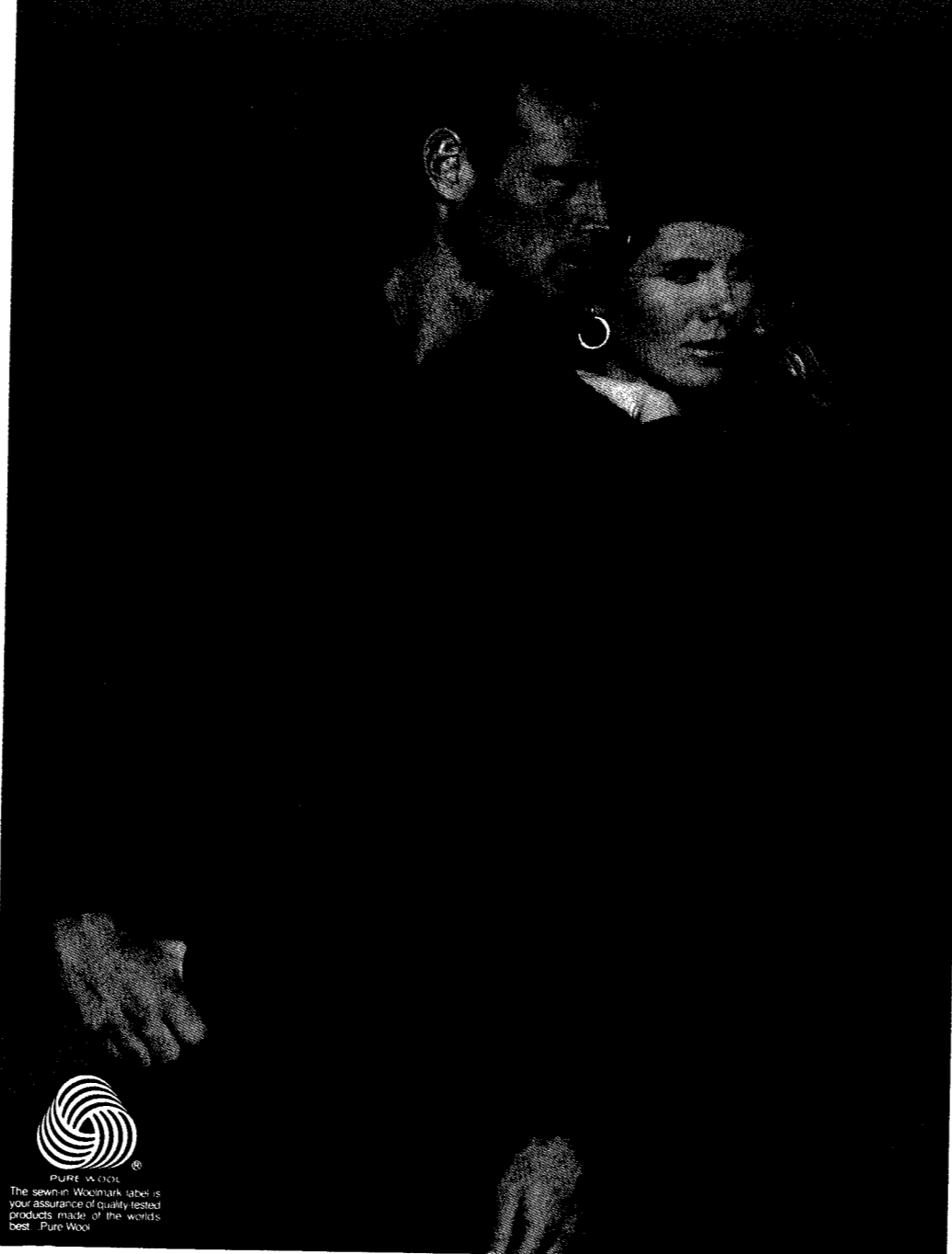


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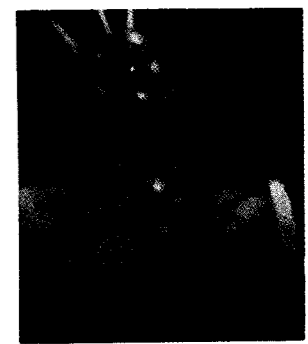
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ON PHILOSOPHICAL GROUND

WHAT GOOD is philosophy? When this apparently reasonable question first arose, the original Greek gentlemen who honored themselves with the title of "philosopher" fell into two sharply divided camps. On the one side, the Sophists defended their vocation along purely prudential lines: the study of philosophy, they believed, helps one win arguments, enabling one to persuade people of whatever one wants and thereby to gain power and influence. On the other side, Socrates proposed that the value of philosophy lies in the fact that it can help one to attain the Truth and hence to lead a better life.

It remains something of a mystery to me that our intellectual culture today chooses to remember Socrates as the hero and the Sophists as the villains in this little tale. After all, now that something that we still wish to call "philosophy"

has been institutionalized in our universities, the question "What good is philosophy?" is still very much with us. Furthermore, unless I'm mistaken, the stock contemporary answer tends to be a modern-day equivalent of the Sophists' response. In its most cynical version it takes the form: "it helps prepare you for law school." Among actual teachers and serious students of philosophy, however, there remains a diehard contingent who still champion some presentable twentieth-century variant of the Socratic view. They argue that the study of philosophy, insofar as it promises the hope of greater understanding, constitutes an end in itself.

Yet the skeptic in each of us still wonders. How can something as seemingly abstruse as philosophy help us to argue and think more coherently about the pressing issues of our day? Naturally, the phi-

ESSAY

James Conant

philosopher responds that many an instance of what we take to be a "pressing issue of our day" is, in reality, a murky conceptual swamp into which we will inevitably sink without trace unless we take appropriate intellectual precautions. At this point an example is in order. A paradigmatic instance of such a stretch of conceptual swampland is the controversy concerning abortion.

Even a cursory perusal of the arguments deployed in the abortion debate reveals that the warring parties are at best not in agreement and at worst deeply unclear as to whether the issue in question is one of public planning, family planning, morality, legality, theology, government, medicine, or biological taxonomy. Usually neither side meets the arguments of the other head-on but, rather, transforms the terms of the question into ones that admit more readily of its preferred answer. Both sides evidently have a strong stake in subscribing to the myth that there is one and only one question under dispute, susceptible to only one form of answer. Consequently, both conservatives and liberals find themselves locked into their positions, afraid to yield the slightest ground to the enemy.

We seem to be presented with the following: the parties in dispute are not sure which of several essentially distinct yet profoundly entangled questions they are at loggerheads over, but neither is willing to relax its grip on a preferred candidate for the answer. Here one has all the hallmarks of a prototypically philosophical question, namely, one that does not, at heart, know either what it is asking or what would count as a satisfactory answer.

I would like to present three examples from our contemporary

public debate to buttress my claim that, in our deep confusion on these matters, we (as a society) are mired—whether we like it or not—on philosophical ground.

To begin with, the closest neighbor lurking in the abortion controversy, you may feel, to a perfectly straightforward question is the legal one: is a fetus the appropriate sort of subject for legal protection? This apparently self-contained issue of law almost instantly unravels into the hopelessly knotty question of whether a fetus is a human being. For this question there remains not even a glimmer of consensus as to whether religion, medicine, or our moral sensibility is the appropriate court of appeal. Further, our judiciary has not even attempted to delineate the "rights of the fetus" but has sidestepped the problem by collapsing the legality of abortion into the proximate jurisprudential issue of the mother's right to privacy. So we are left with a situation that enrages conservatives (because it evades the issue of homicide) and terrifies liberals (because of the fragility of its constitutional foundation).

As is typical in such philosophical arguments, both sides feel that what really moves them is being ignored by the other side. As a result, both liberals and conservatives resort to shock tactics (the coat-hanger painted red versus the documentary showing the aborted fetus) in order to arouse the apparently slumbering ethical sensibilities of the "radicals" they oppose. Each side is horrified by the savagely emotional tactics of the other.

Finally, our culture turns to its own Panglossian panacea to head off the threat of a philosophical dilemma. In a previous era it was the

official dogma of the church that was solemnly invoked. Today, it is the cult of the expert. Scientists are asked to testify in Congressional hearings as to whether a fetus is a human being—as if a more sophisticated appreciation of biology could suddenly and decisively clinch for our culture what it is willing to countenance as a person.

Now, you ask, how can philosophers help us solve this problem? They can't. Resolving the status that we are willing

to grant (or concede) to a fetus is something that our culture will have to sweat its way toward. Philosophy can ease the pain in two ways. It can make the discussion more fruitful by mapping the contours of the insoluble: by untangling and identifying the qualitatively distinct strands of argument and by enabling the opposing parties at least to engage each other on common ground. Secondly, it bears a hope of making the discussion more humane if it can convince liberals and conservatives alike that a willingness to acknowledge the moral intuitions that fuel the ethical passion of each side is a methodological precondition for reaching any sort of understanding.

For liberals this means abandoning irrelevant arguments about the primitiveness of the protoplasmic structure of the fetus and opening themselves up to the horror of the fact that they are willing to deny life to incipient members of our society. For conservatives, it will require easing their outrage over something that they take to be murder long enough to register

fully the countervailing evils that a blanket taboo on abortion imposes on a modern society. All this might take us some measure beyond arguing over whether a fetus is as fully human as a flourishing adult citizen or as fully inhuman as a test tube of biomatter.

In such a dialogue, a space might eventually open up in which we can ask not just simplistically whether we abhor abortion but whether we should or should not

abhor other things more than abortion. Liberals should learn to come clean and admit that under sufficiently utopian conditions (under which children are easily adopted and well cared for and there are no social or emotional stigmas attached to

illegitimacy; no severe personal, public, or medical complications attending pregnancy; no extreme social discrimination resulting from our ostensibly neutral legislative practices, and so on) their moral repugnance toward abortion would fully blossom. Conversely, conservatives should have the courage to ponder just how remote from such a utopia our society actually is.

The most philosophy can do for us in the midst of this controversy is to enable us to see more clearly what is actually at stake. In the end, it can only sharpen our questions and post signs at the dead ends. Nonetheless, it is a great and perennial mistake to presume that because philosophy does not hold the promise of solving our problems we can spare ourselves the difficulty of the reflection that it urges upon us.

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