

The Greeks had differing beliefs

Moral positions on abortion flow from beliefs people have about personhood and souls and gods.

The pre-Christians were no more unified in their beliefs than the Christians are. Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, and Seneca had arrived at different positions on abortion and infanticide.

According to Paul Carrick in *Medical Ethics in Antiquity* we can sum up the positions held as follows: for the Pythagoreans, human life was said to begin at conception. It was a duty to God not to injure human or other sentient life. For bodily life, into which divine souls had descended as a punishment, possessed derivative value as the temporary residence in which souls could be purified by choosing to live wisely. "Hence, to terminate either fetal or infant life was wrong because it deprived the victim of the immediate opportunity to at least attempt to live an embodied, earthy life in such a way as to win for his soul both the admiration and divine invitation of the gods."

Plato was an advocate of both abortion and infanticide in the Republic. He saw in these biomedical measures the opportunity to promote the best possible offspring. Therefore, on utilitarian grounds predicted on his understanding of eugenic principles, he prescribed abortion and infanticide in specific circumstances that he judged to be useful to the overall quality of life in his utopia.

Plato held that human life did not begin until birth, and hence neither abortion nor contraception was considered to be morally objectionable.

Aristotle also endorsed both abortion and infanticide on utili-

itarian grounds. But he put the start of human life at some point in utero when the fetus is informed by the rational soul after first receiving its nutritive and then sensitive soul. Aristotle says the rational soul arrives at different times depending upon the sex of the fetus:

"In the case of male children the first movement usually occurs on the right-hand side of the womb and about the 14th day, but if the child be female then on the left hand side and about the 19th day. About this same period the embryo begins to resolve into

This is the third part of a 4-part series on abortion, presented to stimulate discussion in the community on this important and controversial issue. Both Parliament



BOB LANE

distinct parts, it having hitherto consisted of a fleshlike substance without distinction of parts." (*Historia Animalium VII 583B*, Thompson (trans).)

Seneca asserted that human life in the biological sense begins at birth with the child's first breath. It was not until the individual reached young adulthood, around 14 years, that he or she became a person in the moral sense — with the full protection of the moral rule against homicide. But, like Aristotle, Seneca and the other Stoics prescribed infanticide for defective newborns only. The defec-

tive newborn was taken to be so bereft of the opportunity to acquire the virtues necessary to live a human life that it was thought to be an act of reason to hasten its death.

What sense did it make in Plato's time to talk about "right to life"? It would have made no sense at all. Notions of "rights" are as I suggested earlier relatively new in the history of ideas. As Professor McIntyre says in *After Virtue*: "It would of course be a little odd that there should be such rights attaching to human beings simply as human

and the Supreme Court face tough decisions arising from the conflict between the pro-choice and pro-life positions.

The author of the series is Bob Lane, coordinator of philosophy at Malaspina College. He wrote a similar series last year on capital punishment. Mr. Lane will be teaching an evening course starting in September, on biomedical ethics.

beings in light of the fact . . . that there is no expression in any ancient or medieval language correctly translated by our expression "a right" until near the close of the middle ages: the concept lacks any means of expression in Hebrew, Greek, Latin or Arabic, classical or medieval, before about 1400, let alone in Old English, or in Japanese even as late as the mid-19th century.

"From this it does not follow that there are no natural or human rights; it only follows that no one could have known that there were . . . the truth is

plain: There are no such rights, and belief in them is one with belief in witches and unicorns."

One part of my argument depends upon this notion of "rights."

There are no human rights in the same sense that there are no witches. Human rights depend upon humans conferring those rights and deciding who is to receive them.

It does not follow from this that the process of conferring those rights is non-rational or immoral or arbitrary. We do the best we can given our limitations as human beings. We do not know the truth but we struggle to find it. There may well be more truths but we do not know what they are. It is this kind of skepticism which informs my position on abortion.

One of the interesting ways in which the abortion issue differs from most other moral issues is that the plausible positions on abortion appear to be extreme positions. For, if a human fetus is a person, one is inclined to say that, in general, one would be justified in killing it only to save the life of the mother. Such is the extreme conservative position.

On the other hand, if the fetus is not a person, how can it be seriously wrong to destroy it? Why would one need to point to special circumstances to justify such an action?

The conservative will charge the liberal with the task of specifying a cutoff which is not arbitrary and which will distinguish between persons and non-persons, subjects and objects. We need to consider the central question: what is a person?

The fourth and final part of this series will appear in tomorrow's issue.