

Correspondence

Infanticide for the handicapped newborn – a secular rejection

SIR

Thomas Long's article on Infanticide for the Handicapped Newborn seemed to assume that Ramsey's religious stance is the only valid opposition to Kuhse and Singer's utilitarianism. I do not think this is true; from a secular humanitarian point of view killing is also wrong.

Kuhse and Singer's definition of a 'person' is puzzling on two counts. The newborn do not have 'hopes and plans for the future', I agree, but neither do the profoundly mentally handicapped, those in a depressive state, and anyone contemplating suicide. Does this mean we should also be allowed to kill them?

On the other hand, it could quite easily be argued that the newborn *are* self-assertive and purposeful, and that to a certain extent they do have a sense of themselves, and of the future. They cry when hungry – they know who it is who feels the hunger, and the purpose of the crying is that it leads to the satisfaction of that feeling. It could thus

be argued that crying babies value their lives more than intending suicides. The latter may also be far more burdensome to their families and the societies in which they live. So which should be put to death?

The assertion that pro-life arguments do not give 'equal consideration' to the families of handicapped newborns is unsound. They actually give equal weight to the rights not just of the immediate family but to every member of society, by saying that no human being may be killed for the benefit of another. It is Kuhse and Singer who are trying to compare unlike values – the physical life of one individual against the possible potential inconvenience of another.

The right some able-bodied people assume to judge the quality of life of the handicapped would be amusing were it not so dangerous. Babies with spina bifida are now killed because certain doctors and philosophers say their lives would be miserable and expensive to maintain. I have spina bifida, and would refute the first hypothesis. If the second is of equal importance, why do I have the right not to be killed now, particularly if I suddenly suffer a catastrophic accident and lose my ability to be 'self-assertive'?

The fact that some babies, such as those with Tay Sachs, will not live long is no more relevant than the discovery of AIDS in an older person. Our judgement that their six months of life are not as worth living as six months of any other lives is subjective and in my view has no moral imperative to be fulfilled.

It would be interesting to know at what point Kuhse and Singer believe babies become persons, and whether this happens at a different stage for the handicapped; if financial and societal interests need to be weighed against the lives of the handicapped newborn, what is the process by which this requirement becomes invalid once they are persons? And do the severely mentally handicapped ever achieve this status? Until the genesis of personhood can be adequately explained and demonstrated, I will continue to believe that killing the disabled newborn is a serious threat to my rights, my human dignity and my status as a person.

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