformity.

• Most of those who say they would have the abortion if one of these difficult situations becomes their own, as one would expect, identify themselves as moderately or strongly Pro-Choice. Around two-thirds of these respondents say they would.

• The neutral and moderately Pro-Life are
divided fairly evenly on this, some saying they would, a few more saying they would not, and a large number who were really unsure.

When asked to make a decision on the basis of specific genetic problems, we see a similar pattern:

- The majority (between 51 percent and 73 percent depending on the situation), would only give a little consideration or none at all toward having the abortion themselves.

- Only about one in ten, on average say that they would have an abortion if a test reveals that the baby is mentally retarded (12%), born blind (8%), missing a limb (9%), has a serious heart defect (11%). If a test shows that a child will be born with a terminal illness that will end its life in six years, one-fourth (24%) of those surveyed said that they would have the abortion.

- For each of the physical conditions just mentioned, the strongly Pro-Choice were 2 to 3 times more likely to say they would have the abortion. By contrast, the strongly Pro-Life were in most cases, less than half as likely to say they would have the abortion.

Poverty, Social Disadvantage and the Quality of Life

The issues of poverty (e.g. how the addition of a child might create a heavy financial burden) and the abandonment of the mother by the father raise the quality of life issue, not only for the family bringing the child into the world but for the child, him or herself. These issues are different, of course, and yet at the level of general moral evaluation, Americans respond identically to them. In both instances, two-thirds of the respondents (66% and 68% respectively) said that abortion is not acceptable during the first three months. More than three-fourths (83%) said abortion was unacceptable any time after the first trimester.

- The polarization among the most opinionated could hardly be greater. Ninety-three percent of the strongly Pro-Life say that abortion would be unacceptable under these circumstances while 73 percent of the strongly Pro-Choice say that it would be acceptable.

- Unlike the earlier situations described, the balance of moral judgement in the middling positions on this issue leans toward the unacceptable of abortion. It is those who favor abortion under these circumstances who are out of step with popular sentiment.

The issue of the child’s quality of life was raised more directly in another question: is abortion a “better option than bringing a child into a home where it is not wanted?” Responses to this question make it amply clear that abortion for quality of life motives is an issue which sharply polarizes the Pro-Life and Pro-Choice.

- When asked whether they thought “abortion is usually a better option than bringing in a child into a home where it is not wanted,” one-third (35%) agreed it was compared to three-fifths (59%) who disagreed.

- Yet three-fourths (74%) of the strongly Pro-Choice agreed with that statement compared to only 8 percent of the strongly Pro-Life!

Quality of the Mother’s Life

A new dimension to the quality of life issue is raised when considering how the pregnancy, birth and care of the child will effect the mother.

- In the case of a teenager, who would have to drop out of school because of a pregnancy, two-thirds (66%) said that abortion was unacceptable during the first three months. More than three-fourths (83%) said abortion was unacceptable any time after the first trimester.

- In the case of a professional woman, whose career would be interrupted by an unplanned pregnancy, three-fourths (77%) said that abortion was unacceptable during the first three months. Nine out of ten (89%) said abortion was unacceptable under these circumstances any time after the first trimester.

- In the case of any woman, whose life plans are changed “in ways that are hard to live with,” three-fourths (74%) disagreed that such circumstances would make abortion “alright.”
How one identifies oneself on the abortion issue generally has a large impact on the attitudes expressed.

- In each of these situations, the strongly Pro-Choice are the only ones for whom a majority find abortion to be “acceptable” or “alright.” In every one, they are again 2 to 3 times more likely to find the act acceptable than the rest of the population.

While the rest of the American public is not as consistent as the strongly Pro-Life, nevertheless the majority in these situations tilt fairly strongly toward the protection of the unborn. In summary, the majority of Americans object to abortion for quality of life reasons, and the quality of the mother’s life is viewed as even weaker grounds than concern for the quality of the child’s.

**Birth Control and Gender Selection**

If nominally altruistic “quality of life” rationales fail to garner support, more blatantly utilitarian birth control and gender selection arguments are met with even greater moral resistance.

- Just under one in ten (9%) say that abortion is acceptable during the first three months when used as a “repeated means of birth control,” and only 6 percent say this is acceptable after the first trimester.

- Only one in twenty (6%) say that abortion is acceptable if a couple wants a boy but a test shows that it is a girl. This marginal support all but vanishes when the situation is personalized — only two percent admit they would actually have an abortion for the purpose of sex selection.

Nevertheless, as a matter of principle, the strongly Pro-Choice find gender selection abortion morally acceptable by a substantial margin. Twenty-one percent of the strongly Pro-Choice say it is acceptable during the first tri-mester and 15 percent of the same say it is acceptable in the latter stages of gestation.

2. The Overall Impact of Social Background

Without more complex analysis of the data it is difficult to say whether the effects of certain background factors would diminish or disappear if still other factors were held constant. Nevertheless, by studying the basic tables presented in the Appendix, one can see that background factors have different bearings on the respondent’s views of the morality of abortion in different situations.

- Region: The south and mid-west are clearly more conservative regions — no surprise there. Individuals from the western states, however, are typically even more unrestrained in their acceptance of abortion than those in the east. Along these lines, those who are from the most urban settings are also the most morally accepting of abortion.

- Education: The better educated the respondent, the more likely they will hold to Pro-Choice moral positions on abortion. Any exposure to university life has a profound impact on world view but those who have earned a college degree or more are even more likely to be confirmed in a Pro-Choice orientation.

- Political Party: In most situations, Republicans are slightly more Pro-Life in their views than are Democrats — however the difference between them is far narrower than one might expect given the rhetoric of contemporary political campaigns. For all of the rant about the Democratic Party as the pro-abortion party, it is the Independents who are most inclined to view abortion as morally acceptable.

- Registered Voter: The registered voter is also more inclined toward a Pro-Choice position than the unregistered voter.

All of these are general tendencies in the data. The differences mentioned are not always great, but they are statistically significant and though doggedly consistent. Further analysis of the data will reveal just which of these factors are the most influential in the general public.

3. The Adoption Alternative

Within the larger field of moral judgement about abortion and childbearing, where does adoption fit? To get at this, respondents were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: “abortion is usually a better option than giving a child up for adoption.” To this, 12 percent of the general population agreed; 82 percent disagreed, 7 percent did not know how to respond.
• Most of the patterns described above hold true here as well. Most striking, however is the fact that the strongly Pro-Choice are more than twice as likely as the average American to agree with this statement.

For the majority of Americans to agree that adoption is a better option than abortion does not imply that abortion should not be an option at all in their minds. The data reviewed in section two of this chapter belies this.

4. Who Has A Say? The Question of Input

The decision of whether to abort a fetus or not has an impact beyond the woman who presently makes the final decision. It affects others in concentric circles away from the woman out through that abstraction we call society. Because others are affected by this act, should they or should they not have a voice in the decision-making process?

The survey shows that after the pregnant woman herself, the majority of Americans believe that the baby’s father and the parents of a pregnant teenager should have a voice in the decision — a great deal or at least a moderate amount. (See Figure 3-4)

• Two-thirds (66%) of the public also believe that the woman’s family or personal physician should have some input. This opinion, however, does not extend, to the doctor at an abortion clinic nor to any counselor at an abortion clinic. (Thirty percent of the public, however, believes that both of the latter should have a voice.)

• Another one-third of the population believe that a counselor at an adoption agency should have a voice. This is especially attractive to those who are Pro-Life, but even those who are Pro-Choice are nearly as inclined to agree that they should have some say.

• By the same measure, about one-third (or slightly more), Americans believe that the woman’s church, religious community or pastor should have a voice in the decision. This view, however, is held disproportionately by those who claim to be neutral or Pro-Life.

• Everyone, it seems — not least the strongly Pro-Life — are nervous about the role of the federal or state government becoming involved in this issue. Only 17 percent or so believe that these institutions should have a say in the matter. Only slightly more (27%) agree that “the law, the courts, and the judge” should have a say.

Overall Americans are most inclined to see the abortion decision as a family matter; afterward, as a community or religious matter; last and least, they view it as a matter for the courts or the state.

Conclusions:
The Shifting “Balance Point” of Public Opinion

That there is a diversity of moral opinion on the abortion issue is not at all surprising. But in our search to understand this diversity better we have stumbled upon an interesting concept, that of a “balancing point” of public opinion. The balancing point of public opinion is that point of divergence between the majority view and a minority view. In some cases there is no strong divergence of opinion and therefore the balance point is in the middle of two extremes. In other cases, however, one group may really stand out from all of the others. In these, the balance point is the point of divergence.

In sorting out the moral attitudes of Americans on abortion as it plays out in a complex range of real life situations and circumstances, we have seen that the balance point — between majority and minority opinion — shifts. In the situations of rape, incest and the likelihood of infant deformity, it is the strongly Pro-Life who are the outliers; whereas in the situations of an increased economic burden, the potential of a lower quality of life for the child or the mother, a need for birth control and gender selection, it is the strongly Pro-Choice (and in some cases, the moderately Pro-Choice) who are the outliers. Understanding where the balance point of opinion shifts says much about the moral instincts of Americans as a whole — what they will likely accept and not accept by way of legal restriction and also where the challenges of public education lay.


Abortion Coalitions

One of the perplexing mysteries of the abortion controversy concerns the “muddled middle” — those people who are neither strongly Pro-Life nor strongly Pro-Choice. We know a fair amount about the moral positioning and reasoning at the opposite ends of the debate but about all we can say of the middle is that they resemble one side on certain issues and the other side on other issues. In the end it is difficult to be very coherent about the moral positionings of those not at the extremes.

The question guiding our inquiry in this chapter is, how can we more coherently understand those Americans who are not or choose not to identify themselves at the mutually antagonistic ends of the abortion controversy?

Findings:

1. Abortion Coalitions

Through a technique called “cluster analysis,” we have been able to isolate certain sub-groups distinguished by their relatively unique moral viewpoints on the abortion issue. (This procedure does this by drawing on a range of information and organizing it according to average differences along several sets of variables.) In our own analysis, a typology of six relatively distinct clusterings of meaningful moral viewpoints emerged. (See Table 4-1, 4-2 and 4-3) They are as follows:

The “Consistently Pro-Life”

The first and largest coalition comprises about 35 percent of the American population and it is made up of individuals who maintain assumptions and moral judgements that are consistently in keeping with the protection of the unborn. Generally speaking, they view the fetus as constituting a “person” at the moment of conception, believing that its right to life outweighs a woman’s right to choose whether to have a baby, at the very start of the pregnancy. These individuals believe that abortion is just as bad as killing someone who has already been born.

For them, abortion is nothing if it is not murder. When confronted by a range of morally compromising situations they consistently maintain the view that abortion is unacceptable. Even when they personally are faced with the likelihood that their own child would be born with a serious genetic abnormality, in virtually all cases they would not consider an abortion. On top of this, they self-consciously and strongly identify with the Pro-Life movement.

The “Secretly Pro-Life”

This coalition (20 percent of the population) is also very much on the Pro-Life side of the controversy, particularly insofar as its views of the fetus is concerned. They generally believe that the fetus becomes a person at conception or a little after and, in principle, believe that the right to life outweighs the right to choose at conception or soon thereafter. In spite of these views of the fetus, however, they hesitate to call abortion “murder,” and they believe that abortion is acceptable under a few more difficult situations than the consistently pro-life. They might even consider an abortion themselves under extreme circumstances. What really stands out about this coalition, however, is that they disproportionately think of themselves, and identify themselves, as neutral or even moderately pro-choice. They balk at the
general idea that government should have input into the abortion decision, even though they respond relatively favorably toward specific proposals that would monitor or restrict abortion. This group is younger and more tolerant in their sexual morality than any of the other pro-life groups. In fact, they are younger on the average than any of the other abortion coalitions, belying the otherwise accurate impression that the younger the cohort, the more pro-choice the moral outlook.

The “Conveniently Pro-Life”

This coalition, representing about 14 percent of the American public, is also very much Pro-Life in its general orientation to the unborn. The majority believe that the fetus becomes a person at conception, and also, just like the previous group, believe that the fetus’ right to life outweighs the woman’s right to choose at conception or shortly thereafter. Interestingly, they are convinced that abortion is murder, indeed more convinced than the previous group, but “not as bad as someone who has already been born.” Moreover, the majority within this coalition think of themselves as moderately or even strongly Pro-Life, although a substantial minority think of themselves as neutral.

But there is more to this group. When asked to consider specific situations under which abortion might be acceptable, they are a little more accepting than the previous two coalitions. Even more telling, however, is the fact that when faced with a personal decision about abortion, they balk. Under difficult circumstances, they would not hesitate to have or strongly consider having an abortion. At the risk of over-simplification, these people are Pro-Life in principle, but Pro-Choice in personal practice. On a preliminary scale assessing the importance of individualistic criteria in moral decision-making, this group was exposed as the most individualist coalition in the sample.

The “Ambivalent Pro-Choice”

On balance this coalition, which makes up only 7 percent of the adult population, thinks of itself as moderately pro-choice and to a certain degree, even morally neutral on the issue. Nevertheless, their assumptions about the nature of the fetus and whose rights should be protected are very much Pro-Choice. Specifically, they focus upon viability as a key point in the pregnancy, believing that personhood begins at this point or even later, and that the right to life does not outweigh the woman’s right to choose until the same point in the pregnancy. If they personally had to make the decision, faced with the likelihood that their child would have a genetic abnormality, they would either have the abortion or seriously consider it. What makes them “ambivalent” in their approach to this issue is that they tend to be reticent to accord broad moral acceptability for abortion in the range of difficult situations (i.e. those mentioned in the previous chapter.) This ambivalence is also reflected in the way they identify themselves on the issue: namely, as neutral to moderately Pro-Choice. Perhaps one reason for this ambivalence has to do with their view of the ethical status of abortion itself. While they generally do not believe the act is murder, they do believe that it is the taking of human life. Thus, they vacillate, and since they are not really positive one way or the other about abortion, they are pro-choice. In a word, they are pro-choice by default, rather than by conviction.

The “Personally Opposed” Pro-Choice

In nearly every way this coalition, which comprises 8 percent of the population, is on the Pro-Choice side of the controversy. The majority believe that the fetus only becomes a person at the point of viability or even later. In line with this, the majority state in principle that the fetus’ right to life outweighs the woman’s right to choose at about the fifth month, once again close to the time when experts say the fetus is viable outside the mother’s womb. Is abortion murder within this coalition? No, not really. While a good many will say that abortion is the taking of human life, they emphatically state that it is not murder. The predominant opinion, however, is that abortion is only a surgical procedure for removing human tissue. Ethically, they show a fair degree of consistency with the pro-choice stance. Pro-choice by commitment, rather than default, they view abortion as morally acceptable in many if not most situations. Yet what really marks this coalition is their emphatic unwillingness to consider an abortion for themselves if their baby were shown to have serious genetic problems. Only in the most extreme cases would abortion ever be a consideration. Thus, they are the “personally-opposed Pro-Choice.”

The Consistently Pro-Choice

This group (16 percent of the American public) is the polar opposite of the consistently Pro-Life coalition. The individuals who make up this clustering disproportionately identify themselves as “strongly pro-choice.” As a matter of general moral principle, they believe that abortion is acceptable under many circumstances and if they personally were faced with the decision whether to abort a fetus that has deformities or other genetic problems, they
would be more inclined under more circumstances than any other group to do so. The reason for this, we may assume, is that the majority believe that the act of abortion is nothing more than a surgical procedure for removing human tissue. Their strong pro-choice position, however, is not without some qualification for most view viability as a key moral boundary between abortions that are acceptable and unacceptable, and many approve of moderate legislative restrictions. For example, 4 out of 10 (39%) approve limiting abortion to the first trimester except in cases where the mother’s life is threatened, and another 6 percent are undecided. Still, one-fourth (23%) believes that the right to life only outweighs the right of a woman to choose at birth.

2. A Demographic Footnote

The social and demographic characteristics of these abortion coalitions are not terribly distinct in most cases, except at the ends of the typology. (See Table 4-4) In this they resemble the ends of the self-identification typology. The Pro-Life coalitions tend, by the very slightest margin, to be more greatly represented by women, while the Pro-Choice coalitions by men — but again, only by a small degree. The Consistently Pro-Life tend to be slightly older. The Consistently and Secretly Pro-Life are also more widely represented among the lowest levels of academic achievement compared to the Consistently (and to a certain extent, Personally-Opposed) Pro-Choice who are represented at the highest levels.

3. Parting Observations

These is much more to be learned about these abortion coalitions, but we have already learned a great deal. Even a cursory sketch of their intricate differences reveals that “pro-life” and “pro-choice,” by themselves, are rather crude constructions. A bipolar view may only serve to conceal much more nuanced variations in abortion morality that partition the “muddled middle.” We have seen that some are pro-choice by default, some by design. Some are pro-life in principle, but not in personal practice. Some are personally opposed, but legally permissive. And some are just plain permissive. But even these are “pro-life” by their own definitions, while supporting a sprinkling of proposals that are pro-life even by the definitions of the opposition.
Findings:

1. The Changing Role of Women

Clearly one of the social issues about which Americans deeply disagree concerns the role of women. The Life Choices Survey shows this disagreement well.

- Except for the oldest age cohorts, Americans are about evenly split on the issues of whether a woman should put her family before her career and whether her preschool child is likely to suffer if she takes a job outside the home.

- While Americans tend to reject the idea that being a housewife is less fulfilling than working for pay, they might have equally rejected the notion that working for pay is less fulfilling than being a housewife.

The bottom line, at least among younger people surveyed, seems to be that women should follow their own hearts in carving their domestic and vocational niches. The fact that this attitude is a recent one is underscored by the greater importance older generations place upon women’s domestic role — 76 percent of those sixty or older believe that a woman should put her husband and children ahead of her career, compared to 50 percent of those who are younger than thirty.

But how do these divergent views on the role of women relate to the abortion issue? In perhaps the most important book on the subject, Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood, Kristen Luker contends that different understandings of gender roles and human sexuality are central to the “world view” differences that separate Pro-Life and Pro-Choice movements. Abortion, for one side, is a symbol of economic autonomy while for the other side it is a symbol of an attack on motherhood. The Life Choices Survey confirms these general associations.

- Seventy-two percent of the strongly Pro-Life believe that a woman should put her family ahead of her career, compared to only 43 percent of the strongly Pro-Choice.

- Similarly, 61 percent of the strongly Pro-Life feel that a young child will suffer if his or her mother works; only 41 percent of the strongly Pro-Choice feel the same.

Intuitively, one would suppose that the abortion controversy is related to a variety of other issues contested in contemporary America. The activists themselves insist that there is such a relationship. And to listen carefully one may hear the most passionate on all sides articulate how their work is related to the larger effort of establishing an ideal America.

It is too much of a temptation to assume, in the case of the abortion controversy, that Pro-Life Americans are “conservative” and Pro-Choice Americans are “liberal.” There is at least superficial evidence to support this generalization but will it really hold up under inspection? The Life Choices Survey provides a unique opportunity to explore some of these issues. The principle question that guides this chapter is this: how do people’s views of and positions on abortion relate to their attitudes toward a number of other important contemporary social issues?
2. Changing Sexual Mores

Another theme that is central to Luker’s study of the world view differences among activists concerns the moral meaning of sexual activity. Again, the Life Choices Survey confirm her basic hunch.

- Pro-Choice Americans are divided fairly evenly in the meanings they assign to sexual activity — one-third say it is mainly a source of pleasure and recreation; another third, that it has a sacred and spiritual meaning; and the remaining third, that it combines both.

- On the Pro-Life side, the story is dramatically distinct. Only 9 percent of those who identify themselves as strongly Pro-Life and 16 percent of the moderately Pro-Life say that sex is basically a source of pleasure and recreation, compared to 61 percent of the former, and 52 percent of the latter who say that it has a sacred and spiritual meaning.

The differences in the meaning of human sexuality given by opposing factions extends to their evaluation of certain forms of sexual behavior.

- Three-quarters (75%) of the strongly Pro-Choice say that sex before marriage is okay if a couple loves each other, compared with only one-quarter (26%) of the strongly Pro-Life.

- Two-thirds (68%) of the strongly Pro-Choice say that homosexual relations are okay, compared to only one-fifth (20%) of the strongly Pro-Life.

- Almost 9 out of every 10 persons (86%) who call themselves strongly Pro-Choice believe that birth control should be available to teenagers even if their parents do not approve. Only a little more than a third (36%) of the strongly Pro-Life feel likewise.

When recreation and pleasure are interpreted as the essence of sexual expression, moral strictures lose their foundation. Right becomes a personal matter of feeling good, rather than one of conforming to common definitions of goodness. Since pleasure is not the essence of sex for the strongly Pro-Life, it is rejected as a criterion of moral judgment.

In sum, while the lives of Pro-Life and Pro-Choice proponents are obviously lived-out in the same society, the meanings they attach to their everyday activities in that society differ in fundamental ways.

3. Meaning and the Self

Even though it is both natural and accurate to think of Pro-Life and Pro-Choice advocates as moral opponents or opposites, it is worth noting that they share certain things in common that the muddled middle lacks. First, the activists on both ends tend to have a shared sense of commitment to something larger than themselves. For the strongly Pro-Choice that something may be viewed as a cause while for the strongly Pro-Life it would be viewed as a calling. Those who strongly identify with one end of the argument or the other share a sense of closure, coherence, and commitment that is lacking in the middle of the road. It is in the center of the abortion spectrum, not at the Pro-Choice end, where one finds greatest agreement with the idea that “realizing your full potential as a human being is more important than helping others.”

- Thirty-six percent of those professing to be “neutral” on abortion agree that realizing your potential is more important than helping others, compared to 29 percent of those who are strongly Pro-Choice and 18 percent of those who are strongly Pro-Life.

Grounded in the deeper commitments of those who strongly identify with either of the two movements is an intensified sense of personal efficacy, a feeling that they can make an impact upon the world around them. Those who profess to be neutral, on the other hand, are somewhat more fatalistic.

- Sixteen percent of those who are “neutral” strongly agree that “we really have little control over what happens to us” compared to only 10 percent of those who strongly identify with one or the other the two movements.

Yet these points of correspondence should not be overstated; the general pattern that emerges from the comparison of Pro-Life and Pro-Choice extremes is one of difference rather than similarity. And while they share a slightly greater sense of commitment than those in the middle, those commitments are qualitatively different.

4. Suicide, Euthanasia, Right to Die

The Pro-Choice “lack of moral rigor” or “defense of moral emancipation,” (depending upon one’s per-
spective) carries over into many concrete areas of ethical evaluation. Lack of commitment to absolute standards, for example, translates into a softening of judgment against those who commit suicide.

• Only 28 percent of those who are strongly Pro-Choice unequivocally reject the idea that suicide is morally acceptable, compared to 60 percent of those who are strongly Pro-Life. The strongly Pro-Choice are five times as likely as the strongly Pro-Life to agree that taking one’s own life is “morally acceptable because a person has a right to do whatever he wants with himself.”

Generally speaking, those who identify themselves as being in the middle on the abortion issue are closer to the Pro-Choice position of reserving judgment than to the Pro-Life response of moral indignation.

The same pattern is seen in the case of a terminally ill patient who requests that he or she be permitted to die.

• Almost two thirds (63%) of the strongly Pro-Choice say that they would approve of withholding food or water in order to comply with the wishes of the patient. Only one-quarter (24%) of the strongly Pro-Life say the same.

In this case, however, the views of those who are neutral on abortion are closer to those of the Pro-Life — few of them approve of withholding life-support.

In contrast to the issues of suicide and the terminally ill patient, both of which involve a conscious decision on the part of the living to end their own lives, the case of a person who has fallen into a vegetative state involves others in a decision to end the life of one who has lost the capacity to decide for themselves. The vast majority of Americans, regardless of religious or political persuasion, support the right of family members, in consultation with doctors, to remove life support from someone in a vegetative state who has no real hope for improvement. Three quarters (76%) of the general public support such a right. Given that support for this passive form of euthanasia is ubiquitous, do any groups stand out as having unusually high support for such a measure?

• Yes - college graduates, secularists, and residents of the Pacific Coast express unusually high support for such euthanasia, at 85 percent, 88 percent, and 84 percent respectively.

• Yet the greatest approbation of all comes from the strongly Pro-Choice, 91 percent of whom support the right of family members to terminate life support in such cases.

• Interestingly, even among the strongly Pro-Life, more than two-thirds (68%) support the right of family members to make such a decision.

What about the child born with “extreme deformity”? Would it be best for all concerned to let such an infant die? Forty percent of the American public say “yes it is.” This figure, however, masks important differences among Americans who have different positions on the abortion question. Two-thirds (67%) of the Strongly Pro-Choice agree with this compared to only one-fourth (24%) of the Strongly Pro-Life. (See Figure 5-3) (The contrast is even more stark when considering the differences among abortion coalitions — see Table 5-1.)

Based upon this evidence, is it accurate to conclude that Americans embrace what some have touted as a “right to die?” Hardly! Four-fifths of the population still say that suicide is morally unacceptable and a plurality disapprove of euthanasia, — either withdrawing sustenance from a terminally ill patient who wishes to die or letting a severely deformed child die. Only among those with no religious affiliation and those who call themselves Pro-Choice is there an overall rejection of this moral censure.

5. Death Penalty and Military Service

All of the issues of life and death that we have touched on thus far have either involved instances where a person wished to die or where they were reduced to a level where they could no longer wish. Shifting our focus to one of the great life and death controversies of modern times, how does the general public evaluate the death penalty, a situation where a perfectly healthy person wants to live, but society has judged them no longer worthy? In this instance, the public clearly concedes a “right to die” — three-quarters (74%) say that they favor the death penalty for persons convicted of murder. Support is fairly uniform across social and demographic categories, with the level of opposition being highest among single persons, secularists, and those in the large cities. Contrary to popular caricatures of Pro-Lifers as preoccupied about the lives of unborn fetuses while embracing “death” measures such as military intervention and the death penalty, the evidence from this survey reveals that those who are Pro-Life are no more supportive of the death penalty than those who are Pro-Choice. If anything, the supposedly “conserva-
...tive” strongly Pro-Life are less supportive of the death penalty than the supposedly “liberal” strongly Pro-Choice.

- Sixty-eight percent of the strongly Pro-Life say that they favor the death penalty for persons convicted of murder, compared to 75 percent of the strongly Pro-Choice.

- Seventy-four percent of those who have drifted closer to a Pro-Life position over the past two years favor the death penalty compared to 79 percent of those who have drifted closer to Pro-Choice.

With respect to military service, 80 percent of both the strongly Pro-Life and the strongly Pro-Choice say they would be willing to fight if they were twenty years old and the country were at war. However, the consent of the strongly Pro-Choice is more qualified — only 32 percent say they would be willing, if the country were at war, to fight “under any condition” compared to 42 percent of the strongly Pro-Life. What is more, this difference persists even when controlling for the overrepresentation of secularists among the strongly Pro-Choice and the fact that secularists are particularly likely to decline military service.

How do the different abortion coalitions relate to the ideal of military service? In this an interesting face surfaces. Openness toward military service is not directly associated with moral censure of abortion. On the contrary, the Consistently Pro-Life, the Conveniently Pro-Life, the Ambivalent Pro-Choice and the Personally-opposed Pro-Choice are all approximately equal in their willingness to fight for their country. About 40 percent of each say they would fight unconditionally. It is the Secretly Pro-Life, young and firmly opposed to abortion, and the Consistently Pro-Choice, progressive and individualistic, who are most hesitant about military service.

- Only 28 percent of the Secretly Pro-Life and 32 percent of the Consistently Pro-Choice would unconditionally agree to fight if their country were at war.

Conclusion: Making Sense of “Pro-Life” and “Pro-Choice” Worlds

The importance of considering how different Abortion Coalitions relate to the idea of military service opens a new line of inquiry and the possibility of understanding the worlds of the “Pro-Life” and “Pro-Choice” better. Far from constituting monolithic subgroups of like-minded citizens, both the Pro-Life and Pro-Choice ends of the abortion spectrum are comprised of distinct clusters who view society from different perspectives.

While the “Pro-Life” share a certain commonality with respect to their views on abortion, they are also separated by points of difference and contention. In fact, the greatest separation in the entire spectrum of abortion postures may be that separating the Consistently Pro-Life from other Pro-Life groups and from the mainstream of American moral thinking. Even though the Consistently Pro-Choice also depart dramatically from the middle-of-the-road, the Consistently Pro-Life are even more disconnected. On matters of sexual morality generally, the Secretly Pro-Life share more in common with the various Pro-Choice coalitions than they do with the conservative views of the Consistently Pro-Life. For example,

- Only 27 percent of the Consistently Pro-Life agree that sex before marriage is okay, compared to 60 percent of the Secretly Pro-Life, 71 percent of the Personally-Opposed Pro-Choice and 83 percent of the Consistently Pro-Choice.

- The same pattern can be found in attitudes toward homosexuality. Only 19 percent of the Consistently Pro-Life strongly agree that homosexual relations are okay compared to nearly half (46%) of the Secretly Pro-Life. Here again, the Secretly Pro-Life are more likely to resemble the Ambivalent Pro-Choice (51% of whom agree) and the Personally Opposed Pro-Choice (56% of whom agree with that statement). (Seventy percent of the Consistently Pro-Choice agree with that statement.)

Much the same pattern is apparent when comparing the different Abortion Coalitions on other matters of value and orientation. Thus,

- Only 27 percent of the Consistently Pro-Life classify themselves as politically conservative, compared to only 28 percent of the Secretly Pro-Life, 29 percent of the
Personally-opposed Pro-Choice, and 26 percent of the Consistently Pro-Choice.

- When asked their understanding of evil, only 26 percent of the Consistently Pro-Life said that evil was either “whatever limits human progress and the advance of knowledge” or “whatever hurts someone and causes them to suffer,” both of which emphasize societal or humanitarian obligations. This compares with 49 percent of the Conveniently Pro-Life, 51 percent of the Secretly Pro-Life, 60 percent of the Ambivalent Pro-Choice, 66 percent of the Personally-opposed Pro-Choice, and 68 percent of the Consistently Pro-Choice who gave one of these answers. Departing from national norms, the Consistently Pro-Life were more likely to define evil in either transcendent (39%) or individualistic terms. They were the only group for which violations of civic and humanitarian obligations did not resonate when they reflected upon evil.

Each of these examples illuminate the moral uniqueness and marginality of the Consistently Pro-Life. Whether the focus is sexual morality, gender roles, the immanence of God in everyday life, understandings of good and evil, or self-identification as political conservatives, there is a qualitative break between the moral constitution of the Consistently Pro-Life and that of the other Abortion Coalitions, even their closest allies.

This may, in fact, explain why the Secretly Pro-Life are secretly Pro-Life. They sense a profound gap between their own moral make-up and that of the most openly and vigorously Pro-Life. At the same time, they sense a certain consistency with those who are more moderate or Pro-Choice on the abortion issue. Thus, in spite of the fact that they see abortion as morally reprehensible, they are hesitant to think of themselves as Pro-Life, an identification that would align them with persons who are fundamentally dissimilar. Although the data also reveal that the Consistently Pro-Choice depart from national norms in their liberalism, secularism and libertarianism, they are nearer to the center on many of the issues cited in this chapter than are the Consistently Pro-Life. What is more, the slope of opinion from the Secretly and Conveniently Pro-Life across the Pro-Choice coalitions to the Consistently Pro-Choice tends to be more continuous, without any ruptures comparable to the one separating the Consistently Pro-Life from the rest of the American population.
Findings:

The answer to this question, according the Life Choices Survey, has everything to do with the religious and moral assumptions people bring to the debate. Indeed, one of the central findings of the Life Choices Survey is that cultural and religious factors explain more about the range of opinion we have seen, than anything else, including the standard demographic factors of which social scientists are so fond. Indeed, these factors give meaning and substance to the positions that activists, observers and marginally involved citizens alike call “Pro-Life” and “Pro-Choice.”

1. Traditional Formulations

To anyone who follows survey research on the topic, the very idea that religious and cultural factors are important should seem strange and unlikely. After all, as we alluded in the preface, survey research has not had much success in explaining very much about the abortion debate through conventional religious and cultural factors. Protestants, Catholics and Jews, for example, always share a similar if not identical distribution of opinion.

- In a 1988 survey conducted by the Times Mirror Corporation, for example, Americans were asked their views of a constitutional amendment restricting abortion. Of those surveyed, 47 percent of all Protestants supported it and 46 percent of all Catholics supported it.

- In another national survey conducted in 1988 by the Gallup Organization, Americans were asked when abortion should be legal. Once again, the pattern of response between Protestants and Catholics was identical: each religious grouping had 17-20 percent who said all cases, 60-62 percent who said certain cases, and 17-19 percent who said in no cases.

Examples such as these are plentiful in the literature on the subject. The comparison between Protestants and Catholics and Christians and Jews has been so uninteresting, in fact, that many polling organizations do not even report the comparison. “Why should they?” they might reason. “Religious faith has little bearing on people’s opinions on the subject.”
That conclusion is premature. The reason the survey research establishment comes to this conclusion is that it has failed to see what almost every activist in the controversy long ago recognized, and as a consequence, it has either missed or ignored what may be the central explanatory factor of this controversy.

2. The Hypothesis of a “New Cultural Divide”

The problem resides in the practice of lumping all Protestants together, all Catholics together, all Jews together, all Mormons together, etc., and ignoring those who claim to have no religious faith at all. This is a problem because Protestants themselves would never lump themselves together. Neither would Catholics or Jews. The reality is that each major faith in America is increasingly split between their “orthodox” and “progressivist” camps.

- Within Protestantism (and every denomination in Protestantism), it takes form in the division between Evangelical and Mainline.

- Within Roman Catholicism, it is the division between those loyal to the Pope and those once-called, “Americanists,” but now simply “liberal” or “progressive.”

- Within Judaism, it is the division between the Reform and secular camps and the Orthodox movement. (The Conservative movement in Judaism is presently dividing right down the middle.)

- Finally, there is a growing number of Americans who claim no faith at all. These are the Secularists and they, with a few important exceptions, tend to line up on the “progressivist” side of the new cultural divide.

What divides the “orthodox” from “progressivist” in each of these faiths, we would contend, is the issue of “moral authority,” that is, the sources and authorities individuals and communities turn to in deciding what is right and wrong. The basic tension in American religion and in American culture more broadly is between those who believe moral truth comes from “transcendent sources,” (as expressed in an “inerrant Scripture” for Evangelicals, the “Roman Magesterium” for Catholics, or “Torah and the community that upholds it,” for Orthodox Jews) and those who believe that our understanding of right or wrong derives from inner-worldly sources, say our experience, or science, and so on.

If this hypothesis is true, then theologically conservative Catholics and Evangelical Protestants will have more in common with each other than they do with those “progressivists” within their own faith traditions. So too, progressive Catholics, Mainline Protestants and Secularists will have more in common with each other than they do with the traditionalists in their own faith camp.

This is precisely what the Life Choices Survey shows at almost every level. Consider first the ways in which different groups orient their lives.

3. Who are the “Orthodox” and the “Progressivists?”

The Demographic Profile

Of course, some factors have been shown to be more important than others, yet overall, the role of social and demographic factors in shaping the public’s views on abortion has been relatively slight. Likewise the demographic profile of Americans who view themselves as Pro-Life or Pro-Pro-Choice has been illuminating at the extremes but rather muddled and confused in the middle. Yet when considering the social and demographic attributes of the various orthodox and progressive groups, the our understanding of the nature of the conflict becomes sharpened.

Table 6-1 presents a demographic profile of the various religious coalitions

- Evangelicals make up about 28 percent of the population surveyed. They are disproportionately older, married and women from the South or Midwest with modest educational achievement. They also lean toward the Republican party.

- Mainline Protestants comprise 31 percent of the sample. One will find slightly more men than women here. The majority are married but a fairly large minority (16%) are currently divorced or separated. They also hail in fairly larger numbers from the Midwest and South but can also be found in the East and West too.

- Orthodox Catholics comprise 14 percent of the sample population. Like the Evangelicals, the typical Orthodox Catholic is a married, older woman of moderate educational background. Orthodox Catholics are found more in the East and are overwhelmingly Democratic.
• Progressive Catholics make up 20 percent of the sample population. They divide fairly evenly among men and women, are married and are baby-boomers. They are slightly better educated than their orthodox counterpart, but like the Orthodox, they can be found most plentifully in large cities in the East.

• Secularists comprise 7 percent of this survey sample. They are twice as likely to be male as female and disproportionately younger (under 44 years) married to their first spouse or single. (Though despite their youth, the highest divorce rates are found in their ranks.) They also are generally drawn from the large cities of the West and Midwest. They are a very well-educated group who identify themselves as political independents.

Where Each Looks For Truth

When asked, “what in your opinion is the most believable authority in matters of truth?,” the range of response (see Table 6-2) was telling:

• Evangelical Protestants and Orthodox Catholics were the most likely to turn to the teachings of scripture. In keeping with their tradition, Orthodox Catholics were also the most likely to turn to “what religious leaders say.”

• The majority of secularists (68%), and the plurality of Mainline Protestants (49%) and Progressive Catholics (49%) (note the similarity!) were most likely to turn to their “own personal experience.” Though in smaller numbers, they were also more likely to turn to the “teachings of science” than the Evangelicals or conservative Catholics.

When asked, “If you were unsure of what was right or wrong, how would they decide what to do,” we can see the same general pattern of responses.

• Evangelicals and Orthodox Catholics disproportionately said the would “do what God or Scripture tells them.” They were the least likely to say they would “do what would make them happy,” or “do what would get them ahead.”

• The majority of secularists (59%), and the plurality of Mainline Protestants (47%) and Progressive Catholics (46%) (once again, note the similarity!) were most likely to choose the humanist response and “do what would be best for everyone.” Though in smaller numbers, Secularists really stood out in saying they would “do what would make them happy.” Progressive Catholics stood out in saying the would “do what would get them ahead.”

It becomes clear that this translates into a general moral orientation for different sides of the cultural divide. The strongly Pro-Life are committed to specific moral guidelines which they believe to be universal, while the strongly Pro-Choice are bound to the universal precept that morality should not be universal, that individuals should be free to formulate their own. It is in this sense that the overemployed terms of conservative and liberal still have meaning. Those on the orthodox side of the cultural divide seek to conserve a morality that has timeless value, while progressivists seek to liberate personal conscience from external constraint.

Because the advocacy of specific standards requires greater consensus and moral protagonism than does the more nebulous agreement to grant moral sovereignty to individuals, the Pro-Life position can be said to require a stronger commitment than that of their opponents.

• Almost 8 of every 10 secularists (79%) mainline Protestants (75%) and progressive Catholics (73%) say that there are “few moral absolutes,” that what is right or wrong varies from situation to situation. The orthodox communities (and the Evangelicals in particular) are less likely to hold this view.

To Whom Each Feel Chiefly Obligated

When asked to choose one thing to which respondents felt more responsible than anything else, the majority of Americans said the family (40%), then God (31%), then “myself” (18%), and then “all of humanity” (8%). The differences among orthodox and progressive groups, however, is striking. (See Table 6-3)

• 59 percent of the Evangelicals and 41 percent of the Orthodox Catholics said they were most responsible to God — they were the least likely of all groups to say “myself.”

• Progressive Catholics (53%) were the most likely to say they were responsible to the family, followed by Mainline Protestants
(47%). Just over one-fifth (21%-22%) of the respondents in both of these camps said that they were mainly responsible to “myself” — two and a half times more likely than their orthodox counterparts.

- Secularists were just over twice as likely to say they were responsible to “myself” than the national average, and almost 5 times more likely than the orthodox Protestants and Catholics. They were just as likely, however to say they were obligated to their family. Though the numbers are comparatively small, secularists were still twice as likely as the orthodox groups to say they were responsible to “all of humanity.”

**How Each Views Matters of Spirit and Faith**

From Table 6-4 one can see that the identical (and by now, predictable) pattern of responses take form over matters of religious and spiritual practice.

- The orthodox groups are just over twice as likely as their progressivist counterparts and more than 5 times more likely than the Secularists to describe their religious beliefs as “very important.”

- Where the overwhelming majority of Evangelicals (61%) and Orthodox Catholics (72%) attend religious services once a week or more, only 20 percent of the Mainline Protestants and 28 percent of the Progressive Catholics do so. The majority of these attend religious services once a month or less. Predictably, 72 percent of the secularists say that they never go to church or synagogue.

- Orthodox and progressivist groups show the same pattern in their prayer lives as well as in response to a question asking if they have ever had a religious experience that has changed the direction of their lives.

4. Related Issues of Life and Death

Much the same pattern can be seen in the way these communities relate to other social issues and life and death concerns. (See Tables 6-7 through 6-9)

Consider first how their attitudes differ over the changing role of women:

- Seven out of 10 Evangelical Protestants and Orthodox Catholics agree that “a woman should put her husband and children ahead of her career” compared to roughly 5 out of 10 Mainline Protestants and Progressive Catholics and 4 out of 10 Secularists.

On matters of sexual behavior, the differences are even more stark:

- Only about one-third of the Evangelical Protestant (31%) and Orthodox Catholics (34%) agreed that “sex before marriage is okay, if a couple loves each other.” This compares to half (49%) of the Progressive Catholics; two-thirds (63%) of the Mainline Protestants and four-fifths (79%) of the Secularists.

- Half of all Evangelicals (58%) and Orthodox Catholics (51%) say that birth control should be made available to teenagers compared to nearly three-fourths of the Mainline Protestants (69%) and Progressive Catholics (71%) and Secularists (82%).

- And Secularists (61%) are three times as likely and Mainline Protestants (43%) are twice as likely to approve of homosexual relationships between consenting adults as are Evangelical Protestants (only 21 percent of whom approve). Likewise, half (50%) of all Progressive Catholics approve of homosexual relationships compared to roughly one-third (35%) of all conservative Catholics.

Finally, some differences can be seen in the way different moral communities view matters other “edge of life” issues.

- Compared to the Evangelicals and Orthodox Catholics, the mainline religious communities are twice as likely and the secularist community is five times as likely to agree that “suicide is morally acceptable because a person has a right to do whatever he wants to himself.”

- One half of those in the various progressivist groups (51% — Mainline Protestant; 46% — Progressive Catholic and 52% — Secularists) agree that “there are cases of extreme infant deformity when the best thing for everyone concerned may be for doctors to let the new born infant die” compared to one-third of all Evangelical Protestants (32%) and Orthodox Catholics (31%).
• The majority of all groups believe that a family, in consultation with doctors, has a right to remove life-support from a person who is in a vegetative state. The differences still exist in the same pattern though they are less dramatic. They become more stark again when presented with a situation of having to decide whether to approve or disapprove of withholding food and water from a terminally ill patient. The orthodox communities are far less likely to approve of this than are the progressivist communities. For example, Secularists are nearly two and ahalf times more likely to approve of these measures as are the Evangelical Protestants. The difference is between 64% and 26%, respectively.

5. The Orthodox, the Progressivist and the Abortion Controversy

How does the “new cultural divide” relate to the abortion controversy? If it is true, as we have argued, that the different orthodox and progressivist communities are distinct because they live by different and opposing sources of moral authority, this will play out as different and opposing ideas about the morality of abortion as well. And indeed they do.

“Self-Identification” on the Abortion Issue

The first thing we notice is that religious/moral orientation is a much better predictor of position on the abortion issue than education, region or any other background factor. (See Table 6-10).

• Evangelicals and Orthodox Catholics are far more likely to be strongly Pro-Life or moderately Pro-Life than anything else. They are by no means uniformly Pro-Life, however. One out of five Evangelicals (22%) and 1 out of 6 Orthodox Catholics (16%) claim to be neutral on the issue, and a minority of each (between 16% and 18%) view themselves as Pro-Choice.

• The typical Mainline Protestant views his or her position as being either neutral or slightly Pro-Choice, where the typical Progressive Catholic views his or her stance as being either neutral or slightly Pro-Life. Persons of these faiths can also be found at either end of the continuum as well.

• The average Secularists position themselves on the Pro-Choice side of the continuum and more often than not, as strongly Pro-Choice. Roughly 1 in 7 (14%), however, can be found on the Pro-Life side of the divide.

Personhood and the Ethics of Abortion

As it will be recalled, the public as a whole divided their opinion about the nature of “persons” primarily between the enlightenment conception (one distinguished by an ability to think and reason) (49%) and the theistic conception (36%) of a creature made in God’s image.

• People from every category could be found holding all views yet the strong tendency was for the orthodox to embrace the theistic ideal while progressive Protestants and Catholics leaned toward the Enlightenment ideal.

• Over two-thirds of the Secularists said that the most important thing distinguishing persons was their ability to think and reason.

It is largely for this reason that the groups differ so widely on the question of when the fertilized egg inside a mother’s womb first becomes a person.

• A full-three fourths of the Evangelicals (73%) and Orthodox Catholics (77%) maintain that this happens at conception. This compares to half (50%) of the Orthodox Catholics, less than half (44%) of the Mainline Protestants, and one-fourth (26%) of the Secularists.

• About one-fifth of all those on the progressive side of the cultural divide (Protestant, Catholic and Secularist) believe that a fertilized egg becomes a person at quickening.

• Secularists (28%) are nearly twice as likely as Progressive Protestants (18%) and Catholics (14%) to say this happens at the point of fetal viability.

• Finally about one out of every ten progressive Protestants, Catholics and Secularists believe that a fertilized egg does not become a person until birth itself.

How does the new cultural divide bear on a person’s ethical judgement about the nature of abortion?
• Well over half (58%) of the Evangelicals and Orthodox Catholics believe that abortion is just as bad as killing someone who has already been born, compared to one-fourth (22%-24%) of their progressive counterparts. Just 13 percent of the Secularists hold this view.

• The plurality of Mainline Protestants (34%) and Progressive Catholics (42%) view the act not as murder, but still as the taking of human life.

• The major portion of Secularists (40%) view abortion as simply the removal of human tissue.

The Morality of Abortion in the Difficult Situations

It would be too tedious and, in the end, unnecessary to review how the new cultural division effects the moral judgement of people confronted with the entire range of difficult situations and circumstances. The reader may consult the summary found in Tables 6-11 as well as the Summary Tables in the Appendix for details. The overall pattern, however, is clear and in every way confirming of the hypothesis described above.

In every situation, however unclear and morally compromising:

• Those on the orthodox side of the cultural divide — the Evangelicals and the Orthodox Catholics — take positions that are most protective of the fetus.

• Those on the progressivist side of the cultural divide take positions that are significantly less protective of the fetus. Mainline Protestants and Progressive Catholics are generally much more accepting of abortion than their conservative counterparts. In every case, Secularists take positions that are the least protective of the life of the fetus.

This pattern also holds in situations where the respondent is asked to consider how they personally would respond to news that a test has shown their baby to have a genetic tendency toward a variety of traits or deficiencies.

Finally the pattern holds when Americans were asked “at what point in a pregnancy do you feel that the unborn child’s right to be born outweighs the woman’s right to choose whether she wants to have a child.” About 7 out of 10 Evangelicals and Orthodox Catholics put this at conception; about 4 out of 10 Mainline Protestants and Progressive Catholics put this at conception; and just over 2 out of 10 Secularists place this at conception. Indeed 30 percent of the Secularists say that the right to life outweighs the right to choose at the point of fetal viability and 17 percent say that this is at the time of birth. (See Table 6-12)

Abortion Coalitions and the New Cultural Divide

More interesting are the ways the abortion coalitions discussed in Chapter Four relate to the new cultural divide. (See Table 6-13 and 6-14)

• Nearly nine out of ten Evangelicals and Orthodox Catholics are on the Pro-Life side of the controversy. Just over half in both cases are Consistently Pro-Life. One-fifth of each are Secretly Pro-Life and one out of seven from each of these faith communities are Conveniently Pro-Life.

• Progressive Catholics also tend to be on the Pro-Life side of the controversy but only one-fourth are Consistently Pro-Life. As many are likely to be Secretly Pro-Life and just a few less than this are likely to be Conveniently Pro-Life, publicly approving of the agenda yet privately given to the abortion option. Very few Progressive Catholics are in the Ambivalent and Personally-Opposed Pro-Choice coalitions yet 16 percent of all progressive Catholics are Consistently Pro-Choice.

• Mainline Protestants are the most evenly divided among the various abortion coalitions. About one-fifth of their number can be found each among the Consistently Pro-Life and Consistently Pro-Choice. Another one-fifth (22%) are those who Pro-Life in almost every way but think of themselves as neutral or Pro-Choice — the Secretly Pro-Life. About 1 in 10 are found among the Personally-Opposed Pro-Choice.

• The majority of Secularists are not only on the Pro-Choice side of the controversy but are Consistently Pro-Choice. Some of these would not consider abortion for themselves, even within difficult situations but they are nevertheless ideologically-committed to progressive abortion morali-
ty (the Personally-Opposed Pro-Choice). There is an interesting minority of 16 percent are Secretly Pro-life.

6. The Significance of the New Cultural Divide

These findings are as dramatic in their consistency as they are in their revelation. A more convincing empirical argument could not have been fabricated.

The significance of these findings can be framed in this way: In Chapter Five we came to see that the way a person positions him or herself on the abortion issue relates very clearly to other attitudes and opinions, particularly those concerning the changing role of women, human sexuality, and the “edge of life” issues of suicide, euthanasia, and the “right to die.” This confirms much of the argument made by Kristen Luker in her book, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* who argued that attitudes toward abortion were part of a world view. In this chapter, however, we have seen that attitudes and opinions on the abortion controversy are related to even deeper and more fundamental assumptions that people hold — assumptions about the sources of truth and of goodness, about the ultimate meaning of life, and so on — which in turn are born out of a participation in distinct moral and religious communities. What this means, then, (contrary to so much of the previous research), is that people’s attitudes toward abortion are not at all random but are deeply rooted within “communities of moral conversation or discourse” that sustain these positions.

Over the centuries, Orthodox Catholics, Evangelical Protestants and Orthodox Jews have typically been enemies. But today they share the same views and work together in large part because they participate in similar kinds of communities, communities distinguished by their reliance upon transcendent expressions of moral authority.

The Mainline Protestants and Progressive Catholics are clearly on the progressivist side of the new cultural divide. It is fair to say that most of these individuals look to and rely upon other sources of moral truth in addition to scripture, religious tradition or church authority. Nevertheless, while they do not approach the religious life and doctrine as intensely as the orthodox, simply living in the shadow of the church has a strong influence in their lives. The evidence? They are Pro-Choice in their approach to abortion and yet not nearly as much as those who do not abide at all in its shadow.

The Life Choices Survey also shows that the new cultural divide has an impact not only among the leaders of each side of the controversy, but upon the ranks of ordinary citizens as well. Not only are the movement activists polarized but the ordinary Americans are increasingly polarized as well.