I am Pro-Life. Don’t Call Me Anti-Abortion.

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Charles C. Camosy

The struggle in the abortion debate is, in many ways, a struggle over language.

For example, I am pro-life. I strongly support rights and protections for mothers and children, including prenatal children, and other vulnerable populations. I want to see the laws of this country protect these people as well. In my view, this makes me pro-life. That’s why I use the phrase “prenatal child” where other people would say “fetus.”

In the view of those people, and of mainstream news outlets, I am not pro-life; I am anti-abortion. This language allows critics to dismiss me and fellow pro-lifers as single-issue obsessives, which we are not.

In recent years abortion-rights supporters moved from using neutral language like “autonomy” and “choice” toward using positive, stigma-defying language. Groups like Planned Parenthood now speak about “abortion care.” Oprah profiled activists who urge people to #ShoutYourAbortion. Billboards erected by abortion-rights supporters proudly say that abortion is a “family value.”

Defying stigma is one thing. But the stakes of this debate are never higher than when we decide on language to describe the object of abortion.

The New York Times editorial board, for instance, recently used the phrase “clusters of cells that have not yet developed into viable human beings,” in a discussion of rights being extended to a fetus in the womb, or what I call a prenatal child.

Language like this ignores the fact that each of us once existed as “clusters of cells that have not yet developed into viable human beings.” It seeks to hide the fact that by the time most surgical abortions take place, a prenatal child has electrical activity in the brain and a beating heart.

Other words and phrases used in the discussion about abortion seek to obscure this reality as well: “tissue,” “part of the mother,” “parasite,” “potential life.” Even the term “fetus” is dehumanizing.

Outside of an abortion context, an obstetrician-gynecologist doesn’t generally speak to a mother about her fetus. She talks to her about her baby. Family and friends organize baby showers, not fetus showers. A mother-to-be has a baby bump, not a fetus bump. She is “with child,” not “with fetus.” It is not unusual for major news outlets, such as the BBC, to use the phrase “unborn babies” when they report on new prenatal surgical techniques.

We have shifted our language in ways that hide the dignity of the vulnerable, in this instance and on issues far from the abortion debate as well. This is part of what Pope Francis calls “throwaway culture.” What he is describing is often connected with the excesses of consumerism, a culture in which human beings whose dignity is most inconvenient are discarded as mere objects. Such a culture requires the use of language that deadens one’s capacity to show concern for those who need it most.
Pope Francis has saved some of his strongest language for condemning abortion. But he consistently applies his concern about throwaway culture to other populations. Rehumanize International, a pro-life group, has done research on how this culture affects different populations, including racial minorities, people with disabilities, older people, immigrants and refugees, enemy combatants and prisoners. The research has found tragic patterns in which marginalized populations are referred to as sub-humans, defective humans, parasites — and in the process become thought of as objects, things and products.

The Trump administration’s forced separation of immigrant children from their parents is a classic example of using people as objects. The administration’s ill-conceived attempt to use the profound suffering of children to deter illegal immigration failed to respect these children as human beings deserving of care and respect, not objects to be used as a means to an end.

As Bishop Daniel E. Flores of the Diocese of Brownsville, Tex., noted when the policy was first underway: “Children are not instruments of deterrence. They are children.”

Throwaway culture has infected our attitude toward undocumented immigrants generally. We hire migrants for low-wage jobs, paying them less than minimum wage and refusing to pay overtime rates and standard benefits — while at the same time refusing them the basic dignity of human equality. Dehumanizing language gets us to this point. Political leaders and others dismiss migrants as “illegals.” Or as “swarms” of “undesirables” and “parasites.” Some even dismiss this population as “rapists” and “animals.”

A genuine concern for justice for the most vulnerable — one directed at something other than advancing a particular political agenda — must resist throwaway culture across issues that transcend our crumbling right-left politics. People who are committed to justice for the most vulnerable will be on the alert for dehumanizing language intended to confirm biases and serve the interests of those who hold power over the weak.

Doing so is particularly important at this moment. We are likely to see a newly intense debate over abortion at our newly constituted Supreme Court. If we are to avoid the hopelessly stale culture-war debates of the 1970s, then we must refuse the false choice between supporting vulnerable women and protecting vulnerable prenatal children. It will mean genuinely wrestling with the complexity of doing both. And it will mean engaging the arguments of our perceived opponents in good faith.

Charles C. Camosy, a board member of Democrats for Life of America, is an associate professor at Fordham University and the author of Resisting Throwaway Culture (https://www.newcitypress.com/resisting-throwaway-culture.html).