



OPINION...

Abortion: A Question of Choice

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I'm rather tired of reading myth-mongering garbage about abortion in *Opinion* and *Blood and Thunder*, so I'm going to try to take a reasonable look at the subject, if only to counteract some of the illogical, ill-informed rantings I have been forced to typeset lately.

The first thing to say is that abortion is always likely to be needed. Even properly used, the most reliable forms of contraception do not work on every occasion, and not every woman who accidentally becomes pregnant is going to have the wish or the income to bring up a baby.

Then there are women who do not have access to contraception in the first place (particularly in Third World countries) - because it is unavailable or because they do not know how to get and use it - and again, they may neither desire, nor be able to support, a child.

Let us not forget rape victims, nor those women whose babies may be born chronically handicapped, or those whose health may be destroyed by childbirth. As long as women fit these categories, the need for abortion facilities will exist, and if abortion is illegal, then women will go to the backstreet operators for it. Where this is the case, the numbers of women dying from the effects of badly performed terminations rises dramatically. (See the movie *Abortion: Stories from North and South* for exact figures.)

Alternatively, women will rely on any available indigenous forms of abortion, such as massage, and herbal concoctions. The very existence of these traditional methods would indicate that the wish to end the practice of abortion, however well-intentioned, is over-idealistic.

The question of abortion is not purely a matter of moral and philosophical concern, since ideology and politics often intervene. In nineteenth century England, for instance, capitalists' needs for a large labour force induced the passing of laws controlling the availability of abortion.

Or again, the "macho" code, with its stress on virility versus

female chastity, tends to co-exist with strict legal control of, if not entire prohibition of, abortion (and with high levels of prostitution and adultery too, but that's another story.)

The ideological strand which is most clearly visible is, however, the manipulation of women's lives through the control of their fertility. At its most basic, this manifests itself as the "barefoot and pregnant" attitude, where women are bound to the home through repeated pregnancies, kept economically and socially subservient. In its marginally more sophisticated forms, this ideology often invokes the exaltation of motherhood, but all too often this is accompanied by an easy dismissal of the problems that unwillingly pregnant women must face - "Of course it's best not to get pregnant in the first place."

Rarely does this pronatalist attitude mention the disadvantages of alternatives to abortion; whilst great play is made of the emotional traumas involved in having an abortion little is said of the prolonged guilt which women who opt for adoption may experience.

Pronatalism may likewise manifest itself in laws which restrict women's control of their own fertility. Take Canada's legal stance, for example. In New Brunswick, a woman who wants an abortion must go before a therapeutic abortion committee of three doctors who decide whether or not she is eligible - reducing her to a suppliant for favours.

This process also increases the amount of time that passes before the abortion is performed, thereby increasing the likelihood of subsequent physical complications. Inadequate facilities and delays are produced by this unsatisfactory situation. This encourages the growth of private clinics, which provide opportunities for better-off women whilst it is the badly-off who are least likely to be able to support an unplanned child.

What, after all, is wrong with abortion on demand? It might be objected that abortion would become more common because it would be used rather than contraception. I am not going to argue that no women would do this; what I will say is that having an abortion is sufficiently unpleasant to put any woman off

repeating the experience.

Further, such an objection implies that women are inherently irresponsible about their fertility, and that they regard fetuses as mere lumps of cells to be expunged without thought or care. Again, I am not going to say that all women act responsibly and thoughtfully as far as their fertility is concerned, because I don't like over-generalizing (it smacks of the fascist mentality). However, I can and will speak from personal experience. I have known at least six women who have had abortions. These were without exception the result of faulty contraception - hardly suggesting general irresponsibility. All six women thought it through before opting to abort, and discussed it with their partners (it's not only "mommy's" decision, after all). They were not thinking solely in terms of "inconvenience", but in terms of the rights and wrongs of destroying a potential life. The decision to have an abortion was not taken lightly.

Thanks to the publicity of the pro-life lobby, the philosophical and ethical considerations involved have been widely aired. I would suggest, however, that the answers pronatalists offer to the questions they raise are over-simplified.

For instance, to the question when does life begin, they state that life begins at the moment of conception. I would not disagree with this - I've seen films of sperm wiggling about and fertilized cells dividing too - but what I would stress is that practical concerns ought not to be ignored in the debates on abortion, when it is practical concerns which are of immediate importance to women seeking abortion.

No woman should have to bear an unwanted child. Abortion ought to be a matter of choice, of weighing up the priorities, and then making the relevant decision.

I'm not pretending that this is the only opinion to have - mine is a subjective attitude, just like everyone else's.

I'm not offering the definitive solution to the question of abortion. It's a matter of the least evil, not the only good; of how we deal with the real world, not with how we wish it would be.