

PHI 212: CONTEMPORARY MORAL ISSUES

Dr. Y's Notes on Mary Anne Warren's writing "Postscript on Infanticide"

Mary Anne Warren wrote in response to an objection to her view, and these are Dr. Y's notes of her response.

POSTSCRIPT ON INFANTICIDE (February 26, 1982): A troubling objection: Warren's argument may appear to justify not only abortion, but infanticide as well. For a newborn infant is not significantly more personlike than an advanced fetus, and consequently it would seem that if the destruction of the latter is permissible so too must be that of the former. Most people consider infanticide to be a form of murder, and thus never justified. **Warren's reply:** Warren grants that her argument implies that infanticide does not constitute the killing of a person. However, **there are several reasons why infanticide is impermissible:**

1. Even if its parents do not want it and would not suffer from its destruction, there are other people who would like to have it, and would, in all probability, be deprived of a great deal of pleasure by its destruction. So it is wrong, at least in this country and in this period of history, other things being equal, to kill a newborn infant. Infanticide is wrong for reasons analogous to those that make it wrong to wantonly destroy natural resources or great works of art.
2. Most of us value the lives of infants and would much prefer that they be preserved, by paying taxes to support orphanages rather than to allow unwanted infants to be destroyed. "So long as there are people who want an infant preserved, and who are willing and able To provide a means of caring for it, under reasonably humane conditions, it is, other things being equal, wrong to destroy it." **OBJ:** If this argument shows that infanticide is wrong, at least at this time and in this country, doesn't it also show that abortion is wrong? Answer:
3. Many people value fetuses, and are disturbed by their destruction, and would much prefer that they be preserved, even at some cost to themselves. "As a potential source of pleasure to some family, a viable fetus is just as valuable as a viable infant." The crucial difference between a viable fetus and a viable infant? So long as the fetus is unborn, its preservation, contrary to the wishes of the pregnant woman, violates her rights to freedom, happiness, and self-determination. Her rights override the rights of those who would like the fetus preserved, just as if someone's life or limb is threatened by a wild animal, his right to protect himself by destroying the animal overrides the rights of those who would prefer that the animal not be harmed. Once the infant is born, however, its preservation no longer violates any of its mother's rights, even if she wants it destroyed, because she is free to put it up for adoption. Consequently, while the moment of birth does not mark a sharp discontinuity in the degree to which an infant possesses the right to life, it does mark the end of its mother's right to determine its fate. If abortion could be performed without killing the fetus, she would never possess the right to have the fetus destroyed, for the same reasons that she has no right to have an infant destroyed. On the other hand, it follows from my argument that when an unwanted or defective infant is born into a society that cannot afford and/or is not willing to care for it, then its destruction is permissible. This conclusion will, no doubt, strike many people as heartless and immoral; but the very existence of people who feel this way, and who are willing and able to provide care for unwanted infants, is reason enough to conclude that they should be preserved.