

# ABORTION OR THE UNWANTED CHILD: A CHOICE FOR A HUMANISTIC SOCIETY

James W. Prescott

The anti-abortion movement believes that the fetus, even in its embryonic stage of development, is human life and that any deliberate termination of embryonic or fetal life constitutes an "unjustified" termination of human life—that is, homicide. Conversely, proponents of abortion deny that the fetus is human life, particularly during its embryonic stage of development, and therefore believe that the termination of fetal life does not constitute homicide. Further, proponents of abortion justify the termination of fetal life by asserting that the woman has the ultimate right to control her own body; that no individual or group of individuals has any right to force a woman to carry a pregnancy that she does not want; that parents have the moral responsibility and constitutional obligation to bring into this world only children who are wanted, loved, and provided for, so that they can realize their human potential; and that children have certain basic human and constitutional rights, which include the right to have loving, caring parents, sound health, protection from harm, and a social and physical environment that permits healthy human development and the assurance of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

These conflicts of "rights"—namely, the presumed rights of the fetus, the rights of the woman, the rights of the child, the presumed rights of adults to unlimited reproduction, and the rights of society—need careful consideration in evaluating the morality of abortion. How do we order the priorities of competing "rights"? Since rights confer obligations, does the failure to meet those obligations mitigate or abrogate the rights that gave rise to those obligations?

For example, when conception occurs in a uterine environment

known to be adverse or a child is permitted to be born into an adverse environment, both of which threaten or deny the child's basic human and constitutional rights and opportunities for normal human development, should moral and constitutional questions be raised concerning the rights of such parentage? Is the right to parentage absolute? Do adults who are incapable of responsible behavior (for example, the severely mentally retarded) have the right to bring into this world children who will be neglected and abused and who will become infant- and child-mortality statistics? Is it not more moral and humane to prevent a life than to permit a life that may experience deprivation, suffering, and perhaps a brutal early death, which many of our child-abuse and infant- and child-mortality statistics reflect? Is mere physical existence our highest goal and greatest moral burden? Or is the quality of human life our highest goal and greatest moral burden? What are the social and moral criteria for justifying the sacrifice of human life? Perhaps the justifications for a "just war" should be considered in relation to certain arguments for and against abortion.

These questions of moral behavior, like that of abortion itself, are unlikely to be resolved by religious convictions or theological doctrine, since such convictions and doctrine vary considerably among free people and are, at best, arbitrary in their formulation and implementation. The extensive debates on abortion clearly indicate that no philosophical, religious, or scientific consensus exists concerning the question of whether fetal life is human life. A similar lack of consensus exists concerning the moral and ethical nature of the abortive act. Further, the US Constitution does not permit the legislation of religious beliefs or doctrine.

Consequently, it would appear constructive to examine the abortion question from a different perspective. Specifically, what are the effects of denied abortions—that is, of compulsory childbirth or of being an unwanted child—upon the development of the child; what are the consequences to society when parents are denied the right to have only wanted children; and what are the characteristics of societies that permit abortion in contrast to those that punish abortion. An examination of these questions from the perspective of the behavioral and social sciences, rather than from that of theology, should provide a basis to evaluate the merits of abortion on different grounds and to clarify the motivations and



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The unwanted child. An example of child-abuse. This infant had scalded milk thrown on his face.

some of the social and psychological characteristics of the pro-abortion and anti-abortion personality.

### Consequences of Denied Abortion: The Scandinavian Study

One of the most important studies that tried to evaluate the consequences of being an unwanted child upon the development of the child was conducted in 1966 by H. Forssman and I. Thuwe of the Department of Psychiatry at Goteburg University in Sweden.<sup>1</sup> Therapeutic abortion was officially legalized in Sweden in 1939 and liberalized in 1946 to include mental-health criteria. These Swedish investigators examined the development of children from birth to age twenty-one who were born during the years 1939 to 1941 to mothers who had applied for abortion but were denied. The sample included one hundred and twenty children, who were compared with a control group of children whose mothers had not applied for abortion. Of the unwanted children, 27 percent were born out of wedlock, whereas only 8 percent of the control children were born out of wedlock.

The statistically significant differences between the unwanted and the control children can be summarized as follows:

1. Sixty percent of the unwanted children had an insecure childhood, in contrast to only 28 percent of the control children. Criteria for an insecure childhood included official reports about unsatisfactory home conditions: the child was removed from the home by authorities; the child was placed in a foster or children's home; the parents were divorced or deceased before the child was fifteen; the child was born out of wedlock and never legitimized.

2. Twenty-eight percent of the unwanted children had received some form of psychiatric care, compared to 15 percent of the control children.

3. Eighteen percent of the unwanted children were registered with child-welfare boards for delinquency, compared to 8 percent of the control children.

4. Fourteen percent of the unwanted children had some form of higher education, compared to 33 percent of the control children.

5. Fourteen percent of the unwanted children received some form of welfare between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one, in contrast to 2.5 percent of the control children.

6. And finally, while 68 percent of the control children showed

none of the social disabilities mentioned above, only 48 percent of the unwanted children were free of such characteristics.

It is worth noting that many of the differences listed were found in different social classes. In summary, unwanted children are more than twice as likely to suffer the social, emotional, and educational disadvantages as wanted children, on a variety of measures. Unwanted children appear to present certain costs to society: increased delinquency, a higher number of welfare recipients, a more poorly educated citizenry, and a greater number of psychiatric problems.

### Child Abuse and Neglect: Consequences of Being Unwanted

The killing of a child by its parents is an extreme outcome of being unwanted and is the final act of child abuse. Roman civil law recognized the right of the father to maim and kill his offspring (*patria potestas*), and a number of cultures have practiced the killing of female infants because they were valued less than male infants. Ceremonial sacrifices of infants and children have been documented in a number of cultures, and Abraham's willingness to kill his son for religious purposes is a biblical case in point. But the killing of one's own child in a modern civilization is uniformly met with revulsion and horror—even though child abuse, which is the precursor of filicide (the killing of one's own children) and neonaticide (the killing of the newborn), is widespread today. The central issue here is the role of abortion in preventing unwanted children and helping reduce the incidence of child abuse and infanticide. It should be recognized that being "wanted" and being "unwanted" are difficult psychological concepts, and E. Pohlman's " 'Wanted' and 'Unwanted': Toward Less Ambiguous Definition" should be consulted for a more extensive treatment of this subject.<sup>2</sup>

Phillip J. Resnick, in a study of one hundred thirty-one filicides, found that 49 percent were associated with "altruistic" motives—for example, to relieve suffering; 21 percent were attributed to parental psychoses; 26 percent were attributed to the child's being "unwanted," which includes the child-abuse syndrome, and 4 percent were attributed to revenge on the spouse. Statistics, however, fail to convey the horror and tragedy of parents killing their own children, particularly when it could be prevented.<sup>3</sup>

Several of the case histories are so grueling that they cannot help but raise the question of whether it is more humane to prevent human life than to compel it into an existence that possibly could result in a cruel and painful death. Dr. Resnick cites several means by which infants and children are killed. He states: "Head trauma, strangulation, and drowning were the most frequent methods of filicide. Fathers tended to use more-active methods, such as striking, squeezing, or stabbing, whereas mothers more often drowned, suffocated, or gassed their victims."

It is unnecessary to catalogue the atrocities that are sometimes inflicted upon unwanted children. In Dr. Resnick's study of thirty-seven neonaticides, he found that 83 percent of infant killings were attributed to being "unwanted" by the mother; 11 percent to psychoses; 3 percent to "accidental" murder (child abuse); and 3 percent to "altruism." These infanticides must be seriously considered in any discussion of abortion, since for some people they may seem to be the only alternative to compulsory pregnancies.<sup>4</sup>

The 1965 national fertility study reported by L. Bumpass and C. F. Westoff showed that, for the years 1960 through 1965, 22 percent of all births were unwanted by at least one spouse.<sup>5</sup> This rose to 48 percent and 55 percent for families with five or six children. The greater proportion of unwanted births was reported from low-



income and poorly educated families. Such family characteristics are serious impediments to providing quality care for children.

In addition to "unwanted births," "illegitimate births" also have been related to child abuse and neglect. In 1972, in "Abortion on Request: The Psychiatric Implications," R. A. Schwartz cited statistics that indicate that illegitimate births rose from 3.5 to 9.7 percent during the period from 1940 to 1968 and that 90 percent of those illegitimate births were unwanted,<sup>6</sup> while R. C. Bensing and O. Schroeder reported, in *Homicide in the Urban Community*, that an extremely high illegitimate-birth rate is a good indicator of a high homicide rate.<sup>7</sup>

In a recent study conducted by the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences it was demonstrated that, for a New York City live-birth cohort, the neonatal death rate was two-and-a-half times as great for mothers who were judged to have received inadequate prenatal and postnatal care as for those who received adequate care.<sup>8</sup> This suggests that our infant- and child-mortality rates may be used as an index of societal indifference and parental deprivation and neglect—that is, an index of dehumanization. The United States has one of the highest infant-mortality rates among industrialized nations, ranking fifteenth with a rate of 18.5 per one thousand live births; and this can be attributed primarily to lack of adequate prenatal and postnatal care. There is little question that infants and children who survive depriving social and physical environments have (1) a high risk of arrested educational achievement, (2) low income potential, (3) a greater chance of poor health, and (4) a higher incidence of abnormal social and emotional behaviors, particularly asocial behaviors.

My own studies have shown very high and significant correlations between US infant-mortality rates and homicide rates for the years 1940 to 1967, during which the entire country constituted the statistical sample.<sup>9</sup> In the years 1940 to 1955 from 15 to 25 percent of our homicide rates could be predicted from our infant-mortality rates; in the years 1955 to 1967 from 25 to 75 percent of our homicide rates could be predicted from our infant-mortality rates. The increase in the strength of these relationships indicates that those factors common to homicide and infant mortality are increasing in this country. In other words, it is becoming increasingly accurate to assert that those states that have high infant-mortality rates also have high homicide rates and that those states with low infant-mortality rates have low homicide rates.

The common factors associated with infant mortality, illegitimacy, and homicide assume greater significance in the context of the findings of J. Sklar and B. Berkov, who demonstrated that legalized abortion reduces the number of illegitimate babies.<sup>10</sup> They reported that for the year 1971 an estimated thirty-nine thousand more illegitimate babies and twenty-eight thousand more legitimate babies would have been born if legalized abortion had not been available. It was emphasized that the illegitimate births prevented represent almost one-tenth of all out-of-wedlock children born in the country in 1971. Two other effects of legalized abortion were reported: (1) a reduction of the incidence of pregnancy-related marriages and subsequent marital disruption; and (2) the prevention of illegal abortions, since it was estimated that between two-thirds and three-fourths of all legal abortions in the United States in 1971 were replacements for illegal abortions. These authors concluded that a return to restrictive and repressive abortion laws would result in an increase in illegal abortions, pregnancy-related marriages, and illegitimacy.

Since illegitimacy has been linked to adult homicide and the killing of unwanted infants, it is clear that if abortion can reduce the number of illegitimate and unwanted children it can reduce the potential for future homicides and child abuse.

Given the alternative to abortion—that is, the birth of unwanted children, with all the adverse implications—it is clear that abortion is a beneficent and humanitarian act that values the *quality* of future human life more than the *quantity* of future human life. It is worth mentioning that the principle of the prevention of human life has its precedent in scripture—albeit in a different context—namely, Judas' betrayal of Jesus Christ: "It had been good for that man if he had not been born" (Matthew 26:24). Should this not be equally true for many children who are doomed to a life of misery and abuse, and for some who may meet an early violent death.



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The wanted child. An example of child-affection.

### Cross-Cultural Studies

If abortion represents a disrespect for human life and constitutes an act of "murder," as is sometimes contended, then it would be expected that societies that permit and practice abortion should also be characterized by a disrespect for the quality of human life and by physical violence. This notion was tested by relating the coded scale "Punishment for Abortion" developed by B. C. Ayres to coded scales relating to child-rearing practices,<sup>11</sup> sexual behaviors, physical violence, and other characteristics of human relationships summarized by R. B. Textor from the Human Relations Area Files.<sup>12</sup> Ayres identified eleven cultures that severely punish abortion and twelve cultures that have little or no punishment for abortion. The cultures that severely punish abortion are the Alorese, Ashanti, Azande, Balinese, Chir-Apache, Fon Jivaro, Masai, Sanpoil, Fenda, and Wogeo. The cultures that have little or no punishment for abortion are the Ainu, Chagga, Dobuans, Dusun, Hano, Kurtatchi, Kwakiutl, Lesu, Marshalllese, Papago, Pukapuka, and Tikopia.

The relationships between abortion and other practices of these cultures can be summarized as follows:

55% of cultures that punish abortion practice slavery.  
92% of cultures that do not punish abortion do not practice slavery.

100% of cultures that punish abortion practice polygyny.  
58% of cultures that do not punish abortion do not practice polygyny.

78% of cultures that punish abortion restrict adolescent sexual experience.

67% of cultures that do not punish abortion do not restrict adolescent sexual experience. (Virginity has a high or low value in these cultures.) (P = .08)

88% of cultures that punish abortion punish extramarital sex.  
67% of cultures that do not punish abortion do not punish extramarital sex.

73% of cultures that punish abortion also kill, torture, and mutilate enemy captured in warfare.

80% of cultures that do not punish abortion do not kill, torture, and mutilate enemies captured in warfare.

100% of cultures that punish abortion are patrilineal rather than matrilineal.

71% of cultures that do not punish abortion are matrilineal rather than patrilineal.

70% of cultures that punish abortion place high pressure upon children to develop self-reliance.

78% of cultures that do not punish abortion do not place high pressure upon children to develop self-reliance. (P = .07)

Relationships defined in the five groupings are all significant beyond the .05 level; relationships defined in two are significant at the .08 and .07 levels, respectively.

The data cited, particularly the variables of slavery, torture and murder, and punitive sexuality relating to punishment of abortion, do not support the anti-abortionist point of view that abortion is tantamount to encouraging a more violent society. Rather, it provides support for the opposite point of view; specifically, societies that prevent and punish abortion also show disrespect for human life (the practice of slavery), are physically violent (killing, torturing, and mutilating the enemy), repress the expression of physical affection and pleasure (sexual repression), and place a high value on virginity.

These data, in turn, support the view of those who defend legalized abortion as a moral, humanitarian act that is characterized by a concern for the quality of human life, its integrity and dignity, and believe that these objectives are obtained by not permitting the birth of unwanted children. The most statistically significant findings are that 100 percent of cultures that punish abortion are patrilineal and that 71 percent of matrilineal cultures do not punish abortion. It is clear that the struggle of women for the right of self-determination and control over their own bodies involves the struggle to be free from male domination and authority. In this context it is perhaps not surprising to discover that cultures that enslave women to the bondage of compulsory pregnancy also practice other forms of human slavery.

### Child Abuse and Abortion Punished: A Preliminary Study of Contemporary Social Attitudes

In an effort to determine whether the relationships between abortion, child nurturance, physical violence, and sexuality that were observed in preindustrial societies also exist for contemporary modern societies, a questionnaire was designed to assess these relationships. The Somatosensory Index of Human Affection was administered to ninety-six college students, whose mean age was nineteen years, and was factor analyzed. This statistical technique yields quantitative relationships among the variables or test questions. This questionnaire was administered and analyzed by Dr. Douglas Wallace of the Human Sexuality Program at the University of California School of Medicine at San Francisco.

The table below provides a factor structure—that is, a profile or description of a personality syndrome—that indicates the degree to which the attitudes and behaviors reflected in the questions belong together naturally. The numbers attached to each statement are called factor coefficients and indicate the weight that each statement has on the factor. A weight of 100 percent is represented by a coefficient of 1.0. Percent weights are determined by squaring the factor coefficient; for example, .70<sup>2</sup> is 49 percent. Thus a statement with .70 has twice the weight of a statement with .50 (49 percent versus 25 percent). In short, for nineteen-year-old college students these descriptive statements define a personality profile. Students who agree to one statement will also tend to agree with all the other statements. Students who disagree with one statement will tend to disagree with the other statements. It should be emphasized that this analysis defines the nature of the interrelationships among these variables and does not reflect the degree of agreement or disagreement with each statement. The nature of the relationship among these statements would remain the same by either agreeing with all the statements or disagreeing with all the statements. This student sample disagreed with the statements in the table. Consequently, the relationships described reflect associations along the dimension of relative disagreement, that is, little disagreement to strong disagreement.

An examination of the table fully supports a relationship among various attitudes to child abuse (hard physical punishment of children), punishment of abortion, repressive sexuality, a profile of physical violence (support of capital punishment and violence as

#### SOMATOSENSORY INDEX OF HUMAN AFFECTION—CS FACTOR I: 66.6%

##### Child Abuse & Abortion Punished: A Violent Society Characterized

- .85 Hard physical punishment is good for children who disobey a lot.
- .84 Prostitution should be punished by society.
- .82 I tend to be conservative in my political points of view.
- .81 Physical punishment and pain help build a strong moral character.
- .80 Abortion should be punished by society.
- .80 Responsible premarital sex is not agreeable to me.
- .78 Nudity within the family has a harmful influence upon children.
- .76 Capital punishment should be permitted by society.
- .75 Violence is necessary to really solve our problems.
- .74 Physical punishment should be allowed in the schools.
- .73 Sexual pleasures help build a weak moral character.
- .72 Society should interfere with private sexual behavior between adults.
- .70 Alcohol is more satisfying than sex.
- .69 Responsible extramarital sex is not agreeable to me.
- .61 Natural fresh body odors are often offensive.
- .65 Drugs are more satisfying than sex.
- .60 I get hostile and aggressive when I drink alcohol.
- .54 I often feel like hitting someone.
- .51 I often dream of either floating, flying, falling, or climbing.
- .49 I would rather drink alcohol than smoke marijuana.
- .47 I do not enjoy affectional pornography.
- .45 My mother is often indifferent toward me.
- .45 I drink alcohol more often than I experience orgasm.
- .43 I can tolerate pain very well.
- .42 I often get "uptight" about being touched.
- .40 I remember when my father physically punished me a lot.



necessary to solve our problems), alcohol (and drug) usage preferred to sex, an indifferent mother (deprivation of physical affection) and physically punitive father. Although these data on American college students are consistent with the data on pre-industrial cultures, it should be recognized that a different subject sample could provide a different combination of statements from the total questionnaire.

These findings, when taken in the context of cross-cultural studies, clarify the psychosocial structure of the pro-abortion personality and the anti-abortion personality. It would seem that the abortion issue carries with it deep personality characteristics and values that are largely influenced by experiences of physical pleasure and pain or their absence during the formative periods of development. The abortion issue cannot readily be resolved without an understanding of these complex emotional interrelationships that are determined by our social, cultural, and developmental family experiences. Further, the interpretation of the abortion issue as a "right to life" issue not only is an oversimplification of the problem but also is not consistent with these data. Those American college students who would punish abortion also support capital punishment, and, in primitive cultures, those who forbid abortion also practice slavery and kill, torture, and mutilate their enemies.

There is additional evidence with which to question the validity of the "right to life" principle advocated by anti-abortionists. Jonathan Randall in a recent article in the *Washington Post* described the successful efforts of Simone Veil, health minister in Giscard d'Estaing's government, in obtaining a French Assembly vote (284 to 189) to legalize abortion. He described an incident during the German occupation of France in World War II, when a woman was executed for obtaining an abortion. The French law that prescribed the death penalty for having an abortion clearly makes a mockery of the "right to life" principle expressed by the anti-abortionists. The relationship between support for capital punishment and prohibition of abortion is further strengthened by the voting patterns of members of the Federal Parliament of Canada during the years 1967 to 1969. The votes on Criminal Code Bill C-168 (27th Parliament, Second Session, 1967-1968), which proposed to abolish capital punishment, were statistically related to votes on Criminal Law Amendment Bill C-150 (28th Parliament, First Session, 1968-1969), which was an omnibus reform bill to permit abortion (previously a criminal offense under any circumstances) and to liberalize the adjudication of sexual offenders. Because of elections occurring between votes on these two bills, only ninety-eight voters on both bills were available for analysis. The results are summarized as follows: fifty-eight (59 percent) voted for both reform bills; twenty-one (21 percent) voted against abortion reform; three voted for capital punishment and against abortion reform. These findings strongly support the relationship of advocacy of capital punishment with opposition to abortion and, conversely, opposition to capital punishment with advocacy of abortion. These relationships are supported by 80 percent of the voters. (This writer is indebted to Frank Borowicz, professor of law, University of Windsor Law School, Windsor, Ontario, for obtaining the voting patterns for this analysis.)

With respect to religious beliefs and abortion, it is of more than passing interest that abortion practices in primitive cultures are not related to a belief in a supernatural deity or a spirit world. Similarly, religious preference and degree of religiosity was not related to abortion attitudes in the college sample. This, however, may change with a sample that is more conservative in religion. These data, when taken in the context of known contemporary religious differences on the abortion issue, are strongly supportive

of the point of view that abortion attitudes are more related to developmental life experiences in human relationships and to the social-cultural mores of the society than they are to "religious" experiences and convictions. Recently a Jesuit priest, Reverend Joseph O'Rourke, of Boston, was expelled from the Society of Jesus for baptizing a three-month-old infant after Roman Catholic parish priests refused the baptism because the infant's Catholic mother refused to recant her public statements supporting individual freedom of choice concerning abortion.

These relationships were further illuminated by the recent annual meeting of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, which debated and rejected on November 7, 1974, a fifteen-hundred-word statement that was opposed to capital punishment. On November 21, 1974, the bishops accepted a substitute motion on capital punishment: "The United States Catholic Conference goes on record in opposition to the death penalty" by a vote of 108 to 63. It should be noted that 37 percent of the Catholic bishops voting supported capital punishment. Clearly, the "right-to-life principle" is an inconsistent and arbitrary religious principle and provides no reasonable basis for resolving the abortion issue.

## Conclusion

In summary, these data support the recommendations of the Presidential Commission on Population Growth and the American Future concerning abortion:

With the admonition that abortion not be considered a primary means of fertility control, the Commission recommends that present state laws restricting abortion be liberalized along the lines of the New York statute, such abortion to be performed on request by duly licensed physician under conditions of medical safety. In carrying out this policy, the Commission recommends: That federal, state and local governments make funds available to support abortion services in states with liberalized statutes; That abortion be specifically included in comprehensive health insurance benefits, both public and private.

Moreover, these data strongly support the right of the woman to be pregnant by choice and to be a mother by choice as essential prerequisites for a humane and compassionate society. •

## NOTES:

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