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consciously beings as arduous and uncertain journeys, at different stages, in which various amounts of hope and desire, as well as time and effort have been invested in order to reach particular goals or destinations. Suppose that I am thinking of travelling to Nepal, where I plan to trek to Thyangboche Monastery, at the base of Mt. Everest. I have always loved high mountains, and I know that I would enjoy being in the Himalayas for the first time. If during these early days of musing on the possibility of such a trip an insuperable obstacle arises – perhaps the Nepalese government bans tourism on the grounds that it is an environmental hazard – there will be a little put out, naturally, but my disappointment will be nothing compared with what it would have been if I had already arranged to take the necessary time off work, perhaps bought a non-refundable plane ticket to Kathmandu, or even trekked a long distance towards my destination, before being barred from reaching my goal. Similarly, one can regard a decision not to bring an infant into the world as akin to preventing a journey from getting underway, but this is not in itself seriously wrong, for the voyager has made no plans and set no goals. Gradually, as goals are set, even if tentatively, and a lot is done in order to increase the probability of the goals being reached, the wrongness of bringing the journey to a premature end increases. Towards the end of life, when most things that might have been achieved have either been done, or are now unlikely to be accomplished, the loss of life may again be less of tragedy than it would have been at an earlier stage of life.

The great virtue of this ‘journey’ model of a life is that it can explain why beings who can conceive of their own future existence and have embarked on their life journey are not replaceable, while at the same time it can account for why it is wrong to bring a miserable being into existence. To do so is to send a being out on a journey that is doomed to disappointment and frustration. The model also offers a natural explanation of why Parfit’s two women both do wrong, and to an equal degree: they both quite unnecessarily send out voyagers with fewer prospects of making a successful journey than other voyagers whom they might have placed at the starting line. The women’s children can be thought of as replaceable before the journey begins, but this does not require us to hold that there is an obligation to bring more children into existence, let alone to regard people as replaceable once life’s journey has properly begun.

Both the modified moral ledger model and the journey model are metaphors, and should not be taken too literally. At best they suggest ways of thinking about when beings might be considered replaceable, and when they might not be so considered. As I indicated in the Preface, this is an area in which fully satisfactory answers are still to be found.

Before we leave the topic of killing non-self-conscious beings, I should emphasise that to take the view that non-self-conscious beings are replaceable is not to say that their interests do not count. I hope that the third chapter of this book makes it clear that their interests do count. As long as sentient beings are conscious, they have an interest in experiencing as much pleasure and as little pain as possible. Sentience suffices to place a being within the sphere of equal consideration of interests; but it does not mean that the being has a personal interest in continuing to live.

Conclusions

If the arguments in this chapter are correct, there is no single answer to the question: ‘Is it normally wrong to take the life of an animal?’ The term ‘animal’ – even in the restricted sense of ‘non-human animal’ – covers too diverse a range of lives for one principle to apply to all of them.

Some non-human animals appear to be rational and self-conscious, conceiving themselves as distinct beings with a past and a future. When this is so, or to the best of our knowledge
may be so, the case against killing is strong, as strong as the
case against killing permanently intellectually disabled human
beings at a similar mental level. (I have in mind here the direct
reasons against killing: the effects on relatives of the intellec-
tually disabled human will sometimes — but not always — con-
stitute additional indirect reasons against killing the human. For
further discussion of this issue, see Chapter 7.)

In the present state of our knowledge, this strong case against
killing can be invoked most categorically against the slaughter of
chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans. On the basis of what
we now know about these near-relatives of ours, we should
immediately extend to them the same full protection against
being killed that we extend now to all human beings. A case
can also be made, though with varying degrees of confidence,
on behalf of whales, dolphins, monkeys, dogs, cats, pigs, seals,
bears, cattle, sheep and so on, perhaps even to the point at
which it may include all mammals — much depends on how
far we are prepared to go in extending the benefit of the doubt,
where a doubt exists. Even if we stopped at the species I have
named, however — excluding the remainder of the mammals —
our discussion has raised a very large question mark over the
justifiability of a great deal of killing of animals carried out by
humans, ever: when this killing takes place painlessly and with-
out causing suffering to other members of the animal com-

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living an equally pleasant life. Taking this view involves holding
that a wrong done to an existing being can be made up for by
a benefit conferred on an as yet non-existent being. Thus it is
possible to regard non-self-conscious animals as interchange-
able with each other in a way that self-conscious beings are not.
This means that in some circumstances — when animals lead
pleasant lives, are killed painlessly, their deaths do not cause
suffering to other animals, and the killing of one animal makes
possible its replacement by another who would not otherwise
have lived — the killing of non-self-conscious animals may
not be wrong.

Is it possible, along these lines, to justify raising chickens for
their meat, not in factory farm conditions but roaming freely
around a farmyard? Let us make the questionable assumption
that chickens are not self-conscious. Assume also that the birds
can be killed painlessly, and the survivors do not appear to be
affected by the death of one of their numbers. Assume, finally,
that for economic reasons we could not rear the birds if we did
not eat them. Then the replaceability argument appears to justify
killing the birds, because depriving them of the pleasures of
their existence can be offset against: the pleasures of chickens
who do not yet exist, and will exist only if existing chickens are
killed.

As a piece of critical moral reasoning, this argument may be
sound. Even at that level, it is important to realize how limited
it is in its application. It cannot justify factory farming, where
animals do not have pleasant lives. Nor does it normally justify
the killing of wild animals. A duck shot by a hunter (making
the shaky assumption that ducks are not self-conscious, and the
almost certainly false assumption that the shooter can be relied
upon to kill the duck instantly) has probably had a pleasant
life, but the shooting of a duck does not lead to its replacement
by another. Unless the duck population is at the maximum that
can be sustained by the available food supply, the killing of a
duck ends a pleasant life without starting another, and is for
porting another is a high price to pay for ignorance or carelessness. In this way the argument might apply beyond rape cases to the much larger number of women who become pregnant through ignorance, carelessness, or contraceptive failure.

But is the argument sound? The short answer is this: It is sound if the particular theory of rights that lies behind it is sound; and it is unsound if that theory of rights is unsound.

The theory of rights in question can be illustrated by another of Thomson’s fanciful examples: suppose I am desperately ill and the only thing that can save my life is the touch of my favourite film star’s cool hand on my fevered brow. Well, Thomson says, even though I have a right to life, this does not mean that I have a right to force the film star to come to me, or that he is under any moral obligation to fly over and save me — although it would be frightfully nice of him to do so. Thus Thomson does not accept that we are always obliged to take the best course of action, all things considered, or to do what has the best consequences. She accepts, instead, a system of rights and obligations that allows us to justify our actions independently of their consequences.

I shall say more about this conception of rights in Chapter 8. At this stage it is enough to notice that a utilitarian would reject this theory of rights, and would reject Thomson’s judgment in the case of the violinist. The utilitarian would hold that, however outraged I may be at having been kidnapped, if the consequences of disconnecting myself from the violinist are, on balance, and taking into account the interests of everyone affected, worse than the consequences of remaining connected, I ought to remain connected. This does not necessarily mean that utilitarians would regard a woman who disconnected herself as wicked or deserving of blame. They might recognize that she has been placed in an extraordinarily difficult situation, one in which to do what is right involves a considerable sacrifice. They might even grant that most people in this situation would follow self-interest rather than do the right thing. Nevertheless, they would hold that to disconnect oneself is wrong.

In rejecting Thomson’s theory of rights, and with it her judgment in the case of the violinist, the utilitarian would also be rejecting her argument for abortion. Thomson claimed that her argument justified abortion even if we allowed the life of the fetus to count as heavily as the life of a normal person. The utilitarian would say that it would be wrong to refuse to sustain a person’s life for nine months, if that was the only way the person could survive. Therefore if the life of the fetus is given the same weight as the life of a normal person, the utilitarian would say that it would be wrong to refuse to carry the fetus until it can survive outside the womb.

This concludes our discussion of the usual liberal replies to the conservative argument against abortion. We have seen that liberals have failed to establish a morally significant dividing line between the newborn baby and the fetus, and their arguments — with the possible exception of Thomson’s argument if her theory of rights can be defended — also fail to justify abortion in ways that do not challenge the conservative claim that the fetus is an innocent human being. Nevertheless, it would be premature for conservatives to assume that their case against abortion is sound. It is now time to bring into this debate some more general conclusions about the value of life.

**The Value of Fetal Life**

Let us go back to the beginning. The central argument against abortion from which we started was:

- First premise: It is wrong to kill an innocent human being.
- Second premise: A human fetus is an innocent human being.
- Conclusion: Therefore it is wrong to kill a human fetus.

The first set of replies we considered accepted the first premise of this argument but objected to the second. The second set of
replies rejected neither premise, but objected to drawing the conclusion from these premises (or objected to the further conclusion that abortion should be prohibited by law). None of the replies questioned the first premise of the argument. Given the widespread acceptance of the doctrine of the sanctity of human life, this is not surprising; but the discussion of this doctrine in the preceding chapters shows that this premise is less secure than many people think.

The weakness of the first premise of the conservative argument is that it relies on our acceptance of the special status of human life. We have seen that ‘human’ is a term that straddles two distinct notions: being a member of the species Homo sapiens, and being a person. Once the term is dissected in this way, the weakness of the conservative’s first premise becomes apparent. If ‘human’ is taken as equivalent to ‘person’, the second premise of the argument, which asserts that the fetus is a human being, is clearly false: for one cannot plausibly argue that a fetus is either rational or self-conscious. If, on the other hand, ‘human’ is taken to mean no more than ‘member of the species Homo sapiens’, then the conservative defence of the life of the fetus is based on a characteristic lacking moral significance and so the first premise is false. The point should by now be familiar: whether a being is or is not a member of our species is, in itself no more relevant to the wrongness of killing it than whether it is or is not a member of our race. The belief that mere membership of our species, irrespective of other characteristics, makes a great difference to the wrongness of killing a being is a legacy of religious doctrines that even those opposed to abortion hesitate to bring into the debate.

Recognising this simple point transforms the abortion issue. We can now look at the fetus for what it is — the actual characteristics it possesses — and can value its life on the same scale as the lives of beings with similar characteristics who are not members of our species. It now becomes apparent that the ‘Pro Life’ or ‘Right to Life’ movement is misnamed. Far from having concern for all life, or a scale of concern impartially based on the nature of the life in question, those who protest against abortion but dine regularly on the bodies of chickens, pigs and calves, show only a biased concern for the lives of members of our own species. For on any fair comparison of morally relevant characteristics, like rationality, self-consciousness, awareness, autonomy, pleasure and pain, and so on, the calf, the pig and the much disdained chicken come out well ahead of the fetus at any stage of pregnancy — while if we make the comparison with a fetus of less than three months, a fish would show more signs of consciousness.

My suggestion, then, is that we accord the life of a fetus no greater value than the life of a nonhuman animal at a similar level of rationality, self-consciousness, awareness, capacity to feel, etc. Since no fetus is a person, no fetus has the same claim to life as a person. We have yet to consider at what point the fetus is likely to become capable of feeling pain. For now it will be enough to say that until that capacity exists, an abortion terminates an existence that is of no “intrinsic” value at all. Afterwards, when the fetus may be conscious, though not self-conscious, abortion should not be taken lightly (if a woman ever does take abortion lightly). But a woman’s serious interests would normally override the rudimentary interests even of a conscious fetus. Indeed, even an abortion late in pregnancy for the most trivial reasons is hard to condemn unless we also condemn the slaughter of far more developed forms of life for the taste of their flesh.

The comparison between the fetus and other animals leads us to one more point. Where the balance of conflicting interests does make it necessary to kill a sentient creature, it is important that the killing be done as painlessly as possible. In the case of nonhuman animals the importance of humane killing is widely accepted; oddly, in the case of abortion little attention is paid to it. This is not because abortion is known to kill the fetus swiftly and humanely. Late abortions — which are the very ones
in which the fetus may be able to suffer — are sometimes performed by injecting a salt solution into the amniotic sac that surrounds the fetus. It has been claimed that the effect of this is to cause the fetus to have convulsions and die between one and three hours later. Afterwards the dead fetus is expelled from the womb. If there are grounds for thinking that a method of abortion causes the fetus to suffer, that method should be avoided.

THE FETUS AS POTENTIAL LIFE

One likely objection to the argument I have offered in the preceding section is that it takes into account only the actual characteristics of the fetus, and not its potential characteristics. On the basis of its actual characteristics, some opponents of abortion will admit, the fetus compares unfavourably with many non-human animals; it is when we consider its potential to become a mature human being that membership of the species Homo sapiens becomes important, and the fetus far surpasses any chicken, pig or calf.

Up to this point I have not raised the question of the potential of the fetus because I thought it best to concentrate on the central argument against abortion; but it is true that a different argument, based on the potential of the fetus, can be mounted. Now is the time to look at this other argument. We can state it as follows:

First premise: It is wrong to kill a potential human being.
Second premise: A human fetus is a potential human being.
Conclusion: Therefore it is wrong to kill a human fetus.

The second premise of this argument is stronger than the second premise of the preceding argument. Whereas it is problematic whether a fetus actually is a human being — it depends on what we mean by the term — it cannot be denied that the fetus is a potential human being. This is true whether by ‘human being’ we mean ‘member of the species Homo sapiens’ or a rational and self-conscious being, a person. The strong second premise of the new argument is, however, purchased at the cost of a weaker first premise, for the wrongness of killing a potential human being — even a potential person — is more open to challenge than the wrongness of killing an actual human being.

It is of course true that the potential rationality, self-consciousness and so on of a fetal Homo sapiens surpasses that of a cow or pig: but it does not follow that the fetus has a stronger claim to life. There is no rule that says that a potential X has the same value as an X, or has all the rights of an X. There are many examples that show just the contrary. To pull out a sprouting acorn is not the same as cutting down a venerable oak. To drop a live chicken into a pot of boiling water would be much worse than doing the same to an egg. Prince Charles is a potential King of England, but he does not now have the rights of a king.

In the absence of any general inference from ‘A is a potential X’ to ‘A has the rights of an X’, we should not accept that a potential person should have the rights of a person, unless we can be given some specific reason why this should hold in this particular case. But what could that reason be? This question becomes especially pertinent if we recall the grounds on which, in the previous chapter, it was suggested that the life of a person merits greater protection than the life of a being who is not a person. These reasons — from the indirect classical utilitarian concern with not arousing in others the fear that they may be the next killed, the weight given by the preference utilitarian to a person’s desires, Tooley’s link between a right to life and the capacity to see oneself as a continuing mental subject, and the principle of respect for autonomy — are all based on the fact that persons see themselves as distinct entities with a past and future. They do not apply to those who are not now and never
have been capable of seeing themselves in this way. If these are the grounds for not killing persons, the mere potential for becoming a person does not count against killing.

It might be said that this reply misunderstands the relevance of the potential of the human fetus, and that this potential is important, not because it creates in the fetus a right or claim to life, but because anyone who kills a human fetus deprives the world of a future rational and self-conscious being. If rational and self-conscious beings are intrinsically valuable, to kill a human fetus is to deprive the world of something intrinsically valuable, and so wrong. The chief problem with this as an argument against abortion – apart from the difficulty of establishing that rational and self-conscious beings are of intrinsic value – is that it does not stand up as a reason for objecting to all abortions, or even to abortions carried out merely because the pregnancy is inconveniently timed. Moreover the argument leads us to condemn practices other than abortion that most anti-abortionists accept.

The claim that rational and self-conscious beings are intrinsically valuable is not a reason for objecting to all abortions because not all abortions deprive the world of a rational and self-conscious being. Suppose a woman has been planning to join a mountain-climbing expedition in June, and in January she learns that she is two months pregnant. She has no children at present, and firmly intends to have a child within a year or two. The pregnancy is unwanted only because it is inconveniently timed. Opponents of abortion would presumably think an abortion in these circumstances particularly outrageous, for neither the life nor the health of the mother is at stake – only the enjoyment she gets from climbing mountains. Yet if abortion is wrong only because it deprives the world of a future person, this abortion is not wrong: it does no more than delay the entry of a person into the world.

On the other hand this argument against abortion does lead us to condemn practices that reduce the future human popu-

lation: contraception, whether by ‘artificial’ means or by ‘natural’ means such as abstinence on days when the woman is likely to be fertile; and also celibacy. This argument has, in fact, all the difficulties of the ‘total’ form of utilitarianism, discussed in the previous two chapters, and it does not provide any reason for thinking abortion worse than any other means of population control. If the world is already overpopulated, the argument provides no reason at all against abortion.

Is there any other significance in the fact that the fetus is a potential person? If there is I have no idea what it could be. In writings against abortion we often find reference to the fact that each human fetus is unique. Paul Ramsey, a former Professor of Religion at Princeton University, has said that modern genetics, by teaching us that the first fusion of sperm and ovum creates a ‘never-to-be-repeated’ informational speck, seems to lead us to the conclusion that ‘all destruction of fetal life should be classified as murder’. But why should this fact lead us to this conclusion? A canine fetus is also, no doubt, genetically unique. Does this mean that it is as wrong to abort a dog as a human? When identical twins are conceived, the genetic information is repeated. Would Ramsey therefore think it permissible to abort one of a pair of identical twins? The children that my wife and I would produce if we did not use contraceptives would be genetically unique. Does the fact that it is still indeterminate precisely what genetically unique character those children would have make the use of contraceptives less evil than abortion? Why should it? And if it does could the looming prospect of successful cloning – a technique in which the cells of one individual are used to reproduce a fetus that is a genetic carbon copy of the original – diminish the seriousness of abortion? Suppose the woman who wants to go mountain climbing were able to have her abortion, take a cell from the aborted fetus and then reimplant that cell in her womb so that an exact genetic replica of the aborted fetus would develop – the only difference being that the pregnancy would now come to term six months
those who think that women need special laws to protect them against the effects of their own freely chosen actions.

There is considerable force in both of these opposed arguments, but we should favour autonomy unless there is clear evidence that the results of doing so are very bad indeed. I know of no evidence to that effect. I suspect, in fact, that much (though certainly not all) of the motivation for prohibiting designated donations of tissue derives from a desire to avoid causing more abortions, and in particular, to avoid women becoming pregnant in order to make fetal tissue available. But for the reasons already given, I see nothing inherently wrong with more abortions, or with pregnancies being undertaken in order to provide fetal tissue, as long as the women involved are freely choosing to do this, and the additional abortions really do make some contribution to saving the lives of others. If the chief objection is that the women's actions might be coerced rather than freely chosen, the solution would be not to prohibit all choices for abortion to provide fetal tissue, but rather to set up procedures to ensure that those who do this have chosen freely, in the light of all the available relevant information.

At this point, commerce is bound to rear its head. Someone will ask: What if women become pregnant and terminate their pregnancies not in order to save the lives of those they care about, but because they will be paid for the fetal tissue? Do not arguments from autonomy suggest that this, too, should be up to the woman to decide? Is it really worse to become pregnant and terminate the pregnancy in order to receive, say, $10,000 than to spend six months doing repetitious labour in a noisy, polluted, hazardous factory for the same amount of money?

Despite my willingness to facilitate fetal tissue use, I am much more reluctant to embrace the free market. This is not because I think that women would be unable to protect themselves from the exploitation of the market; it really does not seem to me a worse form of exploitation than those that we accept in more common forms of employment. Rather, I dislike the idea of a

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free market in fetal tissue because, as R.M. Titmuss argued many years ago in the case of blood supplies for medical purposes, when we choose between a social policy based on altruism and one based on commerce, we are choosing between two different types of society. It may well be better, for a variety of reasons, that there are some things that money cannot buy; some circumstances in which we must rely on the altruism of those we love, or even of strangers in our society. I support efforts to resist the creeping commercialisation of every aspect of our lives, and so I would resist the commercialisation of fetal tissue.

ABORTION AND INFANTICIDE

There remains one major objection to the argument I have advanced in favour of abortion. We have already seen that the strength of the conservative position lies in the difficulty liberals have in pointing to a morally significant line of demarcation between an embryo and a newborn baby. The standard liberal position needs to be able to point to some such line, because liberals usually hold that it is permissible to kill an embryo or fetus but not a baby. I have argued that the life of a fetus (and even more plainly, of an embryo) is of no greater value than the life of a nonhuman animal at a similar level of rationality, self-consciousness, awareness, capacity to feel, etc., and that since no fetus is a person no fetus has the same claim to life as a person. Now it must be admitted that these arguments apply to the newborn baby as much as to the fetus. A week-old baby is not a rational and self-conscious being, and there are many nonhuman animals whose rationality, self-consciousness, awareness, capacity to feel, and so on, exceed that of a human baby a week or a month old. If the fetus does not have the same claim to life as a person, it appears that the newborn baby does not either, and the life of a newborn baby is of less value to it than the life of a pig, a dog, or a chimpanzee is to the nonhuman animal. Thus while my position on the status of fetal life may
be acceptable to many, the implications of this position for the status of newborn life are at odds with the virtually unchallenged assumption that the life of a newborn baby is as sacrosanct as that of an adult. Indeed, some people seem to think that the life of a baby is more precious than that of an adult. Lurid tales of German soldiers bayoneting Belgian babies figured prominently in the wave of anti-German propaganda that accompanied Britain’s entry into the First World War, and it seemed to be tacitly assumed that this was a greater atrocity than the murder of adults would be.

I do not regard the conflict between the position I have taken and widely accepted views about the sanctity of infant life as a ground for abandoning my position. These widely accepted views need to be challenged. It is true that infants appeal to us because they are small and helpless, and there are no doubt very good evolutionary reasons why we should instinctively feel protective towards them. It is also true that infants cannot be combatants and killing infants in wartime is the clearest possible case of killing civilians, which is prohibited by international convention. In general, since infants are harmless and morally incapable of committing a crime, those who kill them lack the excuses often offered for the killing of adults. None of this shows, however, that the killing of an infant is as bad as the killing of an (innocent) adult.

In thinking about this matter we should put aside feelings based on the small, helpless, and — sometimes — cute appearance of human infants. To think that the lives of infants are of special value because infants are small and cute is to a par with thinking that a baby seal, with its soft white fur coat and large round eyes deserves greater protection than a gorilla, who lacks these attributes. Nor can the helplessness or the innocence of the infant Homo sapiens be a ground for preferring it to the equally helpless and innocent fetal Homo sapiens, or, for that matter, to laboratory rats who are ‘innocent’ in exactly the same sense as the human infant, and, in view of the experimenters’ power over them, almost as helpless.

If we can put aside these emotionally moving but strictly irrelevant aspects of the killing of a baby we can see that the grounds for not killing persons do not apply to newborn infants. The indirect, classical utilitarian reason does not apply, because no one capable of understanding what is happening when a newborn baby is killed could feel threatened by a policy that gave less protection to the newborn than to adults. In this respect Bentham was right to describe infanticide as ‘of a nature not to give the slightest inquietude to the most timid imagination’. Once we are old enough to comprehend the policy, we are too old to be threatened by it.

Similarly, the preference utilitarian reason for respecting the life of a person cannot apply to a newborn baby. Newborn babies cannot see themselves as beings who might or might not have a future, and so cannot have a desire to continue living. For the same reason, if a right to life must be based on the capacity to want to go on living, or on the ability to see oneself as a continuing mental subject, a newborn baby cannot have a right to life. Finally, a newborn baby is not an autonomous being, capable of making choices, and so to kill a newborn baby cannot violate the principle of respect for autonomy. In all this the newborn baby is on the same footing as the fetus, and hence fewer reasons exist against killing both babies and fetuses than exist against killing those who are capable of seeing themselves as distinct entities, existing over time.

It would, of course, be difficult to say at what age children begin to see themselves as distinct entities existing over time. Even when we talk with two and three year old children it is usually very difficult to elicit any coherent conception of death, or of the possibility that someone — let alone the child herself — might cease to exist. No doubt children vary greatly in the age at which they begin to understand these matters.
as they do in most things. But a difficulty in drawing the line is not a reason for drawing it in a place that is obviously wrong, any more than the notorious difficulty in saying how much hair a man has to lose before we can call him ‘bald’ is a reason for saying that someone whose pate is as smooth as a billiard ball is not bald. Of course, where rights are at risk, we should err on the side of safety. There is some plausibility in the view that, for legal purposes, since birth provides the only sharply clear and easily understood line, the law of homicide should continue to apply immediately after birth. Since this is an argument at the level of public policy and the law, it is quite compatible with the view that, on purely ethical grounds, the killing of a newborn infant is not comparable with the killing of an older child or adult. Alternatively, recalling Hare’s distinction between the critical and intuitive levels of moral reasoning, one could hold that the ethical judgment we have reached applies only at the level of critical morality; for everyday decision-making, we should act as if an infant has a right to life from the moment of birth. In the next chapter, however, we shall consider another possibility: that there should be at least some circumstances in which a full legal right to life comes into force not at birth, but only a short time after birth – perhaps a month. This would provide the ample safety margin mentioned above.

If these conclusions seem too shocking to take seriously, it may be worth remembering that our present absolute protection of the lives of infants is a distinctively Christian attitude rather than a universal ethical value. Infanticide has been practised in societies ranging geographically from Tahiti to Greenland and varying in culture from the nomadic Australian aborigines to the sophisticated urban communities of ancient Greece or mandarin China. In some of these societies infanticide was not merely permitted but, in certain circumstances, deemed morally obligatory. Not to kill a deformed or sickly infant was often regarded as wrong, and infanticide was probably the first, and in several societies the only, form of population control.

We might think that we are just more ‘civilised’ than these ‘primitive’ peoples. But it is not easy to feel confident that we are more civilised than the best Greek and Roman moralists. It was not just the Spartans who exposed their infants on hillsides: both Plato and Aristotle recommended the killing of deformed infants. Romans like Seneca, whose compassionate moral sense strikes the modern reader (or me, anyway) as superior to that of the early and mediaeval Christian writers, also thought infanticide the natural and humane solution to the problem posed by sick and deformed babies. The change in Western attitudes to infanticide since Roman times is, like the doctrine of the sanctity of human life of which it is a part, a product of Christianity. Perhaps it is now possible to think about these issues without assuming the Christian moral framework that has, for so long, prevented any fundamental reassessment.

None of this is meant to suggest that someone who goes around randomly killing babies is morally on a par with a woman who has an abortion. We should certainly put very strict conditions on permissible infanticide; but these restrictions might owe more to the effects of infanticide on others than to the intrinsic wrongness of killing an infant. Obviously, in most cases, to kill an infant is to inflict a terrible loss on those who love and cherish the child. My comparison of abortion and infanticide was prompted by the objection that the position I have taken on abortion also justifies infanticide. I have admitted this charge – without regarding the admission as fatal to my position – to the extent that the intrinsic wrongness of killing the late fetus and the intrinsic wrongness of killing the newborn infant are not markedly different. In cases of abortion, however, we assume that the people most affected – the parents-to-be, or at least the mother-to-be – want to have the abortion. Thus infanticide can only be equated with abortion when those closest to the child do not want it to live. As an infant can be adopted
by others in a way that a pre-viable fetus cannot be, such cases will be rare. (Some of them are discussed in the following chapter.) Killing an infant whose parents do not want it dead is, of course, an utterly different matter.

TAKING LIFE: HUMANS

In dealing with an objection to the view of abortion presented in Chapter 6, we have already looked beyond abortion to infanticide. In so doing we will have confirmed the suspicion of supporters of the sanctity of human life that once abortion is accepted, euthanasia lurks around the next corner — and for them, euthanasia is an unequivocal evil. It has, they point out, been rejected by doctors since the fifth century B.C., when physicians first took the Oath of Hippocrates and swore 'to give no deadly medicine to anyone if asked, nor suggest any such counsel'. Moreover, they argue, the Nazi extermination programme is a recent and terrible example of what can happen once we give the state the power to kill innocent human beings.

I do not deny that if one accepts abortion on the grounds provided in Chapter 6, the case for killing other human beings, in certain circumstances, is strong. As I shall try to show in this chapter, however, this is not something to be regarded with horror, and the use of the Nazi analogy is utterly misleading. On the contrary, once we abandon those doctrines about the sanctity of human life that — as we saw in Chapter 4 — collapse as soon as they are questioned, it is the refusal to accept killing that, in some cases, is horrific.

'Euthanasia' means, according to the dictionary, 'a gentle and easy death', but it is now used to refer to the killing of those who are incurably ill and in great pain or distress, for the sake of those killed, and in order to spare them further suffering or distress. This is the main topic of this chapter. I shall also consider, however, some cases in which, though killing is not con-