

Abortion and Morality

Richard Taylor and Jeanne Caputo

The effort to recriminalize abortion represents the first attempt in our history to base legislation on a purely metaphysical consideration—in this case, on the supposition that “life” somehow begins “at the moment of conception.” It is also the first time that a serious effort has been made to revoke a constitutional right by constitutional amendment.

The fact that the underlying supposition is metaphysical is equivalent to saying it is unprovable—which is in this case obvious. There is no “moment” of conception. It is a complex process involving the bonding of the genetic material of two gametes. And the question of when a fertilized ovum becomes a “human being” is clearly unanswerable, being a dispute about words, not biology. Most fertilized ova, even after they are well into the complex process of development, never become implanted in the womb at all. They are simply discarded by nature. So, if, as the Moral Majority declares, God is the creator of the very nature that produces this result, this seems to make God the supreme abortionist!

Beyond all the metaphysical, moral, and theological verbiage, however, are certain facts that ought to have a sobering effect, facts that say a lot about human suffering and the capacity for evil that lies in the proposals to curtail the right to abortion.

Abortions are not the “easy way out” for free, godless, pleasure-seeking, and liberated modern women. They are needed most often by the unwed, nonadult victims of urban poverty. In the population centers of New York City and Washington, D.C.,

the number of abortions exceeds the number of live births.¹ In Idaho, by contrast, the ratio is about one to ten. One in three abortions are sought by girls eighteen and nineteen. Of those under fifteen, more than two-thirds are nonwhite. The white middle-class moralist of the plains who piously intones that “abortion is murder” is rarely thinking of the black teen-age victims of rape or ghetto psychology, or of the immense suffering that his proposals would engender there.

There were about a million and a half abortions in the United States in 1978. Over a half-million more (est. 641,000) were needed by women who were either too poor or too far from a clinic to get one. The effect of the Hyde amendment, denying Medicaid assistance for abortion, which began to be implemented in late 1977, has been to increase the number of unwanted births precisely among the disadvantaged. It has, of course, had no effect at all upon women able to afford legal abortion.

Dr. George Ryan, president of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, has estimated that passage of this “Human Life Bill” would add about \$40 billion a year to the welfare costs of the nation. Of the approximately million and a half pregnancies aborted each year, perhaps half would have resulted in live births had abortion been illegal—because these women would not have been able to afford illegal abortions or abortions in other countries. Dr. Ryan conservatively estimated that two-thirds of these children would have been welfare recipients and that each such misbegotten child would have been eligible for about \$100,000 before reaching maturity—and, he might have added, then this dismal cycle would have been repeated in another generation.

However, even these appalling figures do not touch the real and overwhelming cost

of such legislation. Gerald W. Lynch, chairman of the New York City Police Foundation, has noted that urban crime originates in the so-called criminogenic family; that is, that the vast majority of criminals have been deprived of a stable early family life. Economically disadvantaged from birth, unknown to the men who sired them, and unwanted by the girls who bore them, they have little chance. Born into hopelessness, crime and violence appear to them as their only real opportunities—and taxpayers are faced with the additional burden of providing more police, increasingly expensive prison facilities bursting with inmates, and more desperate pleas for the death penalty. The police meanwhile become cynical as they watch the inexorable process, and politicians talk foolishly about school prayer, motherhood, and family values! Meanwhile, they push for “human life” legislation, whose only effect would be to exacerbate these problems to the point of overwhelming our entire social structure.

We see the hollowness of the moralizers’ claim to “promote life” when we actually look at instances of the deep suffering their policies create. These are from time to time noted in the press, but we personally know of a child who was thirteen years old, mentally retarded, schizophrenic, black, being used by her mother as a prostitute, and pregnant. When a social worker made the preliminary inquiry about the possibility of abortion, she was met, in the very first telephone call, with the brick wall of religious opposition. The last we heard concerning this pathetic child—who did not have the mental capacity to know she was going to have a baby, much less to take care of it—she had been sent to a “home for unwed mothers,” had borne the child, and was herself, it was joyously reported, learning to eat with fork and spoon! The baby must be about fifteen now—old enough, if a girl, to be having her own children. When we described this case to a leader of the Moral Majority, his bland and automatic response was, “I’m sure some family would have been glad to adopt that child.”

Morality, which one would think ought to have some connection with reducing suffering, has an enormous capacity to make people quite blind to suffering when it occurs.

Note

1. Data cited are from *Family Planning Perspectives*, vol. 13, January and February 1981; the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services *Annual Summary* for 1978; and the *New York Times*, March 31, 1982, editorial page. •

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Singer Responds to Bullough

Vern Bullough, in "A Dissenting View," which follows my article, "My Ordeal at Long Beach" (FI, Winter 1982-83), criticizes teaching practices that I would also criticize. They do not resemble my practices.

Despite my use of the phrase "totally self-disclosing," it is not true that I require gay people to come out. By that phrase I meant that students were to be frank and open in small group discussions about such topics as masturbation. Further, students had the option of submitting sensitive written assignments to my gay or feminist co-instructors rather than to me.

Sexology is of course more than "wide-eyed prurient voyeurism." Field trips constituted less than 10 percent of class or assignment time. All were optional; none were required. No "participation" was required on any of them. At least two instructors briefed the students and accompanied them on sensitive field trips. Students were not encouraged to participate in unorthodox sexuality on the field trips or at any other time.

Students were permitted to write about novel sexual experiences as part of an assignment if they first consulted with me about their intentions and followed stringent guidelines to avoid personal risk. It is not true that this practice is uncommon or unethical. Optional written assignments on novel sexual behaviors such as masturbation, pelvic self-exam, role reversal dates, etc., are common in sexuality classes in this region. Further, to deny students the opportunity to examine in writing their own sexual behaviors would be to deprive them of a uniquely valuable experience. It would be incongruous to instruct students in a sexuality course that they never use their own experiences as illustrations or as subject matter in written assignments. And it would be a violation of their rights—students, too, have academic freedom to discuss and analyze what they choose.

Students were never "required" to do anything uncomfortable. They were advised on three separate occasions about the possibly threatening nature of my class before they enrolled in it: once in the Bulletin and schedule of classes; once in a required pre-enrollment personal interview with me; and again on the first day of class. Students

were informed of alternative sexuality classes they might enroll in if they were uncomfortable with mine. Such carefully guarded multiple options was the key factor in repeated approval of my course by university agents—before the attacks started.

My professional background in sexuality includes all of the usual self-education of currently active sex professionals, plus the following: (1) Several scientific articles in submission to or in revision for the *Journal of Sex Research*. (2) Co-founder, associate editor, and editor of the journal *Alternative Lifestyles*. (3) Manuscript referee for the *Journal of Sex Research*. (4) Reviewer of sexuality texts for virtually all the major publishers in the area. (5) Author of popular articles on sexuality; author and producer of visual media for the National Sex Forum. (6) Active leadership for ten years in various national and local alternative-lifestyle groups, gay-rights groups, etc.

I have no apologies to make about my standing in the field of sexology. Likewise, my students were asked to be analytic and conceptual about sex; that was their primary mission, not "prurient observation."

Finally, Bullough is arguably correct in asserting that my resignation was a strategic error. I did not resign for strategic reasons, however, but for personal ones: because my presence was endangering others, and because my mistakes in public relations were causing untold trouble and embarrassment to my colleagues. I was not personally comfortable with continuing to be a source of such disruption for so many others. For this reason, I have not regretted my resignation.

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Abortion and Public Policy

Marvin Kohl urges us not to lose sight of the moral and metaphysical principles involved in the abortion issue (FI, Winter 1982-83, p. 42). But if anything should be obvious by now, it is that it is precisely such principles, whether coming from religion or philosophy, that have exacerbated this problem. Jeanne Caputo and I were trying, in our brief discussion (FI, Fall 1982, p. 32) to redirect attention to the overwhelming human suffering that the anti-abortionists' cruel crusade promises to yield.

It has always astonished me that theologians sometimes seize upon abstract principles dear to themselves and then follow them right down to their logical conclusions without the slightest heed to the misery they sometimes entail. Cardinal Newman comes to mind, with his fatuous suggestion that it would be better for the heavens to fall, and the earth's population perish in deep misery, than for one poor soul to tell a deliberate lie or steal a single farthing. That idea, that the *moral* issue is somehow the paramount one, is the constant theme of the Church Fathers—one thinks at once of St. Augustine and Tertullian—and also, of course, of the contemporary "moral majority," as well as of a great many academic philosophers. They seem never to ask themselves: "What would be the actual result, over the generations, if our principles were made *laws*?" Instead, they talk of moral principles or, worse yet, metaphysical ones. The comfort of these spares them the necessity of actually looking at the unpleasant facts that sometimes do not blend well with principles.

There is no principle of religious ethics that anyone knows to be true, though many are embraced by faith—often at great cost in terms of their actual consequences. Similarly, there is no principle of philosophical ethics that anyone knows to be true, though philosophers, like everyone else, sometimes have strong feelings in this area. Marvin Kohl does not know that there is anything wrong with destroying a fertilized ovum, zygote, blastula, blastocyst, or fetus, nor does labeling one of these "human" alter anything. He writes of "moral anguish," but of the several fine people I know who have chosen abortion none has felt the least trace of this, nor do I see how anything would have been improved if they had.

Questions of a woman's control over her own reproductive function, or of the right of the state to compel women in a free society to bear misbegotten children, are questions of public policy and law, not abstract ethics. They are not going to be resolved by resort to religious and philosophical principles, nor elevated by talk about moral anguish, but by taking a good look at the actual and predictable consequences of policies proposed for adoption. These, unlike religious and philosophical moral principles, we *can* sometimes at least approximately know and foresee.

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