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Abortion: the moral issues

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the history behind them. Ethical rules are often taken out of context. Antiabortionists ignore the historical debate over ensoulment, for instance, which some theologians claimed happened at quickening. A notable absence of literature indicates a lack of interest in abortion as an issue until the late nineteenth century, and where mention of abortion is made, the antikilling ethic is heavily entwined with an antisexuality ethic. Harrison critiques some of the early texts and shows that some of them express a consideration for the woman's well-being rather than for the fetus, contrary to what may be expected. The issue of fetal life is primarily a modern one. No consistent history of Christian teaching against abortion can be proved.

Other historical considerations include changes in women's culture, economics, health, and knowledge about reproduction. Modern urban living works against traditional methods of birth control (such as long-term breastfeeding), making it even more important to have the option of abortion.

The last two chapters deal again with the relationship between the legal and moral questions. The significant distinctions between "a form of human life" and "a person" are discussed in some detail. Harrison also explains the *Roe vs. Wade* decision and demonstrates that (1) it did not make abortion on demand the law of the land, as some antiabortionists claim; and (2) it is already a compromise position. While it considers primarily the women's well-being in the first trimester, it also allows for state regulation later in the pregnancy. This is a weakening of a true prochoice position, which would not tolerate any state regulation of pregnancy.

In order to move beyond current abortion politics, both sides must be willing to confront the conditions that lead women to abort: (1) material conditions which make it difficult to afford children; (2) negative attitudes about women's sexuality which discourage women from taking responsibility for procreation (for example, fear of being considered a "loose woman" prevents some teens and other single women from using contraceptives). This comprehensive view of procreative choice

shows that there are ways for antiabortionists and prochoice advocates to work together to better the conditions of women's lives and, in doing so, to improve society for all.

I found *Our Right to Choose* a valuable tool in clarifying the complicated issue of abortion. By combining moral, theological, historical, and cultural analyses, Beverly Harrison has added an authoritative and powerful voice to the prochoice movement.

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ABORTION: THE MORAL ISSUES

Edited by Edward Batchelor, Jr.
The Pilgrim Press: New York, 1982
246 pages, \$9.00

RACHEL WEEPING: THE CASE AGAINST ABORTION

by James Burtchael
Harper and Row: San Francisco, 1982
380 pages, \$11.00

Reviewed by Reta Finger

Reading both of these books in the course of a week, as I did, is like eating too much meat. It is impossible to digest all of it. Nevertheless, forcing oneself to agonize over the moral issues surrounding abortion, with the help of these notable thinkers from the Christian tradition, is a valuable lesson in logic.

On the difficult issue of abortion Batchelor provides for us what he previously did on the equally controversial issue of homosexuality—an impressive compilation of essays by Christian ethicists and teachers of moral theology. In his preface, Batchelor stresses that the task of the moralist is to know more than general

principles. One must apply these principles to particular cases. This collection of essays attempts to apply the principle of the protection and preservation of human life to the agonizing dilemma of abortion. Authors include Karl Barth, Charles Curran, Joseph Fletcher, Margaret Mead, Paul Ramsey, Helmut Thielicke, Sarah Ragle Weddington, and others.

Within these pages there is none of the emotional manipulation used by extremists on either side. Rather, the complexity of the question is taken very seriously and is informed by the disciplines of history, sociology, biology, and theology. For example, the biological and medical question of when life begins—at conception, implantation of the embryo in the uterine wall, quickening, viability, or birth—is debated, with thoughtful arguments made for all these stages of development. The Roman Catholic position is examined historically, and various writers observe that the Roman Catholic Church has not maintained an unbroken tradition of belief that human life begins at conception or that all abortion is murder. Aquinas himself put more emphasis on quickening as the time of ensoulment.

Theologically, Robert Nelson discusses the two Greek words for life—*bios* and *zoe*. The first describes sustenance for mortal existence, and the other speaks of the qualitative dimension of human living. It is possible, Nelson suggests, to destroy the *zoe* of the pregnant woman while insisting on the *bios* of the fetus.

In spite of the general excellence and scope of these essays, I was painfully aware of the predominance of male writers. Out of twenty essays, only four were written by women. Also, frequently absent among the male ethicists' discussions was the reminder that pregnancy not only produces a human person, but one dependent for many years upon its parents, primarily the mother. In contrast, Beverly Harrison, along with a few men, stressed the absolute necessity of taking into consideration the concrete situation of the woman involved.

If *Abortion: The Moral Issues* lacked some of the juiciness of life, *Rachel Weeping* did not. Full of stories, quotations, and statistics, and written in a voluble style,

Burtchaell's five long essays lean much closer to persuasion by emotion. His first essay is full of quotations from women who aborted, as well as reactions from some of their partners. Their general carelessness and irresponsibility angered me deeply.

However, Burtchaell's third essay, comparing the Nazi holocaust with abortion, was going too far. Having read other analyses on this topic, Burtchaell's approach seems one-sided. A prochoice position where each woman has primary control of her own fertility hardly compares to the Nazi emphasis on patriarchy and state control of reproduction. The last two essays make other connections: comparing abortion with slavery in America, and asking whether abortion will lead to infanticide.

Burtchaell does make a serious and sustained case against abortion, many points of which deserve a response from the prochoice position. Is it true, for example, that the antiabortion movement is one of the very few where the participants are not acting out of their own self-interest?

Comparing *Abortion: The Moral Issues* with *Rachel Weeping*, I could appreciate the anecdotal style of the latter. On the other hand, Batchelor's book dealt so much more adequately with the tremendous ethical complexity of the abortion issue. With fewer answers supplied, the questions and guidelines that are discussed cover a far broader scope. As an example of the general evenhandedness of this book, Roger Shinn closes his essay with this caution: "One part of any morality, in situations of moral conflict, is the grace to recognize that people who oppose us may be acting out of a moral concern as authentic as ours. Such grace I commend to all parties in the continuing controversies over public policy on abortion" (p. 174). I heartily concur.

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