

**Censorious Oxford students deny moral judgement.** By Brendan O'Neill, Editor Spiked. 22 November 2014.

*Tuesday 18 November, Brendan O'Neill was due to speak at a debate titled 'This House Believes Britain's Abortion Culture Hurts Us All' at Oxford University. But following a furious campaign by intolerant students who wanted the debate banned, it was called off by university officials. Here is the speech O'Neill planned to make.*

The first rule of the politics of fear is that if you want to make something sound scarier than it actually is, you add the word 'culture' at the end of it.

So if you want people to freak out about knives, you talk about 'knife culture'. Suddenly, an inanimate object that we all use every day becomes imbued with menace. If a politician were to say, 'Knives are a normal part of everyday life, but a tiny minority of people use them to do bad things, so watch out', no one would listen. But say 'knife culture' and it seems as though knives are sentient somehow, super scary, omnipresent in 21st century Britain.

If you want people to worry about guns, you say 'gun culture'. Suddenly, what is a very small problem in Britain – the use of guns for criminal ends – gets blown up into a spectre haunting the nation. If you want people to think more about rape, you say 'rape culture'. Suddenly, a terrible but discrete crime that happens between individuals gets turned into a secular form of evil that permeates all areas of life. And on it goes: lad culture, booze culture, gang culture, cultures cultures everywhere, bearing down on everyone, every day.

And so it is with abortion. How can you make what is a pretty mundane medical procedure that British women have been legally accessing for nearly 50 years sound like something terrifying? By adding the magic c-word.

That is what we've been invited here tonight to talk about: 'abortion culture'. I've been asked to oppose the motion 'This House Believes Britain's Abortion Culture Hurts Us All'. The reason I'm happy to oppose this motion is because it is built on a fallacy. There is no 'abortion culture'. There are abortions. And there are women who have abortions. But there isn't an 'abortion culture'. And how can we be harmed by something which doesn't exist?

The promotional blurb for tonight's debate tells us that 185,000 abortions were carried out in Britain last year, and apparently this is evidence of an 'abortion culture', that a powerful and negative culture is pressuring or conditioning women to 'treat human life carelessly'. Well, 160,000 hip-replacement procedures were carried out last year, too. Why do we not talk about a 'hip-replacement culture'? There were 60,000 hysterectomies. Why do we not speak of a 'hysterectomy culture'? It's because no one wants to ratchet up fear about those medical procedures, so the c-word isn't necessary. But there are many who want us to view abortion with dread, to see it not simply as a medical procedure that some women choose but as a product of a culture of death and carelessness, which clueless women have apparently been pressured or conditioned to embrace. And so they add the menacing culture tag.

I find the term 'abortion culture' incredibly dehumanising. It treats the women who access abortion services not as individuals who for many varied reasons have taken a conscious, autonomous decision to end their individual pregnancy, but as automatons, effectively, moulded by culture to see the fetuses they are carrying as worthless. Women's individuality

and agency is airbrushed from the picture, and instead they're presented as bit-part players in a culture of death.

To bundle up 185,000 abortions – 185,000 individual decisions taken by individual sentient and intelligent women – as some mass culture is pretty disturbing actually. Because there are real-life individual stories, and a great deal of thoughtfulness, behind each of these 185,000 individual decisions taken by women. So we know 92 per cent of the 185,000 abortions were carried out in the first 13 weeks of pregnancy – which means the vast majority of women who access abortions services do so speedily and efficiently. They do so before ‘the quickening’, a term I’m sure will be familiar to the Catholic members of Oxford Students for Life here tonight. That’s the moment, around 17 weeks into pregnancy, when the woman first feels the fetus move. For centuries, many leading Catholics believed abortion was only a grave sin if it occurred after the quickening. So 170,000 of these 185,000 women whose souls some of you are so worried about would not have even been considered particularly bad sinners by someone like St Thomas Aquinas, who thought abortion was only murder when it was carried out on an ‘animated fetus’. So please, chill out.

We know that a whopping 81 per cent of the 185,000 abortions were carried out on single women. So these are women deciding that they don’t want to raise a child alone, they don’t want to be single mothers. I’m sure some of the Christians here, who often aren’t huge fans of single motherhood, will consider this a very wise decision. Single motherhood is hard, and women are taking purposeful action to avoid it.

And we know that only 190 of these 185,000 abortions – 0.1 per cent of them – were performed on women who were more than 24 weeks pregnant. That is statistically insignificant. Do any of you really think these 190 women and their decisions are products of some cloudy culture, a culture imperceptibly cajoling them to ‘treat human life carelessly’? Or do you think they are 190 individuals with 190 different stories who had to make a pretty tough decision? Abortion after 24 weeks is a very unpleasant procedure. You and I know nothing of the individual circumstances of these 190 women and the possible turmoil they were going through when they opted for this unpleasant procedure. You have no idea. I have no idea. But using our humanity, rather than the politics of fear, we can surely trust that these 190 women had a very good reason to undergo this unpleasant procedure. We can surely trust that they used reason and thought and moral agency, and talked to their loved ones, before deciding that they could not continue with their pregnancies. There is no ‘culture’ here – there is conscious decision-making, the exercise of individual agency, in tough circumstances, maybe, but it’s agency nonetheless.

Some of you might look at the term ‘185,000 abortions’ and right away think ‘careless, life-discarding culture’. I don’t. I see 185,000 acts of moral independence; 185,000 decisions made; 185,000 *choices* taken; 185,000 attempts by individual women with individual beliefs and feelings to shape their destinies in a way they think will be best for them. I don’t see carelessness for life; on the contrary, I see human life in action, in all its decision-making glory. I see 185,000 striving attempts to improve one’s life and to act on that most irrepressible of human instincts: to determine one’s destiny for oneself. This is the very opposite of a culture programming women to behave in a particular way – it is individual women striking back against the circumstances they find themselves in and using their moral agency to take greater control over their bodies and futures. They aren’t being shaped by some ominous culture; they are shaping their own culture, their own lives, as they see fit. Some of the 185,000 will have found their abortions stressful, others will have seen them as a minor inconvenience; but all of

them *chose*, all of them made a decision. And to my mind, that means all of them did something intrinsically good: they exercised their moral and mental muscles and took responsibility for their life's path.

This is why I am pro-choice. I'm not pro-abortion. It makes not a bit of difference to me whether a woman chooses to continue her pregnancy or end it. It's none of my business, or yours. All I care about is that it is she who decides. The content of the decision matters only to the woman and her loved ones; but the *act* of making a decision, the act of exercising moral choice, is something we all have a very real interest in defending. It isn't the abortion I cheer – it is the fact that a choice is being taken by an individual over a key aspect of her life and future. There's a phrase for that: moral autonomy.

It is time we got serious about moral autonomy. It's the most fundamental issue of our age. Our autonomy is under attack. It's being tamed and constrained and in some cases flat-out undermined. Our right to think and speak for ourselves, to act on our consciences, to pursue what we consider to be the good life, to determine our destinies for ourselves, to be the authors of our circumstances, is under attack.

In fact, the very Enlightenment view of individuals as, in Kant's words, 'more than machines', who should 'cultivate their own minds' and 'walk firmly', is being assaulted today by a new culture – we can all use that word! – which says that actually we are weak and fragile creatures who can't be trusted to make our way through life without lifestyle gurus, experts and officialdom to hold our hands. And it isn't only the state carrying out this assault on the very ideal of autonomy. Everyone's at it. The alarmingly intolerant students who wanted to shut down tonight's debate\* also call into question the idea of autonomy. They claim tonight's discussion will harm female students' 'mental safety' and 'self-esteem'. The irony is terrible: they present themselves as pro-choice but want to deny people the choice to attend this debate; they claim to fight for women's bodily autonomy but don't think women have the basic mental autonomy to attend a discussion like this, listen, think, agree or disagree, and then get on with the business of cultivating their own minds.

The very motion of tonight's debate speaks to the modern disregard for moral autonomy. It says women are being culturally pressured to act in a way that runs counter to their own interests and moral wellbeing. What we have here is a fancy, cultural-studies rehabilitation of the idea that women do not know their own minds. This is an idea currently running riot in the increasingly illiberal, distrustful Western world – that individuals are byproducts of culture rather than exercisers of will and shapers of fate – and it is the implacable enemy of autonomy and freedom. So we have to get serious about moral autonomy, and we have to be consistent in how we defend it. We must defend it in the realms of thought, speech, conscience, and the body, including reproductive rights. This is the kind of rounded, all-in view of moral autonomy we must fight for today. A devotee of the ideal of autonomy must trust that individual women have the moral and intellectual resources to make grown-up decisions about their lives, and to take responsibility for those decisions, and must be utterly free to do so.

Some pro-life campaigners say, 'Ah, but this "act of autonomy" is different to all others because it harms and ultimately destroys another human life – that of the fetus'. I don't deny this. I do think there are massive questions to be asked regarding when a fetus becomes fully human, but I don't deny that a fetus is at least a potential human life and that abortion ends that

potential human life. But I have made a moral judgement, and I've decided that it is worse – infinitely worse – to force a living, breathing, autonomous individual to do something against her will than it is to terminate an as-yet unformed, potential human life. That is the bottom line for me: the freedom and autonomy of a woman is more important than the continued existence of a fetus.

I am comfortable with making this judgement call. Now, are you comfortable with the moral judgement you have made? Which is that it is acceptable in certain circumstances to deprive individuals of the right to act in accordance with their consciences. That it is okay to hamper to the point of destroying a woman's moral autonomy during the nine months that she is pregnant. That a woman loses many of her fundamental freedoms when she becomes pregnant. That it is acceptable for society to force women to do something against her will, with all the terrifying illiberal and anti-social consequences such a tyrannical course of action is likely to have. That women should become, in essence, slaves to circumstance rather than shapers of their circumstances. I'm happy with my moral judgement that it is acceptable to terminate a potential human life in the name of preserving the moral autonomy of an already existing human life, and I'm happy to debate it too, so I hope you are happy with your moral judgement that in the name of protecting potential human life from harm it is acceptable to constrain and even to kill the very stuff of existing human life: decision-making, autonomy, that urge we all have to escape the hand dealt to us by fate or circumstance or accident and to make our lives better, different, more free. So I oppose this motion, and I encourage you to do likewise, for the simple reason that, as I said earlier, there is no abortion culture. There are abortions. And there are women who seek abortions. And more importantly there is the fundamental and really, really good right of human beings to make choices, to exercise their autonomy, and to take responsibility for their lives, regardless of whether others agree or disagree with their decisions. If we must use the c-word, then I call this a culture of freedom.

**Brendan O'Neill** is the editor of *spiked*. The above is a speech he was due to give at Oxford University on 18 November 2014.

*\*The censorious students were successful and the debate was cancelled.*