

Sometimes at an outreach, one of our volunteers gets stumped and asks for help. In addition to giving us the chance to help the pro-choice student, this allows us to further train our volunteers individually, giving them the best possible experience.



Responding to the Astute Observation That I am a Man

By Timothy Brahm

Any time I go to a college campus to do a pro-life outreach, I can count on three things: 1) I will forget to wear sunblock, 2) I will not drink enough water, and 3) I am going to be reminded that I cannot get pregnant. Inevitably, then the pro-choice person will ask, “how can you have an opinion about abortion when you can’t get pregnant?”

While I do not consider this to be a significant intellectual challenge, it does make for a very important rhetorical challenge. I have seen the fate of many a conversation hang on how well the pro-life man responds to this question. His goal cannot merely be to give a logically valid response. In order for the conversation to remain productive, he must be reasonable, and he must be winsome.

It should be obvious that saying men can’t have an opinion about abortion is, at a strictly logical level, merely an *ad hominem* argument, an attack against the person. It is also about as clear an example of sexism as I have ever seen. But the pro-choice person that is inclined to use this argument does not see it that way. Logically speaking, it is that way, but trying to convince her of that

is quite a gamble in my experience.

At our most recent outreach in Bakersfield, CA, four different people asked me how I, as a man, could have any opinion about abortion. I gave each of them the same response:

“You’re absolutely right. I am a man, and I will never get pregnant. I can do my best to sympathize with women who experience unplanned pregnancies, but I will never really know what they’re going through. Let me ask you kind of a weird question, bear with me.

Imagine I go fishing at the lake. I’m having a great time fishing, and then I see her [pointing to a female pro-life volunteer] about twenty yards away. I notice that she is pushing her car into the lake. Well that’s weird, why would she do that? Then I look in the back seat, and I notice there’s a two-year-old child in the car.

Now, I’m a man. I’ve never been pregnant. I’ve never been a mother. I will never know what she is going through. We could even change the scenario by making her child a newborn and saying that she has postpartum depression, something I as a man could never experience. But even though I can’t understand what she’s go-

ing through, shouldn’t I try to do something to save that kid?”

Assuming she says yes, I’ll continue (though usually at this point, she has connected the dots for herself).

“I have this really weird view. It might sound strange to you, but I have good arguments for it. My weird view is that a human embryo right at fertilization is just as valuable a human person as you and me. That might sound crazy, but just go with me for a minute. If I’m right about that really weird view, then it seems like I should try to help those embryos, just like I should try to save the toddler from drowning, even though in both cases I can’t truly understand what the woman has gone through. This is why I think it is so important to figure out if the embryo is a valuable human person, like we are. What do you think?” (If you’re familiar with standard pro-life apologetics, then you’ll notice that the structure of this argument is just a bit of an unusual example of “trotting out a toddler.”)

This is by far the most effective response I have ever seen to the “you’re a man” argument. Usually the person I’m talking with completely connects to



“Chris” (blue shirt) was one of the students at Bakersfield that challenged Timothy Brahm to explain how he as a man could have an opinion about abortion (he’s also one of the students from that outreach that completely changed his mind about abortion in conversation with our staff).

what I’m saying and the conversation improves because we’ve had a positive moment of understanding. Even when I’m talking with an angry feminist that ultimately disagrees, they have always responded by at least understanding and respecting my motives.

I think there are three reasons this response works so well.

First, the thought-experiment is a) straightforward and b) uncontroversial. I love using thought-experiments, but sometimes they have to get complicated or hard to imagine, and that tends to have a negative effect on the thought-experiment’s usefulness. The “fishing story” is very simple and easy to imagine.

It’s also universally obvious that it’s appropriate to try to save the child. If people were inclined to say, “Yeah, but you need to respect parents’ rights to determine when to drown their own children,” then

I’d have to find something else. Fortunately for me (and for misbehaving children everywhere), nobody thinks that.

Second, the preface to the thought-experiment acknowledges the pro-choice person’s concern in a respectful way. One of our priorities at ERI is trying to understand pro-choice culture. They think differently than we do and we need to understand those differences or we’ll just assume that whatever makes sense to us will make sense to them. That is every bit as foolish as assuming that everyone has the same love languages that you do and then treating your loved ones accordingly.

I don’t think it’s logical to believe men shouldn’t have an opinion about abortion. But I’ve spent enough time talking to pro-choice people that I really do get why they feel this way. Acknowledging the fact that men can’t fully understand the difficulty of an unplanned pregnancy shows respect

to her as a person without agreeing with her argument.

Third, agreeing that men can’t fully understand pregnancy clarifies the actual disagreement. Confusing as it may be to pro-lifers, *many pro-choice people believe that if you can’t have first-hand knowledge of a person’s experience, then you can’t make moral judgments against what she does.* I do need to explain why I disagree with that conclusion, but if I don’t first clearly acknowledge that I can’t completely understand what a pregnant woman is going through, the pro-choice person will assume that I think I can.

In other words, this is the argument she is making:

P1: If someone cannot fully understand what another person is going through, then he can’t make a moral judgment against what she does.

P2: Men cannot fully understand what pregnant women are going through.

C: Therefore, men can’t make a moral judgment against abortion.

I want her to hear my argument, and she is much more likely to do that if she knows that I understand my own limitations. It may seem obvious to you that you know your limitations, but take my word for it, it is not obvious to many pro-choice people. It’s an excellent use of ten seconds of my time to show her the respect of clarifying why I disagree.

Personal Note from Tim

The most interesting thing about my work with ERI for the last few weeks is that we have started putting out more public content, particularly between training events. We are now blogging twice a week as an organization, and I personally put out two pieces in the last two weeks. You can follow our blog www.JoshBrahm.com, or if you’d like to get weekly email updates from us, email me at timothy@equalrightsinstitute.com and I’ll add you to the list.

If you haven’t checked out Josh Brahm’s speech from the Students for Life of America conference, I highly recommend it! Josh and I worked hard on it, and I think it excellently communicates our vision for dialogue. You can see it at EqualRightsInstitute.com.

Blessings,
~ Timothy

