

Worth and Welfare in the Controversy over Abortion

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Christopher Miles Coope

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In memory of
Nicholas Coope
(1980–1998)

Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks

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Preface

Many books, I suppose, come about by accident. This is certainly one of them. I had simply set out to write some notes for our students here at The University of Leeds. One day a week, these students take a break from their work in the community and follow our course of Health Care Ethics. Year on year, they have impressed me with their enthusiasm, their friendliness and their willingness to walk in the strange ways of our subject. It has always been a privilege to write for them, and I think about them affectionately now, as once again I set about it.

Abortion tends to take over the lives of those who write about it. Yet this is no bad thing, for without a certain amount of 'taking over' one would not succeed. Abortion is an important public issue, so our attention is not misplaced. It also raises theoretical difficulties in philosophy, many of which are not in ethics at all – as this book will show. Even those interested neither in the issue nor in the philosophical difficulties could still become fascinated by abortion as a controversy simply because of the extraordinary curiosities of the public debate. But being 'taken over' has its dangers. We who write about abortion and who think that there *is* a public issue of great moment should not lose sight of the fact that there are so many equally important problems faced by the world. Some of these naturally have to do with children. I have a good friend, a paediatrician, who in her professional life has been able to do far more to ensure a respect for young human individuals than a philosopher writing about abortion could hope to do.

My views about this subject have changed greatly over the years. I cannot pretend that they have changed as a result of anything very sophisticated by way of argument – at least in regard to argument closely related to the topic. In fact my current thoughts about abortion are somewhat naive. I do not think of this as a defect. I am inclined to follow Berkeley in this matter: thinking that so often in philosophy we first raise a dust and then complain we cannot see. A simple argument justifying the exposure of infants on the grounds that 'The Tok went in for it and they were not such a bad lot', is – however unsatisfactory it may be – more to be trusted than a justification of the same on the basis of the latest extravagance of academic philosophy. There are times when it is better to believe a peasant than a pedant.

Despite all the talk of the sanctity of life, I do not regard the issue as particularly 'religious'. But I am not so sure that our underlying and uncontroversial beliefs about homicide, beliefs which people are just not prepared to give up (or rather, are not *yet* prepared to give up) can deeply be understood without religious beliefs which I and many others have been, perhaps understandably, reluctant to adopt. Nietzsche, I imagine, saw this only too

well. About these beliefs I will only say here that the philosophical foundations of agnosticism appear to me not as strong as they once seemed, and that I for one am continually tempted to jump ship. And insofar as this is so, it is in part an outcome of my work on this controversy.

I do not ever remember that questions about abortion featured at all in my upbringing, in my teenage years say. I certainly heard plenty about religion at my school, but abortion seemed not to be a matter of public concern at that time. It must have seemed beyond consideration. The issue first came to my attention when, as a student of psychology, I chanced to read Glanville Williams's newly published *The Sanctity of Life and the Criminal Law*,¹ taking it up, no doubt, because it was *not* on the reading list. This book also discussed other matters: suicide, euthanasia, and contraception (though what this last had to do with the sanctity of life was, and remains, something of a puzzle). The book was derived from lectures given at Columbia University, and seems to have had a crucial impact at the time on the development of (what is called) liberal thinking about abortion.

For a brief while Glanville Williams was my guide. It must have all seemed pleasantly shocking and agreeably secularist. To me, 'both human history and the history of ethics was just beginning', and I wanted to be part of it.² It was around this time that I found myself, with a few other students, interviewing A. J. Ayer for a TV programme. He answered all our questions with his customary energy and ease. Naturally I wanted to ask him about the sort of issues I had been reading about in *The Sanctity of Life and the Criminal Law*. In fact, I afterwards sent my copy of the book to him, which he then read 'with pleasure and approval'. The book must have caused a stir, for it was picked over by a panel of notables on the then Third Programme. It received, I remember, a curiously cold response from the philosopher on the panel, who seemed not willing to join in the discussion at all and was given a quarantined space all to herself. Not much pleasure or approval there. She was G. E. M. Anscombe, at that time just a name to me. As it turned out, I was later to find myself in tutorial conversations with both these philosophers at Oxford and I successively learned much from them.³

1 *The Sanctity of Life and the Criminal Law*, London: Faber and Faber, 1958. Glanville Williams, Professor of Law at Cambridge, was from 1962 to 1997 President of the Abortion Law Reform Association.

2 I owe this phrase to Derek Parfit. In *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983) he heads one of his sections: 'How both human history, and the history of ethics, may just be beginning'. He claims that 'Non-Religious Ethics has been systematically studied, by many people, only since about 1960' (p. 453). The debate about Glanville Williams's book dates from 1958, slightly before history.

3 Some idea of what Elizabeth Anscombe must have said can now be gleaned, almost 50 years later, from 'Glanville Williams' *The Sanctity of Life and the Criminal Law: a Review*', in Mary Geach and Luke Gormally, eds, *Human Life, Action and Ethics, Essays by G. E. M. Anscombe*, Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2005.

By the time I reached Oxford, however, I had long forgotten the problems of abortion and kindred topics. My days were spent largely on the philosophy of psychology and the philosophy of language. I dare say the matter never crossed my mind until, many years later, my wife was pregnant with our fourth child. Since she was then well on in her thirties she was of course offered 'the tests'. Well, who wants a damaged baby? I was, I remember, quite anxious that the chromosomes should carefully be counted. I just refused to consider *what if*. Distressing choices, I must have said to myself, should not be faced while it was still unsettled whether the question arose. In dedicating the book to the memory of the child in question, my son and good friend Nicholas, who died on the cliffs of Glen Clova while I was writing it, I cannot help thinking back to these beginnings. I am acutely aware that had 'the tests' turned out differently, he might well have been killed by doctors, with my connivance, before he was born. Luck saved him – and me. How many there are who have not been lucky.