

# A Cornerstone of Women's Freedom?

*Understanding and Responding to "Bodily Rights" Arguments – Pt. 1*

JOANNA WAGNER'S MONTHLY UPDATE



APRIL 2015

Dear Friend,

It was a very hot day at Oklahoma State University last fall, when I asked “Kendra” to weigh in with her thoughts about our discussion question. Our poster simply asked, “Should Abortion Remain Legal?” Without hesitating, and very calmly, she replied to the question:

**Kendra:** *Of course it should be legal.*

**Joanna:** *Do you think it should be legal through all nine months of pregnancy?*

**Kendra:** *Yes. No exceptions. It's a woman's right to choose as long as "it" is in her body.*

Kendra and I spoke for about an hour, and our conversation was very friendly, despite our vastly different views. In the midst of that conversation, it became clear that Kendra held what might best be called a “bodily rights” view about abortion. This view can come in different forms, but those who present it in its strongest form agree that the unborn are human beings, equal in value to you and me. What they argue is that a woman’s bodily autonomy is so strong that it gives her the right to kill this human being of equal value, given that this human being is dependent on her body alone for survival.

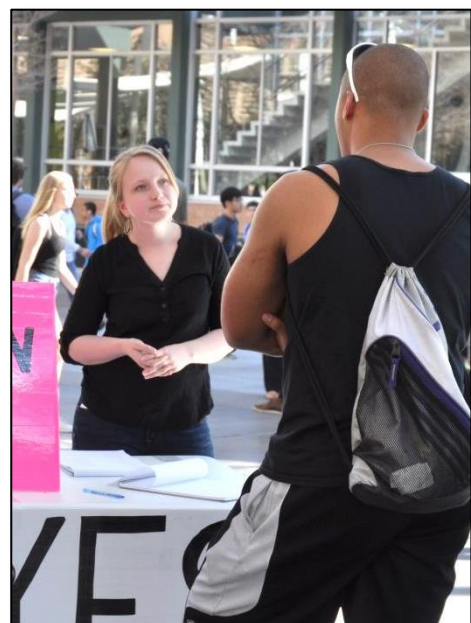
I shared with Kendra two different thought experiments, both of which have helped me to reject bodily rights views like hers. These thought experiments are stories that have helped me think through what obligations we have to those in need, especially those in need of our bodies. In upcoming newsletters, I hope to share these stories with you in detail so that you can utilize them in your conversations.

Kendra thought about each example I raised, and she admitted that they gave her pause and made her question her views. However, while she agreed that some restrictions might be reasonable, she still stuck pretty firmly to her original belief that abortion should be legal based on bodily rights. She said that women’s bodies have precedence over anyone else in need of them. For instance, this would even include a helpless born infant who is in need of her breast milk (in the case when no other source of nutrition is available for the infant). Kendra stated that, even if the infant would die otherwise, if a woman doesn’t want to lend her body to an infant in this way, then she shouldn’t have to. She kept reminding me that women’s rights are very important to her, and while I strongly disagreed with her conclusion about abortion, I could identify with her concern for women.

Kendra’s statements reminded me of a formerly pro-choice woman I met in college, Erika Bachiochi (J.D., Boston University School of Law). Her essay, “Coming of Age in a Culture of Choice,” helped me to better understand pro-choice advocates like Kendra when I was in college. In it she shares:

*“I was pro-choice because I was a feminist. I was a feminist because I cared, and cared deeply, about women, about children, about the poor in America and beyond.”*

Both Erika and Kendra had been influenced by the idea that abortion is a “cornerstone of women’s



This young man with whom I spoke at ASU in early February had a “bodily rights” view on abortion. Read this letter and send me your questions about Bodily Rights arguments. I’ll try to address them in upcoming letters.



JUSTICE FOR ALL TRAINS THOUSANDS TO MAKE ABORTION UNTHINKABLE FOR MILLIONS, ONE PERSON AT A TIME.

WEB: [WWW.JFAWEB.ORG](http://WWW.JFAWEB.ORG)

EMAIL: [JOANNA.WAGNER@JFAWEB.ORG](mailto:JOANNA.WAGNER@JFAWEB.ORG)

OFFICE: 316-683-6426

freedom\*... a necessary precondition for women's equality with men... which effectively means securing freedom from their bodies and, especially, from children.” As with Kendra, it seemed common sense to Erika to be pro-choice, because the people she knew who shared her concerns for women were also pro-choice. But in the midst of Erika's journey, something changed drastically for her. Erika says later on in her essay:

*“As I became more and more immersed in the problems of the poor, especially poor women, I grew more and more disgusted with the argument put forth by abortion advocates that the availability of abortion would assist poor women on the road out of poverty. The thought that we, as a nation, would attempt to solve the problems of the poor by helping them rid themselves of their own children haunted me.”*

Erika had a significant shift in perspective when she realized that the problems plaguing women do not warrant a solution that takes away the basic human rights of others. Without a sense of obligation to the rest of our human community, our search for freedom can take on a very chaotic, even violent, form. The International Declaration of Human Rights states in Article 29: “Everyone has *duties* to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.” By touching on the role that communal responsibility plays in a free society, I was able to take an unconventional turn in my conversation with Kendra that seemed to prove helpful to her.

**Joanna:** *Kendra, do you think it's even possible that our generation – in its pursuit of personal freedom and individual autonomy – has actually forgotten the obligations that come with our rights?*

**Kendra:** *What do you mean?*

**Joanna:** *Well, I agree with you that our rights and freedoms matter – a lot! But honestly, without responsibility toward each other, doesn't “freedom” become chaos? That doesn't seem like real freedom at all.*

**Kendra:** *Hmmm... Continue.*

**Joanna:** *Well first, I definitely respect your desire to protect women. Many women are violently mistreated and abused, and this is unacceptable. I have no doubt that pro-choice advocates often have genuine concern for women, but I am skeptical that this concern is what fuels the desire for legal abortion among our peer group as a whole. Many of our peers have told me directly that they just don't want to have to care for another person – especially if it's not on their timetable and they have to give up some of their own freedom in the process. Would you agree that this view of freedom may be making us all... well... selfish?*

**Kendra:** *Yeah... I guess I can see your point. I mean, I'd be lying if I didn't admit that my view is probably influenced by the fact that I really don't want to have to deal with a kid right now.*

Sometimes in my conversations, it's helpful to just take a step back and ask my peers something to this effect: “Do you think it's possible our generation is missing something important here?” For Kendra, even though she didn't change her opinion on the spot, this type of questioning seemed to help her consider whether her presuppositions about freedom and rights were completely sound. Every generation has its blind spots, after all.

In future newsletters, I will follow up with more of the content I shared with Kendra in our hour-long conversation. I'd love to take into account your questions about this topic. Has the issue of bodily rights come up in your conversations about abortion? Let me know, and I'll try to tailor these future newsletters to you!

Peace and joy,

*Joanna*



Earlier this year I helped train Phoenix-area volunteers, including those shown above. In this seminar, I spoke about understanding and responding to “Bodily Rights” arguments.

\* A Note about the Title: This phrase was borrowed from “Deadly Choice: Abortion as a War Against Women,” by the late feminist historian Elizabeth Fox Genovese (National Humanities Medal winner, '03). Full article: [www.jfaweb.org/Genovese-Article](http://www.jfaweb.org/Genovese-Article)