



Rebecca's Reflections



113 N. Martinson—Wichita, KS 67203—316.683.6426—rebecca@jfw.org

September 2016

“What Do You Mean?”

The Question that Saved My Conversation

Dear Supporters,

Early in my conversation with Kenton and Maggie, it was established that we all believed that the unborn is biologically human at fertilization. But for Kenton and Maggie (students I spoke with at Colorado State University—Fort Collins), the biological facts weren't enough to persuade them that unborn humans have the same right to life as the rest of us. As I have done in many other conversations (see my February 2016 newsletter), I began to explore the Equal Rights Argument with them.

In the midst of this part of the discussion, I made a mistake—a mistake that marked a pivotal turning point for how the conversation would continue. Here's a glimpse of that portion of our conversation, beginning with my introduction to the Equal Rights Argument:

Me: Kenton and Maggie, do you mind if I ask you a few questions that are not related to the unborn or abortion?

Kenton: Sure. *[Maggie nodded her head in agreement.]*

Me: Can we agree that all of us walking around on campus deserve equal treatment, at least regarding our basic right to life?

Kenton: Of course. *[Maggie nodded once again.]*

Me: Can we agree that in order for us to demand equal treatment, there has to be something the same about us? It doesn't make sense to demand to be treated equally if there isn't anything equal about us, right?

Kenton: Yeah, that makes sense. I can agree with that.

Me: So what is the same about us? What is the thing that ties us all together?

Kenton: *[confidently]* Our human nature.

[In shock, I smiled. I would've worded my answer in exactly the same way! I am used to hearing that philosophical term from our community of trainers; but never in the 200+ times that I had walked someone through the Equal Rights Argument had I heard a student respond that what makes us equal is “human

nature” — not even pro-life students. Typically students just say, “Because we're human,” or else they give a reason related to an ability (“we can all think,” etc.).]

Me: *[still smiling and somewhat surprised]* Kenton, we're on the same page. I agree that our human nature is the fundamental reason you, Maggie, and I should all be treated equally, at least regarding the basic right to life. Do you see any logical consequences of that belief, consequences related specifically to the legalization of abortion?

Kenton: *[perplexed]* What do you mean?

Me: If we agree that it is our human nature which is a basis for our equal rights, shouldn't everyone who has that human nature be included?

Kenton: Well, yes, but I still don't see what you mean.

Me: If the unborn have that human nature, shouldn't they be granted the same equal right to life that we have?

Kenton: Oh, okay. I see what you're saying, but that's where I disagree. I don't think the unborn has a human nature like you and I do. They can't do what we do.



[After this, I realized I'd made a mistake. To clear things up, I knew I needed to acknowledge it.]

Me: Oh goodness! Kenton, I'm sorry. I made an assumption about what you meant earlier. I was so excited that you used the words "human nature" that I just figured you meant the same thing that I meant. But now I realize that we've been operating on two different definitions of "human nature." So let's each explain our definitions. What does "human nature" mean to you?

Kenton: *[He turned toward Maggie and excitedly lifted his hands into the air.]* Whoa! Maggie, we've met someone who *actually wants* to know what I believe! She *wants* to have a real conversation. *[He turned back toward me and smiled.]* Hmm...human nature. For me, it means all the things that make us, you know, different from other species. We have emotions, empathy, and rational thought. We are self-aware and know we exist. The unborn doesn't have and can't do those things.

Me: Thanks, Kenton. That's helpful. What I meant by "human nature" is related to your description, but differs in a significant way. *[Kenton leaned in and furrowed his brow like he was putting on his thinking cap.]* Our human nature includes all of the traits and abilities you just mentioned—rational thought, self-awareness, etc. However, it doesn't mean the *present ability* of a human organism to do each of those things. Human nature means that an organism has the *inherent capacity* for those traits to come to fruition as the being matures.

That was really wordy, so let me explain it a little more. Let's take this one cell as an example. *[I then pointed to a picture of a human embryo at fertilization in the Justice For All Exhibit Brochure.]* When the sperm and egg come together, they cease to exist. A new genetically distinct human organism comes into existence. This organism matures to its next stage of development on its own. It does so from within itself in the same way that you and I do. Within this one cell is the programming for this being to eventually be self-aware, have rational thought, etc. This being [i.e. the human at fertilization] just can't do those things yet. This is similar to a newborn human. A newborn isn't self-aware nor does he have rational thought or the ability to run, walk, or talk. But because of the nature of the newborn, his *human nature*, he holds these abilities inside of him. As he continues to develop, these abilities come to fruition.

The conversation continued for quite a while longer. Kenton shared his thoughts more often than Maggie did. Before departing, however, Maggie was the first one to extend her hand for a handshake and say, "Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us. I have a lot to go home and think about."

There are two lessons I learned from my interaction with Kenton and Maggie that I hope will be helpful to you.

Lesson 1: Be on the lookout for misguided assumptions you've made about what someone thinks, feels, or intends.

Even though someone uses the same words we as pro-life advocates might use, that person may have a different intended meaning from ours.

Lesson 2: Acknowledge when you have made an assumption, and ask for clarification. One of the most pivotal points of this conversation occurred when I admitted my mistake and sought clarification by asking Kenton, "What do you mean by that?" Kenton's response of throwing his hands in the air to express excitement was unexpected, yet revealing. He was astonished that someone *actually wanted* to know his thoughts. I wonder how many conversations Kenton had experienced in which the other person only wanted to tell him *her* thoughts. After acknowledging my erroneous assumption, asking for clarification, and giving him time to explain his thoughts, he seemed much more open to hearing mine. This is probably because he knew I cared about *his* thoughts. It was the acknowledgement of my mistake that let Kenton know I cared.

I encourage you to apply these two lessons to conversations about all topics, not just conversations about abortion. Had I not acknowledged my mistake, it is possible Maggie and Kenton would not have been as open to hearing my opinion, or they may have even walked away frustrated before I shared it. Instead, at the end of the conversation Maggie felt as though she had "a lot to go home and think about." I hope these tips, as well as the content I shared with these students, will aid you in having similarly productive conversations.

Rebecca J. Haschke