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Kerry Doesn't Know What a Right Is **by Sheldon Richman**

Not that this disqualifies him from being president, but Senator John F. Kerry proved in Friday's debate that he misunderstands America's founding philosophy and the U.S. Constitution. (If that disqualified someone from being president, few would qualify.)

Kerry showed his ignorance when asked why someone who regards abortion as murder should be forced to pay for it. Regardless of one's position on abortion, the question is perfectly reasonable.

Kerry's answer was perfectly unreasonable. In part he said, "You have to afford people their constitutional rights. And that means ... making certain that you don't deny a poor person the right to be able to have whatever the Constitution affords them if they can't afford it otherwise."

In other words, to have a right to something means that under some circumstances you are entitled to have other people pay for it. Therefore, if no one is willing to pay, your right has been violated. That is quite ridiculous.

Rights cannot imply positive obligations, but only the negative obligation to abstain from interfering with rightful activity. All rights are rooted in self-ownership — the right to one's person and body. (Believers in the legitimacy of abortion claim to understand this.) The right to one's person logically extends to the things one honestly acquires, including money. That's why common theft is universally regarded as wrong. Thus self-ownership entails the right to one's income.

But if that is so, it is wrong for the government to take people's money by force, a form of theft called taxation. If it is wrong to take someone's money without his consent, it is even worse to take it for a cause that is morally repugnant to the victim.

Thus it is a patent contradiction to argue that the right to abortion legitimizes forcing others to pay for it. One right cannot require the violation of another. What Kerry is really saying is that women who can't pay for abortions have rights superior to those of other people. What possible grounds could there be for that absurdity?

In formal terms, the right to have an abortion is like the right to have a car. One may say that a person has a right to have a car if we understand that to mean that one has a right to acquire a car through voluntary exchange. Voluntary exchange, of course, means that both buyer and seller consent to the transaction. A car thief may not invoke the right to a car to justify his illicit activity, and the desire to have a car does not warrant forcing others to pay for it.

Similarly, the right to an abortion can mean no more than the right to engage in a particular sort of voluntary exchange. No one would think it legitimate if the government forced unwilling doctors to perform abortions. Yet others are forced to pay for them, and many people see nothing wrong with that. What's the difference? In the first case, labor is taken; in the second, money is taken. But money is the fruit of labor.

Kerry sank further into absurdity when he said that although he objects to abortion, "I can't take what is an article of faith for me and legislate it for someone who doesn't share that article of faith." This statement was either sloppy or deceptive. He wasn't asked about outlawing abortion. He was asked about forcing conscientious objectors to pay for it. In fact, by supporting compulsory funding, he favors exactly what he says he opposes: legislating his article of faith (that everyone should pay for abortion) for someone who doesn't share that article of faith.

To his credit President Bush said tax money would not be used to pay for abortions. But he's caught in his own contradiction. If people who believe that abortion is murder should not be forced to pay for it, why should those of us who believe his war in Iraq is murder have to pay for *it*?

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