

Spring 2006

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Recommended Citation

DeKoninck, Timothy, "Mother Knows Best" (2006). *CedarEthics Online*. 22.
http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/cedar_ethics_online/22

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Mother Knows Best
Timothy DeKoning

The following is an imaginary dialogue between Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun and Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Their meeting takes place in Justice Blackmun's office on January 22, 1993, exactly 20 years after the Roe v. Wade ruling that legalized abortion in the United States. Justice Blackmun has just returned from lunch with one of his clerks, to find a little old lady standing in his office examining the many artifacts and memorabilia on his walls . . .

HB: Thank you Mr. Jones, it was good talking with you . . .

MT: Wow, this is quite a collection you have on these walls. You sure have had a lot of achievements during your career.

HB: Oh, I'm sorry; I didn't realize you were here. I thought my secretary said I didn't have any more meetings until later this afternoon

MT: You didn't – until this morning. I was praying, and God was told me I should talk to you. So I came by.

HB: Ahh, God. I should have known you would bring *Him* into the conversation. You people always do . . .
What a minute! Aren't you . . . ?

MT: Yes, I know this habit of mine sort of gives it away (smiles).

HB: I knew it! Please, Mother Teresa, have a seat in this chair. I have to say, the other day I was reading through some of the letters I received during the Roe v. Wade fiasco. Some of the most beautiful letters I have ever received came from the Nursing Nuns, despite the fact that the church obviously is very much against our final decision . . . and rightly so, I guess.

MT: Thank you. It's hard to believe that it was 20 years ago. You played a great role in that decision, did you not, Justice Blackmun?

HB: Yes, it was one of my first cases when I was appointed to the Supreme Court bench. You know I have written a lot in other areas of the law, and would like to be remembered for some of those, not just Roe. I think religious people tend to make abortion too emotional, rather than look at the real issues.

MT: What would you say those issues are?

HB: Well, to start off with, we are talking about a woman's right to choose: what do with her own body, to choose how she lives her life.

MT: I must say Justice Blackmun, there are a whole lot of choices being made. Would you mind explaining to me some of these choices?

HB: Well, the courts decided that women have the fundamental right to decide what they can and cannot do with their bodies.

MT: You mean specifically in the case of abortion?

HB: Most certainly in other cases too, but yes, specifically in relation to abortion.

MT: Why do you say it is a fundamental right?

HB: Well, it is her body; she should do with it as she pleases. Look at the argument presented by Judith Jarvis Thompson and her analogy of the "Unconscious Violinist" (Thompson, 1971). Even if we assume that the fetus is a person, the mother still has the right to "unhook" herself from an entity that is hijacking her body.

MT: So you are saying that because a person is endowed with body, she has the right to do with it as she pleases?

HB: Well, yes, I think so.

MT: What about someone who molests children, are you saying that person may do as he pleases? Or what about a mother who chooses to just not feed her children and lets them starve?

HB: Obviously that is a case where they are harming another person. Our judicial system has laws to deal with such acts.

MT: So you are saying someone may do as she pleases with her body, as long as it doesn't bring about harm to another?

HB: Correct. Obviously, there are extremes such as self-mutilation and suicide, but basically a person may do as he wishes.

MT: Then you are saying that if a fetus is a person, then the mother may not do with her body as she pleases, if in fact it brings about harm to the life within her womb?

HB: Well, err, yes. But remember we have not established that a fetus is a person. I do not think this is warranted, and much of the emotional and intense opposition to abortion is centered on this. You are legally correct, however. The judicial system has overlooked the rights of the fetus, and is only concerned with the rights and health of the mother. This is despite the fact that many claim human life begins at conception and not at some later date.

MT: So you are saying that a fetus is not a person?

HB: I am merely stating that a fetus doesn't become a person until much later after conception, and therefore is not covered by the 14th amendment, which states that persons may not be deprived of life, liberty, or property without due process of law. The unborn have never been recognized as persons, so they do not have rights.

MT: Before then would you say that an unborn baby is just a bunch of cells that a woman can do with as she pleases?

HB: Mother Teresa, I see where you are going and I don't like it. May we please get back to our original topic of women's freedom of choice, and the benefits provided by the Roe v. Wade ruling?

MT: Most certainly Justice Blackmun, I thought we were on the topic, but I am willing to go wherever you lead.

HB: What about the health benefits to women now that abortion is legal? In 1965, abortion was so unsafe that some estimate that 17% of all deaths due to pregnancy and childbirth were the result of illegal abortion (Gold, 1990). Now, the procedure is almost without risk, because it is conducted in a medical facility.

MT: That may be so Justice Blackmun, but there is a correlation between abortion and an *increase* in health complications for women. I'm sure you are aware of the increase in cancer risk found in women who have had abortions compared to those who carry their baby to full term (Remennick, 1990)?

HB: Well, I . . .

MT: Justice Blackmun, I want to state clearly that "I do not condemn those who struggle for justice. I believe there are different options for the people of God" (Teresa, 1997, Page 152).

HB: Then why do you take such a strong stand against abortion if you believe there are other options?

MT: Justice Blackmun, because the greatest destroyer of peace today is abortion. It is a war against children. It involves the direct killing of an innocent child, murder by the mother herself. And if we accept that a mother can kill even her own child, how can we tell other people not to kill one another? (Teresa, speech, 1997)

HB: Hmm. Mother Teresa, I will think about this more. However, I am going to be late for an engagement if I don't part company with you soon. I want you to know I have enjoyed this time of discussion.

MT: As have I Justice Blackmun. Thank you for your time, and may God bless you!

HB: Thank you. Good bye.

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