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Book Reviews

Abortion and the Sanctity of Human Life: A Philosophical View

Baruch Brody

The MIT Press, 28 Carleton St., Cambridge, Mass. 02142. 1975, 162 p., \$8.95

Baruch Brody's book on abortion is not just another handbook on the subject. If Philosophy has any contribution to make to the abortion debate, it is to undercut the psychological, social, and religious rhetoric and to allow people to investigate the question on a rational, ethical level. Filled with sensitivity towards the mother and her rights in the abortion dilemma, Brody nonetheless faces the difficult questions in a concise manner: when may we take a life, when does human life begin, what are the rights of the fetus.

The author surveys thoroughly but succinctly the arguments for and against abortion. In his chapter on "The Morality of Abortion," he handles the arguments about the mother's right to her body, abortion for the sake of the unwanted child, and the analogical argument that abortion is another form of self-defense. To counter these points, he notes, "It is surely true that one way in which women have been oppressed is by their being denied authority over their own bodies. But it seems to be that, as the struggle is carried on for meaningful amelioration of such oppression, it ought not to be carried so far that it violates the

steady responsibilities all people have to one another. Parents may not desert their children, one class may not oppress another, one race or nation may not exploit another. For parents, powerful groups in society, races or nations in ascendancy, there are penalties for refraining from these wrong actions, but those penalties can in no way be taken as the justification for such wrong actions. Similarly, if the fetus is a human being, the penalty for carrying it cannot, I believe, be used as the justification for destroying it."

This last point is the author's most outstanding contribution to the abortion question. For pro-abortionist have argued, as has the Supreme Court, that there is no way that we can decide whether or not the fetus is human. They claim that such idle speculation is akin to the Scholastic Philosophers arguing over the question of how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. But Brody meets the difficulty squarely with a theory of essentialism. Basically, Brody asks, what is the distinction between the properties that an object has essentially and the properties that it has accidentally? If there are properties that an object must have to exist

and without them it would cease to exist as that object, then these are the properties that an object has essentially. With this basis established, Brody sets out to determine what properties are essential for being human and at what point does a fetus have these properties. He rejects the theory that the fetus is human at the moment of conception; for although the biological characteristics of the fetus have by then been determined, it does not follow that the fetus already has all these properties. "What the fetus has is the chromosomal mechanism by which the properties are finally produced. Therefore, it does not follow that the fetus out of which "A" will develop is identical with "A" and, like "A," is a human being."

Brody takes his stand concerning the beginning of human life from the opposite spectrum, through an analysis of death. Arguing from recent studies about the time of death, Brody says, "The traditional definition of death, we could all agree, needs to be modified one more time to read: a person is dead only if there has been an irreparable cessation of spontaneous and natural cardiac and respiratory functions and there has been an irreparable

cessation of brain function. But suppose we have the latter condition without the former one, wherein the brain has ceased to function but the heart and lungs have not . . . is the person dead if his brain has suffered irreparable and massive damage whatever the state of his heart and lungs?" To this question, Brody would say yes, and so he concludes that there is only one property which is essential to humanity and that is the possession of a brain that has not suffered an irreparable cessation of function.

He then maintains that the fetus acquires the potential of essential humanity when the fetus actuates the structures of a functioning brain, which comes at about six weeks. While traditional Catholic thought would push back the time of personhood even further, Brody's position is certainly more plausible than the Supreme Court's which has evaded the issue or put humanity at the time of viability; and Brody's chapter on "Abortion and the Supreme Court" is a lucid and logical critique on the Court's shoddy thinking in this area.

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Prenatal Diagnosis and Selective Abortion

Harry Harris

101 pages. Harvard University Press, 1975. \$6.00

In a very few pages, Harry Harris, Galton Professor of Human Genetics, University of Lon-

don at University College at the time the book was published, has compiled technical information