

Jack Changes His Mind...Three Times

Part 1 of 2: "A Good Conversation Is a Mirror"

Impact Report

One of my favorite conversations from my JFA work is my conversation with "Jack" from 2013. Recently I've been sharing it with audiences as an example of the kind of complete change of mind that can happen very quickly. I don't mean to imply that most JFA conversations result in a conversion this dramatic, but the story does help us catch a glimpse of what is possible with any conversation. Let's trust that God is working behind the scenes of every conversation, even if we don't see results like this.

- Steve Wagner,
Executive Director

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It was a special treat. In many conversations, the person with whom I'm speaking doesn't show a clear change of mind. I simply must trust God to work behind the scenes. In one conversation at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) in March 2013, though, I had the privilege of watching a young man I'll call "Jack" change his mind...three times.

Jack had talked to someone at our outreach the previous day, so when I asked him where he drew the line on human rights, he was ready with an answer. "At eighteen weeks," he said. Through a few minutes of clarifying questions from me, he stated that he believed the unborn was a human being biologically, but that the basic right to life began when brain processing was such that the unborn could respond to sound.

He had another reason to draw the line at about eighteen weeks, though: viability. Again, I asked a few questions to clarify what he meant, and he confirmed that he meant that when the unborn could survive outside the womb, even if she required technology, she would have the basic right to life.

"Doesn't progress in technology move the point of viability earlier and earlier?" I asked.

"That's a really good point," Jack pondered. He and I agreed human rights could not be determined by a criterion that could be moved from year to year by technological advances. *The first change of mind.*

I then raised a problem for Jack to solve. "If all of us walking around the campus deserve equal treatment, we must have something the same about us that demands that we be treated equally. But what is the same about us?"

He had raised the possibility that "brain processing" was the thing that made the unborn valuable at about eighteen weeks. I asked if he meant brain processing itself. When he said, "Yes," I pointed out that brain processing is something that comes in degrees – we can have more or less of it. Since it's not something we all have equally, it cannot ground equal rights. He saw the problem.

I gave him another option, though. If he framed his explanation for equal rights as "that we have brain processing at all" then it *would* be an all-or-nothing property that could potentially ground equal human rights. It was true that all of the adults whose rights we were discussing in the vicinity of the outreach at UTSA did have the property of "having brain processing at all," and they had that property equally. If Jack was right that this adjusted criterion was the reason for basic rights, then that would account for the equal rights of adults, and it would account for the fact that infants also share those equal rights. In fact, the basic right to life would then extend into the womb to approximately the point he had picked, at eighteen weeks.

I pointed out, though, that this would present an additional problem: then many animals, such as dogs, would also have equal rights to the rest of us, because they also have the property of "having brain processing at all." Jack made a predictable move at this point and added two additional criteria. "You don't just have to have 'brain processing at all' to have equal rights. You also have to be viable and human."

I asked him if he could give me an independent reason to believe that value should be based on these *three* things in combination. I was looking for an independent reason other than "It saves my view that the



"Jack" (right) and Steve ponder pictures of human development and work to discover what explains our equal rights. (Photo by John Michener)

Jack Changes His Mind...Three Times, Part 1 (continued)

unborn should only be protected after eighteen weeks, and that whatever rights animals deserve, they shouldn't be equal to humans.”

He saw the point of my question, and he quickly saw what philosophers would call the *ad hoc* nature of his argument. His only reason for adjusting his argument was to save it from the implications I drew from it.

I could see the wheels turning. My explanation for equal rights was also on the table – human nature. But the implications of that view were also clear: if human nature is the thing that we all share equally that demands that we be treated equally, then the unborn should be treated equally, too, because the unborn has that same human nature.

“Okay, you've convinced me,” he said. “I agree that abortion should only be legal if the mother's life is in danger.” *A second change of mind.*

Unlike many students I talk to, who feel they have to put on confident airs or defend their arguments at all costs, Jack clearly wanted something more than to impress me. He wanted to understand truth. He got the truth, and I ended up impressed with him anyway – especially with his humble spirit.

I hadn't taken a posture of trying to change Jack's mind. Our conversation functioned more like a mirror, reflecting back to Jack what I heard him telling me. He responded like the happy young chap about to make a business proposal who barely remembers to check the mirror and finds a spot of mustard left unceremoniously on his chin by his lunchtime liverwurst. No one wants to be oblivious to his real state of affairs. There were two factors, though, that especially caused my mirror to be helpful to Jack:

- Without ***the skills of clear thinking***, the mirror would have failed to reflect certain portions of the image properly. Because I knew the questions to ask, the exact image emerged for Jack. Mastering clear thinking skills takes work, but you can learn to create a helpful reflection for someone like Jack. To take practical steps to begin developing these skills, see www.jfaweb.org/clear-thinking.
- The image would have become blurry or distorted like that of a carnival mirror had I not had an ***attitude of humility and goodwill***. If I had needed to show Jack my intellectual prowess, he might have felt the need to take me down a peg or two. If I had belittled his views or mocked them, it would have made it harder for him to take the truth seriously. He might have felt the need to defend turf, and he would have been distracted from the truth altogether.

Throughout our conversation, I brought an attitude of partnering to find truth together. I considered his arguments as if they might be true. Because he was worth my time, his arguments were worth my best efforts to evaluate them with him. He looked in the mirror that our conversation was presenting to him, saw his views for what they were, and decided to make a change right then.

I sensed that our work was not finished, though, because Jack and I had not yet confronted the two thorniest aspects of the topic, especially when combined as an argument for legal abortion: bodily rights and rape. Instead of assuming the conversation had been sufficient as a mirror, I decided to turn it into a window. That's when Jack had his third moment of truth. I'll explain in our August 2021 Impact Report.

- Steve Wagner, for the JFA Team

Steve's conversation with "Jack" took place in March 2013. This report was originally published later that year.



Jack Changes His Mind...Three Times

Part 2 of 2: "A Good Conversation Is a Window"

Impact Report

In this Impact Report, you'll see the conclusion of my conversation with Jack, and you'll see him change his mind a third time. You'll see how I gave him a window for viewing the most compelling arguments for abortion, along with compelling responses to them. I hope reading this conversation will not only inspire you to look deeper into the ideas, but that it will also help you see that you can create conversations which compel abortion-choice advocates to change their minds.

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In our July report (www.jfaweb.org/july-2021), I described how "Jack" in San Antonio abandoned his belief that the unborn only become valuable at viability and then later said I had convinced him that abortion should not be legal except in the case of a threat to the mother's life.

These two changes of mind were encouraging, but I sensed that our work was not finished. We hadn't yet discussed arguments claiming that even if the unborn is a human being, the woman's right to her body justifies abortion. I knew that if we didn't address these bodily rights arguments, especially compelling in the case of rape, Jack might be shaken when he encountered them.

In the first part of the conversation, Jack had been making the claims, and I had been functioning as a *mirror* to help him assess his own views about abortion. Now I set out to function more like a *window*, showing Jack other arguments out there that he hadn't considered yet.

I began by explaining what former JFA intern Trent Horn called the "Sovereign Zone" view: A woman can do anything she wants with anything in her body, and because the unborn is inside her body, the woman can kill the unborn. (You can learn about Trent's current work at www.trenthorn.com.) I pointed out that if a woman has the right to do *anything* with anything that is inside her body, then many things would be justified legally, including intentionally deforming the unborn by taking thalidomide and intentionally torturing the unborn late in the pregnancy through dismemberment abortion. (See "Autumn in the Sovereign Zone" for more on this approach: www.jfaweb.org/body.)

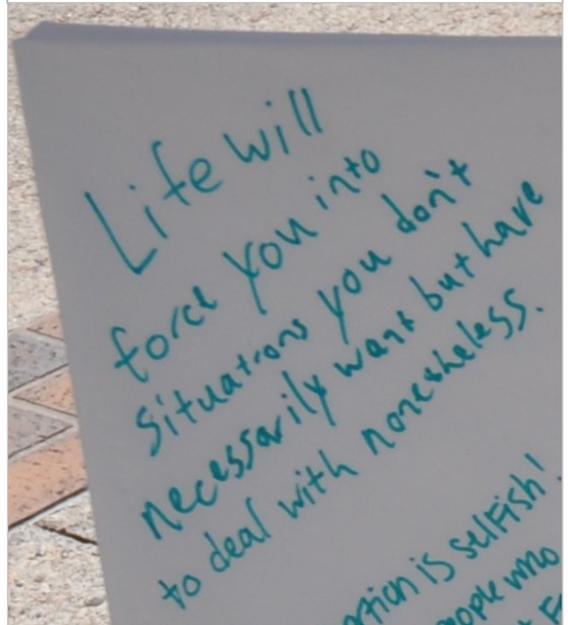
Seeing the implications of the Sovereign Zone view clearly through this window, Jack and I agreed it had to be abandoned. I knew that there was a stronger version of the bodily rights argument that was not so easily dismantled, though, and I went on to tell Jack about it.

Sure, it's obvious that a woman can't do *anything* to anything that is inside her body. But can she be forced to allow the unborn to do something *to her body* – to use her body to sustain its life? Or does she have a right to refuse? As Trent Horn has pointed out, unlike the Sovereign Zone argument, which is based on a very controversial premise, this "Right to Refuse" argument is based on a very uncontroversial premise: Generally speaking, you can't be forced to do something with your body you don't want to do.

It's not only pro-choice advocates who find this argument plausible. I find it plausible. If you find yourself hooked up to someone who needs your kidney to live, you can't be forced to stay hooked up. How then can a government force a woman to stay hooked up to her unborn child? And worse, what if the woman didn't consent to intimacy? Can a woman who is pregnant from rape be forced to continue to use her body to sustain the unborn's life? As Jack and I pondered these questions together, I noted how compelling this line of reasoning is. Even if it holds only in the case of rape and therefore applies to no



"Jack" (above, right) initially clarified that he believed abortion should generally be legal. 90 minutes later he said, "Heck" and wrote on the Free Speech Board (below). He told me that he now thought abortion should not be legal even in the case of rape.



Jack Changes His Mind...Three Times, Part 2 (continued)

more than 1.5% of abortions in America, it's troubling. (See www.jfaweb.org/facts for source.)

It's important to note that throughout this conversation I emphasized genuine sympathy for those who have been raped. This is imperative in any conversation about rape and abortion, but especially when that conversation involves complicated intellectual arguments. We should never get so caught up in our ideas that we forget the people affected by them. This is not just true with the topic of rape, but also with any appeal to bodily rights. (Please see "Meeting the Relational Challenge" at www.jfaweb.org/body for more on this.)

I then shared two parables with Jack that indicate there's something amiss with the Right to Refuse argument, even in the case of rape. I'll share just a snapshot of one of them here, and you can see a full treatment of the approach I used with Jack in a paper we published online in April 2013: "De Facto Guardian and Abortion." (You can find this paper, along with newer resources with alternative approaches at www.jfaweb.org/body).

In the movie *Up*, Carl (inset image, white hair) sets his house free from the ground, flies thousands of feet in the air, and then hears a knock at the door. The young explorer Russell has stowed away on the porch and is about to fall off. Is Carl obligated to take him in? Should the law expect him to give Russell food and shelter? What if he has to use his body to pour water or cut bread for Russell? Does this change the obligation?

Jack agreed that Carl does have an obligation to use his body to support Russell's life. He also agreed this should be a legal obligation. One explanation of this obligation is that Carl just happens to be, for whatever reason, the only person in the vicinity who can care for Russell. We called Carl a *de facto guardian* because it seems he has the same obligations as that of a parent or guardian, though temporarily.

The woman pregnant from rape is similarly situated to Carl. She didn't ask to be in the situation where she would be the only person in the vicinity who could care for a child. But she is. If the *de facto guardian* principle holds, then, she has an obligation (and, as we argue, what should be a legal obligation) to give the child in her womb the food and shelter he needs. She has the obligation to care for the child even if she didn't consent to that obligation, and even if she doesn't feel like a parent. We, in turn, should surround her with support.

After discussing this strongest version of the Right to Refuse argument and how it fared in light of our intuitions about parables like the *Up* story, Jack said, "Heck" and wrote on the Free Speech Board, "Life will force you into situations you don't necessarily want but have to deal with nonetheless." He then verbalized to me that abortion should not be legal, even early in the pregnancy and even in the case of rape.

I saw this third change as more significant than Jack's previous changes of mind. Now I was satisfied that I had created a window so he could see clearly the very best arguments for legal abortion before rejecting them. Evidently I did a good job of presenting those arguments, because at one point Jack said I was making him start to waver and think abortion might be justified. As you can imagine, I created this window for Jack with some fear and trembling. Why risk someone wavering back toward the pro-choice position? Even worse, why risk someone becoming a more confident pro-choice advocate with better arguments?

There are two reasons my fears didn't keep me from creating a window for Jack. First, truth is not fragile. It will shine through if we ask the right questions and apply our minds to the study of sound reasoning. Second, Jack is a human being who is intrinsically valuable. He's not an opportunity to make a convert. He deserves my best efforts to create conversation that is both a *mirror* and a *window*.

- Steve Wagner, for the JFA Team

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