

December 26, 1967

Mrs. Edward E. Roberts  
26 Eddington Lane  
Willingboro, New Jersey 08046

Dear Mrs. Roberts:

Please do not attribute the tardiness of my reply to your letter of November 1 to lack of appreciation for your thoughtful remarks. To be perfectly frank with you, I was rather startled to be faulted with a "masculine" point of view when it was exactly this that I have been opposing in many discussions in such areas as eugenics, patterns of education, and the law of abortion. Then I reread the sentence that you quoted in context, and I realized I used a particularly infelicitous phrase in talking about "merely to reflect the emotional involvement". The term "merely" was not intended to minimize the importance of the emotional involvement of mature human beings with infants and fetuses. And the last thing in the world that I ~~would~~ wish to suggest is the imposition on someone else of what their feelings ought to be with respect to an unborn child. Nor do I question that an unborn child is "alive".

As you well know, however, there are many unfortunate circumstances where the feelings and irrational purposes, and the social and legal responsibilities of a woman may be in intense conflict. In an extremely stressful situation, the emotional relationship of a pregnant woman to her prospective child may be quite different from that which ought to attend any pregnancy, and it is in these circumstances that I feel the ultimate decision should be in the hands of one single person, the mother herself. The community is perhaps not ready to accept quite such a degree of individual decision, but there does seem to be now substantial support for legitimizing abortion when there is also contributory evidence bearing on the future health of the woman facing the responsibilities of motherhood. It is just in these circumstances that I would speak for tolerance and compassion for a medical solution to the problem of an inappropriate pregnancy. Besides the welfare of the woman, I would also place great stress on the right of any born child to be wanted and to find a home in which the mental repose as well as the physical comfort of his surroundings will allow for his best chance at happy development.

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Under the best of circumstances an abortion is such a distressing experience that I hardly see how any law can be characterized as "encouraging abortion". I do favor the extension of laws which permit abortion to be conducted in a medically secure environment to take the place of the very prevalent occurrence of bootlegged abortions, as now occur, and to give a better chance for the mental and physical health of the women who find this choice the better of a set of unhappy alternatives. I scarcely believe that it would encourage amoral behavior to insist on the prospect of facing an abortion as the penalty of a contraceptive indiscretion.

I would rather point to positive moral teaching, and in this I would include the frankest and most open-minded discussion of the significance of sex and love in human relationships as the only conceivable way to counter the trend you write about.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg  
Professor of Genetics

P.S. In reviewing this letter I realize I should amplify the distinction between being "alive" and being a "human being". But I can hardly do more than point out that every one of your isolated tissues is certainly alive, and that we are constantly shedding living cells without giving very much thought about it. On the other hand, I do not see any way in which a scientifically absolute answer can be given to how to define a human being. This is what I meant when I suggested that such a definition is a matter of emotion rather than of science.