



ABORTION

Abortion: Setting the Scene

No social topic has been more hotly debated in the public square over the last forty years than the issue of abortion. It divides political candidates, mobilises electorates, and profoundly influences government policy. Our society accepts abortion as a legitimate medical procedure. Nevertheless, this procedure has only become an accepted social norm performed on a large scale within the last century, beginning with Lenin's legalisation of all abortions in the Soviet Union in 1920.¹ This unprecedented step was followed by the legalisation of abortion in Scandinavia in the 30's, Asia in the 40's, Western Europe in the 60's, and the United States in the 70's.²

In the United Kingdom, the practice of abortion was illegal under the Infant Life Preservation Act of 1929 (ILPA) and the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 (OAPA). The law changed, however, when Parliament provided exceptions to the ILPA and the OAPA by enacting the Abortion Act of 1967. This Act legalised abortion in the UK for the first time where the doctors performing the abortion comply with the terms of the Abortion Act.

By determining that abortion was necessary, Parliament profoundly changed the moral structure of our society. Apart from the reprehensibility of a practice that prematurely ends the lives of innocent human beings, the philosophical implications of abortion have a profoundly damaging impact on the moral structure of society. Essentially, the acceptance of abortion is the result of a misguided philosophy of the most fundamental of all social values—the value of human life. Without the appropriate respect for human dignity, society will begin to implode because its foundational principles have been swept away in the name of human autonomy.

Tracing the History of Abortion in the United Kingdom

The Abortion Act of 1967 ushered in a new era in the United Kingdom. The Act provided exceptions to the ILPA and OAPA, which had prohibited abortion. In so doing, the Act allowed for an abortion to be performed up to 28

¹ Population: Marx, Lenin, and Their Followers, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* entry.

² Saunders, P., "Abortion and Euthanasia", *Word Alive 1998 Lecture Series* (Christian Medical Fellowship), http://www.cmf.org.uk/ethics/word_alive_98_lecture_1.htm.

weeks' gestation if continuing the pregnancy would cause greater risk of physical or mental injury to the mother or existing children than the risk of having the abortion itself. Additionally, the Act permitted abortions to be performed up until birth in the following circumstances: (1) if abortion was necessary to prevent "grave permanent injury" to the mother's physical or mental health, (2) if continuing the pregnancy would cause greater risk to the life of the mother than aborting the baby, or (3) if there was a substantial risk that if born, the child would have "such physical or mental abnormalities as to be seriously handicapped".

Then in 1990, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act amended the Abortion Act by lowering the upper time limit for abortion from 28 weeks to 24 weeks, while still allowing abortions up to birth in the circumstances delineated in the Abortion Act. Interestingly, the Abortion Act does *not* apply to Northern Ireland, which is still governed by the Offences Against the Person Act of 1861, which makes it an offence to procure a miscarriage "unlawfully". Nevertheless, though abortions are illegal in Northern Ireland, they are still occasionally performed, depending upon the construction given to the word "unlawfully".

The abortion industry in the UK has seen steady growth, with almost seven million abortions having been performed in the UK since the Abortion Act took effect. Furthermore, one out of three women in England has had an abortion, and approximately one in four pregnancies in England end in abortion.³ To put it starkly, more than 200,000 abortions are performed annually in the UK: this amounts to one abortion taking place every two minutes and forty seconds.⁴

Fortunately, in Great Britain, the amendments to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008, which sought to further liberalise the legal regime that controls abortion, for the already-massive abortion industry, were not reached due to Parliamentary timetabling. However, moves to lower the abortion limit from 24 weeks to a lower time limit were defeated and so the status quo was maintained.

³ Birth statistics as published annually by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Abortion statistics published annually by ONS and from 2002 by the Department of Health for England and Wales. For the figures for 2008, see:

http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsStatistics/DH_099285.

⁴ Saunders, P., "Innocent blood", *Triple Helix* 2007; Autumn, see <http://www.cmf.org.uk/literature/content.asp?context=article&id=1986>.

Exploring the Moral Status of the Human Foetus⁵

The number of abortions has increased steadily. It is also possible that the abortion law will be further liberalised. This is a matter for serious concern because abortion involves something more fundamental and precious than a woman's "choice" to terminate her pregnancy. A society that accepts abortion assumes that the foetus does not enjoy the same moral status as a human being who has been born. If we accept that the foetus enjoys an equivalent moral status to the baby who has been born, we are confronted with the reality that we are ending innocent human lives in the name of "choice". If on the other hand the foetus is nothing more than a potential human being with a lower moral status, we may confidently support abortion legalisation where vital countervailing interests of human beings are at stake. In both cases, the ramifications of this question are profound.

a. Human Life: What Does Scripture Say?

Frequently, we conflate our perception of reality with reality as it actually is. For example, when we gaze into a pool of water and spy an object at its bottom, we may firmly believe our depth perception is correct as to the object's distance and placement. Unfortunately, however, we can't take into account with the naked eye the effect that refracted sunlight has on our perception of the true depth of that object. In much the same way, we may not perceive that the foetus, especially in its early stages of development as a zygote, blastocyst or embryo, is actually a human being. What is important to remember, however, is that our perception may be distorted because we do not have a proper perspective concerning human life. Though we may have been socially conditioned to view the foetus as nothing more than a potential human being, Scripture unequivocally affirms that, even in its earliest stages of development in its mother's womb, the foetus is a human being.⁶ To be a human being means that we are unique. Even

⁵ Throughout this publication, the word "foetus" will be used to refer to the unborn child at any stage of gestation, whether a zygote, blastocyst, embryo or foetus.

⁶ Psalm 139:13-16: "For you created me in my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be." See also Genesis 25:22-23; Psalm 22:10; Jeremiah 1:5; Hosea 12:3; and Luke 1:41-44.

more than that, it means that we are created in God's image ("the *imago Dei*")⁷ and imbued with a God-given purpose.

This unique quality of being human has been recognised in the laws of virtually every society—both Christian and non-Christian. In most societies human life is understood to be of the most fundamental value. Ask even the most uneducated citizen what the most basic law of any society is, and he will most likely tell you, "Thou shalt not murder".⁸ This trans-generational and trans-societal commonality is *not* coincidental, but is rather an evidence of the basic recognition of God-ordained truth that ending innocent life is murder—an unequivocal wrong.⁹ In sum, the human foetus enjoys, from the moment of conception as a zygote, the same moral status as a human being who has been born. Furthermore, this equivalent moral status entitles the foetus to be treated with the same dignity and respect supposedly accorded to every human being both in fact and in law.

b. Life Science: Is the Foetus a Human Being?

Having looked at the scriptural perspective on life, some people may still not be convinced that the foetus is a human being. There may be several reasons for this scepticism, but they boil down to the primary concern: the foetus, especially in its early stages of gestation, has not developed into a form that we easily recognise as human. Shortly after conception, the sentience of the foetus is highly debatable, although there have been signs that, as early as six weeks' gestation, embryos experience pain.¹⁰ However, this is beside the point for one crucial reason: human beings have a quintessence that is not simply the sum of their physical capabilities. Science clearly indicates that, at the moment of conception, a new being comes into existence with its own genetic code and unique human chromosomal characteristics.¹¹ Our society, however, is uncomfortable with according the foetus the same status as a human being who has been born. For a number of reasons, this view of human life is disturbing.

The view that, at some point of development, the foetus becomes a human being is not unusual. At some level, it seems to comport with our sense of what human beings should be able to do. Modern man has been inundated

⁷ Genesis 1:26-27.

⁸ Exodus 20:13.

⁹ Genesis 9:5; Jeremiah 19:3-4; and Proverbs 6:16-17.

¹⁰ McCullagh and Saunders, "Do fetuses feel pain?", *British Medical Journal* (25 January, 1997).

¹¹ Saunders, P., "The moral status of the embryo", *Nucleus* 2006; Summer, at pp. 17-26.

with the message that a person's worth is dependent upon what he can, or does, "do". What we do not realise is that this belief directly contradicts the scriptural principle that, having been created in God's image, we are special because we *are*, not because of what we can *do*. Nevertheless, this principle of human functionality pervades our culture. It may be most clearly seen in our belief that a foetus—despite the presence of the requisite genetic material of human beings—must yet achieve its status as a human person. This is the "personhood theory", which essentially holds that there is a distinction between human beings and human persons, with foetuses falling under the former category.¹² The threshold for reaching personhood status varies according to who is doing the evaluation. For some, personhood is evaluated according to the ability to think, reason and speak, while for others personhood is the stage at which the foetus is sentient (able to perceive and feel).

Defining "humanness" according to stages of development is problematic, however. Several things, but primarily, the personhood theory and its correlating functionality principle are troubling, because we are created with an intrinsic value that is not dependent upon our functionality in society. We are unique because of who we are—human beings created in the image of an incorruptible God. Practically speaking, however, we should be deeply concerned with the personhood theory, because of what it predicts for the social value of not only the unborn, but also of any human being. Simply put, when we allow our value as human beings to be measured by a socially-determined standard, we have desecrated our human dignity and subjected ourselves to others' opinions. We have traded our intrinsic, unchangeable value for a malleable social construct.

Ultimately, we need to ask ourselves what a foetus lacks that we have and secondly, whether what the foetus lacks is something that is essential to being human, or whether it is merely a characteristic that is a *result* of the essence which resides in human beings in *all* stages of development: foetus, baby, adolescent, or adult. At conception, the foetus has a fundamental nature or "essence". The basic elements of a human being are present. All the foetus needs for continued development is food, water, oxygen and an environment

¹² See Warren, M., "On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion" in *Do the Right Thing*, at pp. 171-75.

conducive to survival.¹³ When we speak of the “essence” of something, we are basically referring to its “inner nature”—its ordered unity of ultimate capacities.¹⁴ The essence of a being is that without which it is unable to exist. In sum, the essence is fundamental, basic, and elemental to the existence of that being.

Take, for example, a newborn baby. The newborn is helpless and entirely dependent upon others to provide it with milk, shelter, and nurturing. It is in every way as dependent upon its parents for development and for survival as the foetus. What separates the two are physical characteristics that we *believe* are the essence of humans, but that are actually the product of the true essence of human beings. At birth, the child is unable to reason, to communicate linguistically, to ambulate, or do any number of other things most people would believe are essentially human. These are indeed human *characteristics*, but they are not what separate a human being from a lower order of creature.

The *capacity* to develop those characteristics, which is present in both the foetus and the newborn, is what characterises a human being. The failure to develop those human characteristics does not make a being any less human, for the capacity to do those things has been, and still is, present in the human being at all stages of development. If this were not so, we would be able—once having “obtained” personhood—to lose that personhood if we lost the ability to do the things that we believe are essentially human. This is a very real problem. I may be an individual who functions perfectly, with the capacity to talk, laugh, reason, and walk. However, if I were to suddenly fall into a coma, I would no longer be a person, because, in this view, although I have the essential *capacity* to do these things, I do not have present ability to do them. At some point, the insidious error of the personhood theory becomes evident. This view of human value is an affront to our God-given dignity—a dignity given to us, not because of what we have done, but because of who we are.

¹³ Beckwith, F.J., *Abortion, Bioethics and Personhood: A Philosophical Reflection* (19 November, 2001), The Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity, http://www.cbhd.org/resources/bioethics/beckwith_2001-11-19.htm.

¹⁴ Moreland, J.P., “Humanness, Personhood, and the Right to Die,” *Faith and Philosophy* (January 1995).

Unravelling Pro-Abortion Arguments

In the face of compelling biblical and scientific arguments against abortion, our society has nevertheless wholeheartedly embraced abortion as a social good. A number of arguments are marshalled in favour of abortion, some more compelling than others. However, they all have one thing in common: all suffer from a fatal misunderstanding of the value of human life.

a. Autonomy: It's a Woman's "Choice"

The most commonly cited pro-abortion argument category is the cry of "it's a woman's choice". In fact, it is often used so smugly that one cannot help but feel that pro-abortion advocates believe that there is no higher good than the good of "choice". This view is understandable. After all, we are inundated with a "me-first!" philosophy of life wherever we turn. We have unwittingly been enticed into a culture that lauds choice over principle, autonomy over ethics, and personal "rights" over what *is* right. In the context of abortion, the personal choice argument is that we, as rational human beings, have the right to make our own decisions and to go about our own lives as we choose. Though this may sound appealing, it is not quite so attractive when the choice in question means ending the life of an innocent human being.

This philosophy of self-determination and unbridled autonomy is fundamentally flawed. Scripturally speaking, this outlook falsely assumes that we control our own destinies—something completely out-of-line with Biblical ethics.¹⁵ Scripture clearly indicates, time and again, that we are not our own, but have been purchased with the blood of Christ.¹⁶ We are endowed with a God-given purpose and, having been redeemed from death to life spiritually, we are called to exemplify this truth in all we do physically. We must therefore, reject this culture of death.

However, even apart from the philosophical problems with self-determination, there are practical problems with making the "right to choose" the all-important criterion. If we discard the paper-thin wrapping of the "woman's choice" argument, we find that it has no substance in reality. The simplest example will illustrate the point. Even a toddler understands the basic principle that he cannot have everything he wants. If he attempts to touch a hot stove, he is rebuked. He can pout, throw a temper-tantrum, and stomp off in a fit of anger. None of this, however, will sway the good parent. The parent is curtailing

¹⁵ Acts 17:25; I Corinthians 6:19-20; Psalms 104:29; and Job 1:21.

¹⁶ I Corinthians 6:19-20.

“choice”, but the parent is doing so for both the good of the child and the family as a whole. In much the same way, we do not have unlimited autonomy to do what we like, if for no other reason than that our actions can have harmful repercussions for the rest of society. Consequently, society decides what to allow and disallow. Someone’s “choice” will always be denied, for we do not live in airtight bubbles, separate from one another. In other words, the mother’s “right” to choose an abortion, denies the right of the unborn child or foetus to live.

We live in community with one another, communities in which *morality* (yes, morality) is legislated for the communal good. Ultimately, the purpose of all moral law is to protect and foster *life*, not choice. When we no longer respect the pre-eminent value of human life, we have strayed from the basis of law and are operating solely on the basis of social determination. Our value is what others say it is. What was once touted as “choice” becomes subject to the totalitarianism of unprincipled majority dominance.

b. Abortion as a Necessity

So, even admitting that the foetus is a life, pro-abortion advocates often argue that abortion is a necessary evil. Essentially, the argument is that, although abortion is admittedly undesirable, people must have a way of dealing with unwanted pregnancies. This approach often marshals the “it’s the lesser of two evils” argument, pleading that where women do not have legal access to abortion, they will avail themselves of illegal and unsafe abortion provision in the “back streets”. Such was the argument used to persuade Members of Parliament to pass the Abortion Act 1967, together with the supposed “safeguards” in its “restrictive” wording, yet the numbers of abortions have risen well beyond any anticipated figures and abortion in the UK has virtually become a routine form of contraception, rather than the exceptional provision it was meant to be.¹⁷

This argument may also be made rather poignantly by using the victim of rape as an example of the type of situation where abortion would be a necessity. After all, how could we *force* a woman to bring the child of a rapist into the world? The shock value of this argument reverberates with us, and we slowly nod our heads in agreement. Rape is a tragic experience for the woman, both emotionally and physically. Unfortunately, we seem to check our reason at the door of emotion when we address this type of situation.

¹⁷ See: http://www.aliveandkickingcampaign.org/press_releases/?id=15 and <http://www.aliveandkickingcampaign.org/features/?id=33>.

After all, the child conceived through rape is no less human than the child conceived out of love. The difference lies in the reasons why they were conceived, not in who they are. Moreover, is it permissible to end someone's life simply because one associates painful experiences with this person? The principled, honest answer is "no". The bottom-line is that we would never sanction the murder of someone who, through no fault of his own, was the cause of grief to someone else. Consequently, it is not permissible for us to sanction the very same thing when it concerns the unborn child.

c. Compassionate Abortion

Finally, pro-abortion advocates frequently argue that abortions must be performed, even up to birth out of compassion because the foetus is expected to have a significant physical or mental defect. Essentially, this argument is based on the functionality principle that justifies eugenics, infanticide and euthanasia. *Society*—not God—makes a judgment about the quality of life of the unborn child. Philosophically, what is lost in this "quality of life/compassion" argument is the principle that murder—even if done in the name of compassion—is never acceptable.¹⁸ Practically speaking, when we begin to make unprincipled value judgments about someone's quality of life, we have discarded *our* own objective value, by virtue of having been created in the *imago Dei*, and we have placed ourselves at the mercy of someone else's opinion. In the process, we have short-circuited God's plan for enriching our lives and have falsely concluded that there are, indeed, some lives that aren't worth living.¹⁹

Abortion's Consequences for the Woman

Frequently, pro-life advocates focus on abortion's consequences for the mother, to the exclusion of other more fundamental reasons for why abortion is wrong—namely, that it is murder of the unborn child. Though abortion does have quantifiable adverse effects on women, making this the primary argument against abortion only reinforces the self-centred philosophy that motivates abortion in the first place. In other words, if the woman chooses not to have an abortion, she is only doing so because she thinks it is in *her* best interests, not

¹⁸ Exodus 20:13.

¹⁹ See Barnes, S., "I'm not a saint, just a parent," *The Times*, 13th November 2006, see: http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/article633433.ece.

because she believes that the unborn foetus is a human being. Thus, in some sense, we have not combated the “me-first!” philosophy, but have only unwittingly reinforced it. Simply put, life is not about what we want. Society regularly restricts our ability to do what we want and makes us do what we ought. The philosophy of personal autonomy is empty. This “my choice is all that matters” philosophy is clearly not the basis for any stable social structure.

This does not mean, however, that we cannot supplement our fundamental argument that the foetus is a human being with empirical evidence that abortion also adversely affects women’s health. The truth is that, since 2003, there has been a great deal of new evidence showing that abortion can have serious physical and psychiatric consequences for women.²⁰ This evidence shows that abortion tends to cause the following psychiatric problems: increased psychiatric hospitalisation, increased outpatient attendance, increased substance abuse during subsequent pregnancies carried to term, increased death rates from injury, suicide and homicide, and higher rates of major depression, suicidal ideation, and illicit drug dependence.²¹ Finally, abortion can have traumatic psychosocial consequences for women. For instance, post-abortion many women feel the need to “replace” their aborted child, feel distance and/or over-protectiveness toward existing children, are unable to maintain normal routines, experience flashbacks or have significant depression.²² In conclusion, while we shouldn’t focus solely on the consequences of abortion as they relate to women’s health, neither should we ignore the vast array of evidence indicating that abortion can have serious consequences for women, as well as for unborn children.

²⁰ See CMF File 35 (2007), “Consequences of Abortion”, at: <http://www.cmf.org.uk/literature/content.asp?context=article&id=1985> and the Royal College of Psychiatrists’ Position Statement on Women’s Mental Health in Relation to Induced Abortion of 14th March, 2008 at: <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/member/currentissues/mentalhealthandabortion.aspx>.

²¹ See *id.*

²² See *id.*

Conclusion

A renowned twentieth century author, when speaking of society's treatment of its weaker elements, remarked: "If one considers the observation that the worth and dignity of a civilization is judged by the way it treats its weakest members, we cannot help but look back in shame at our past."²³ We must, therefore, boldly venture forth, armed with the knowledge that terrible injustice is daily being committed against the innocent. We must be the voices of the voiceless, the champions of the weak,²⁴ and the standard-bearers of God's light in a darkened world. We *must* persevere. Life is too precious.

²³ Rickes, R., *Social Justice: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow, A Critical Reflection*.

²⁴ See also Psalm 82:3: "Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed."





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