

ROBERT NISBET

PREJUDICES

A PHILOSOPHICAL

DICTIONARY

R O B E R T N I S B E T

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A PHILOSOPHICAL DICTIONARY

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PREJUDICES

MANY OF OUR MEN OF SPECULATION, instead of exploding general prejudices, employ their sagacity to discover the latent wisdom which prevails in them. If they find what they seek, and they seldom fail, they think it more wise to continue the prejudice, with the reason involved, than to cast away the coat of prejudice, and to leave nothing but the naked reason; because prejudice, with its reason, has a motive to give action to that reason, and an affection which will give it permanence. Prejudice is of ready application in the emergency; it previously engages the mind in a steady course of wisdom and virtue, and does not leave the man hesitating in the moment of decision, skeptical, puzzled and unresolved.

—EDMUND BURKE, 1790

PREFACE

I TAKE PLEASURE in thanking Harvard University Press for the invitation to undertake this book. I was asked for something along the line of Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary*, directed to my own age and furnished by my personal observations, likes, and animadversions. Whatever initial diffidence on my part there may have been was dispelled by reflection that for four centuries thousands of people have been writing pieces along the line of Montaigne's *Essais* and thousands of others along the line of Defoe's *Moll Flanders*. In any event, titles notwithstanding, more than a few others have been writing "philosophical dictionaries" these many years. It is a literary form we were given by Voltaire, not a sacred text.

As readers of Voltaire's classic know, that book is neither philosophical nor a dictionary. Neither is this book. It is a miscellany of around seventy topics, choice of which has been mine alone, though not without fertile suggestion from others. The topics range from the historical to the current, the didactic to the whimsical, and the personal to the abstract. That all of the topics reflect the author's prejudices—more in Burke's than in Mencken's sense—goes without saying. My hosts predicted that I would find pleasure in the writing of the book, and I have. If only a small amount of that pleasure is transmitted to the reader, I shall be satisfied.

There are some individuals I must thank with fullest appreciation: Michael Aronson, General Editor of Harvard University Press; Joseph Epstein, Editor of *The American Scholar*; Nathan Glazer, Professor of Education and Social Structure at Harvard University; William Goodman, formerly General Editor at Harvard; and Virginia LaPlante, Senior Editor at Harvard and companion in the preparation of the manuscript for publication. From all five I have had interest, suggestion, and valuable criticism. I am much in their debt. Finally, I acknowledge once again with deepest gratitude what my wife has given to this and other books.

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ABORTION

IT IS A reasonable supposition that the first abortion in the human species took place sometime after a natural miscarriage was recognized for what it was. Primitive woman may not have known the cause of pregnancy, but she knew what to do about it if she was so disposed. Or if the kinship community was opposed to yet another mouth to feed. By the same power that the community could encourage reproduction through appropriate obeisances to the spirits, it could discourage reproduction by termination of fetal life or, when necessary, infanticide. The needs and desires of the kinship group were sovereign.

One thing is certain. Sentimentality about fetal life was absent, as, for that matter, it was absent about the freshly born infant. The physical act of birth gave no sanctity. True birth was a ritual admission to the kinship community, and this never occurred until a period of time had passed during which the decision could be made as to acceptance or rejection. The physical and mental condition of the infant was taken into consideration, as was the ratio of males to females and the balance between population and potential food supply. If the decision was affirmative, the infant received a name and for the first time membership in the clan and household. If it was negative, the child was put to death.

Those who today oppose abortion on the ground that it is destructive of the family have a difficult time supporting their case through history and tradition. No kinship system has ever been stronger and more central in the social order than was the Roman family, especially during the Republic. The sacred *patria potestas* gave the house father authority over fetuses as it did over the lives of members of the family. In the contemporary world it would be hard to find a family system more honored and more important in its authority than that of Japan. But abortion there has for long been easily available. The essential point is that physical birth and also blood relationship have never counted for much in reckoning true kinship, which is social and determined by custom, tradition, and law.

It has been said that every abortion is the murder of an innocent human life. But if this is so, it is odd that there is no record of any religion, including Christianity, ever pronouncing an accidental miscarriage as a death to be commemorated in prayer and ritual. Given the rising intensity of the antiabortion cause, it is entirely possible that such funeral services will begin, but if so, they will not have the sanction of history.

The ancient religions are almost silent on the subject of abortion. In the Bible, there is a detailed listing (Exodus 21-23) of the strict injunctions that God, through Moses, imposed upon the Children of Israel. There is no prohibition of abortion. Indeed the only reference to miscarriage reads: "When men strive together, and hurt a woman with child, so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no harm follows, the one who hurt her shall be fined, according as the woman's husband shall lay upon him; and he shall pay as the judges determine. If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe." True, there is Jeremiah 1:5 which quotes the Lord: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." But the words are directed to Jeremiah alone. There is not the hint of generic reference.

Both Plato and Aristotle approved of abortion, the former in the interests of wise population policy, the latter chiefly on the ground that it was an element of the family's proper freedom in the state. Hippocrates' words on the subject are, in the original Greek, somewhat less blunt and categorical than modern takers of the Hippocratic Oath have sometimes suggested. All Hippocrates says is: "I will not give to a woman a pessary to produce abortion." There were other means of abortion known to the Greeks, none of which Hippocrates abjures. In sum, while the ancient world doubtless had its categorical opponents of abortion, one is hard put to find much against the act among the Greek and Roman philosophers.

Abortion was declared a sin by the early Christians, and sin it remained thenceforth in Christianity. But as a sin, it received no special emphasis, falling among the sins of sex outside marriage, adultery, birth outside wedlock, wife abuse, gluttony, pride, and a good many other lapses. It is unlikely that abortion was dealt with in practice by the church differently from the varied other sins which communicants took to confession. After all, though a canon against marriage by priests had existed from the beginning, it was not until the eleventh century that the church began to take steps toward mandatory celibacy. Illegitimacy, contraception, abortion—whatever may be their status as sins, venial or cardinal—have tended to be widely indulged by ecclesiastical and civil governments in Western history, and on the ground generally of the autonomy of the family.

Laws against abortion have been strictest and harshest in the despotisms of history, presumably because of the desire for military recruits, though desire also to weaken the hold of the family over its own should not be discounted. Czarist Russia had very severe laws

against abortion. With the Bolshevik Revolution there was a temporary abrogation of the laws, but as the real militarism of the Soviet Union became ever more manifest and the Stalinist dictatorship more oppressive, abortions were once again discouraged and made difficult of attainment, though not actually prohibited by law. Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy both had laws and also incentives designed to increase population and naturally to discourage contraception and abortion. The surest sign of despotism in history is the state's supersession of the family's authority over its own. Often such supersession is justified in the name of conscience or individual welfare.

The contemporary preoccupation with abortion has its roots in the late nineteenth century, a period of many moral preoccupations and of causes to advance them. Although abortion had been a sin in the Christian church from early on, it had taken its place with a large number of other sins. Now, however, abortion became the centerpiece of a moralistic crusade. So did a good many other matters, including alcohol, tobacco, premarital sex, masturbation, meat eating, narcotics, Sunday saloon openings, and Sunday baseball. Contraception, pro and con, was also the subject of moral crusading. Never have so many laws been passed, first by the states, then the federal government, prohibiting so many actions which for thousands of years had generally been held to fall under family authority. It can be fairly argued that the present infirm state of the family in Western society is the consequence as much of moralistic laws assertedly designed to protect individual members of the family from one evil or another as it is of anything else. Current efforts to prohibit abortion categorically and absolutely might be viewed in this light. It is not so much the "woman's right to choose" that is being assaulted as it is the ethic of family and its legitimate domain.

The nineteenth century also generated the romance and sentimentality of children, especially small ones. Before that century, children had been seen pretty much as immature or incipient adults, scarcely as treasures in and for themselves. From their romanticization it was only a short step to romanticizing pregnancy and thereafter with the fetus. Certain religions, notably but by no means exclusively Roman Catholicism, commenced crusades among their respective memberships against contraception and also forced miscarriage. More and more states and communities passed laws making it illegal to induce miscarriage in a pregnant woman, and abortion mills acquired the ill fame they continue to carry. But all such attention by law and religion has to be seen in the context of the considerable number of actions along the same line—against alcohol, tobacco, prostitution, sex for pleasure, profanity, and others, all novel utiliza-

ABORTION

tions of the law and religion which would have been deemed egregious by earlier generations. The Victorian age on both sides of the Atlantic was, from one point of view, a gigantic crusade by the middle class against the mores and folkways of the other classes, upper included. The use of the sovereign powers of the states to achieve success in this crusade was manifest in the epidemic of so-called Blue Laws in America.

Abortion existed in a kind of twilight zone until 1973 when the Supreme Court thrust itself and the authority of the central government into abortion. Prior to that act of nationalization, abortion, though indulged in, was almost universally considered unattractive morally, if not quite as flagrant as birth out of wedlock. Laws, customs, and mores varied widely among the fifty states; in most there were laws forbidding abortion, but the wording differed substantially from state to state, as did the temper of prosecution for violation of such laws. Physicians found guilty of performing abortions were disgraced, but given the simplicity of abortion within the first month of fetal life and the social and economic pressures which play upon all professions—pressures of political influence, friendship, compassion, and the like—it may be assumed that abortions in otherwise morally immaculate physicians' offices were not unknown. The multiplicity of attitudes, the plurality of practices, the diversity of laws and customs in the states, all constituted a twilight area, one in which history—Hegel's "cunning of reason"—might well have disposed of the issue of abortion, as in the past history has disposed of other moral issues thought to be insoluble by reason and law. History disposes as well as proposes, and its capacity for making a burning issue simply irrelevant in due time should never be underestimated.

But any such possibility was destroyed by a majority of the Supreme Court in 1973, in *Roe v. Wade*. In that decision the Court summarily wiped out the laws, mores, and customs of fifty states by declaring abortion to be constitutional and legal throughout the nation. At a stroke, abortion was lifted from the twilight zone of pluralism, compromise, and conflicting dogma in which it had lain for millennia and was made the subject of centralized, national mandate. Possibly not since the Dred Scott decision of the Supreme Court in 1857, which marked the Court's arbitrary preemption of another agonizing issue, has a Court decision generated passions of such intensity. If a single cause of the Civil War exists, it must be the Dred Scott decision, which also lifted an issue barely controlled—but controlled nonetheless—by the usual constraints of twilight zones into one that thenceforth moved America inexorably into the bloody and devastating Civil War.

In the present day too, as a consequence of a Supreme Court decision, crusades for and against abortion have reached passionate intensity. Forces of total good are arrayed against total evil, the sure sign of a dogma encased in the struggle for absolute power. On both sides what once existed in the shadows of convention and ordinary adjustment is now bathed in the pitiless glare of the apocalyptic. Tragically, some who defend the woman's right to abortion now declare the act of abortion desirable merely as a symbol of woman's escape at last from the tyranny of family role. Abort at will, is the thrust of this misguided propaganda, for only thus can a woman assert her final independence. Zeal in behalf of killing one's own fetus leads the militant abortionists to march happily with lesbians, homosexuals, and others whose interest in freedom is matched by a desire to vent punitive fury upon the family. Thus, ironically, the act of abortion is given, in many circles, the same sacred significance once given to birth alone.

But repugnant as this whole spectacle is, it does not present the danger to the social fabric and to individual liberty that is posed by the ranks of the aggressive antiabortionists. In denying the right of the woman or of her family to terminate pregnancy, these soldiers of righteousness strike at the very heart of both family and individual rights. The effort to pass a law or enact a constitutional amendment abolishing abortion puts this act on precisely the same level of illegality as murder of the most vicious kind or any other felony. To declare the patently inhuman fetus of four weeks "an innocent little baby" is as preposterous as so declaring the sperm and egg at the split second they have united, which is exactly what the more zealous of the antiabortionists desire to be brought about by constitutional amendment. When Mother Teresa leaves her indescribably squalid slums in Calcutta and comes to America to say that "abortion is the greatest poverty a nation can experience," dogmatism triumphs over saintliness. Abortion is indeed regrettable in most circumstances, but by no means in all. It takes inquisitorial cruelty to reach the decision that the fertilized egg must be protected even when it is the result of rape or of a father's systematic sexual abuse of his teenage daughter. No spirit in any way related to the divinity can justify programing the minds of boys and girls to repeat: "I love my mother, but if the choice is between preservation of her life and that of the embryo, I want my mother to die so the innocent baby can live." The moralizing and sentimentalizing about embryo and infant has reached its highest point of intensity in human history in the United States, and there is no sign that its ravaging of the social bond and its wanton commitment of the issue to the centralized state will abate.

Zeal and passion feed on themselves in political-moral causes, as in revolutions.

Such sentiments represent the dissolution of reason, proportion, human experience, and even sound and humane theology. When it is said that all life is sacred and that therefore the life of the fetus may not be terminated under any circumstances whatever—rape, incest, health of mother, economic condition of family—one of the oldest of mankind's perspectives is being violated, that of the scale or chain of being. Doubtless it would not occur to the most fanatical of pro-lifers to declare the existence of a fly the moral equal of the life of a horse or a cow, though it would so occur to the mystics of many faiths in the world, especially in the Orient. Then it should be similarly unconscionable, in the scale of being, in the chain of life that has been cherished in the West since Plato and Aristotle, which is the very spinal column of Christian theology, to declare the barely formed fetus the equal, even the superior in moral status, of the mother or, for that matter, of the lives of other members of the family. Yes, all life is sacred; it has been in one or other perspective for close to as long as man has existed; but from this it does not follow that all life, or even all human life, is equally sacred. And the "innocent" that invariably accompanies reference to the unborn babies comports strangely in a theology that has original sin as one of its foundations.

Still another quintessentially Christian principle of morality which is pertinent to abortion is the principle of development, central in Christian theology from Saint Augustine to Teilhard de Chardin. This too is a borrowing from the Greeks, who almost without exception saw reality in terms of growth and becoming. Goodness, like any other element of reality, must be seen in terms of its achievement, of its realization in time through the actualization of the potential. The true value of the undeveloped, the merely latent or potential, lies in its prospect of becoming developed or fulfilled. The seed is vital of course, or the tender young shoot which promises the grain, but what alone is blessed is the full-grown, fully realized plant or organism.

So with respect to human life. The seed is important, as is the fetus. But the importance of both lies solely within the perspective of development, which does not become real until its *telos*, its end or purpose, is realized. Thus to refer to a first-trimester fetus as "an innocent baby" makes no more sense than to refer to an acorn as an oak tree.

But as far as human freedom is concerned, the most menacing of the proposals made by those who describe themselves as pro-life is that which would define by congressional statute or constitutional amendment the origin of human life in the mother's body. To this

end, the antiabortionists declare that soul begins with the union of sperm and egg, thus arrogating to themselves as a special interest political group a judgment that has eluded or troubled some of the greatest prophets and theologians in human history. The pro-lifers' dogmatic insistence upon the sanctity of any and all fetuses is clearly at odds with Pauline Christianity. For the only sexual relation between man and woman that is declared good and holy is that between man and wife, duly solemnized by sacrament. This in turn confers special status or legitimacy upon the issue of such God-made unions. What, however, is to be made of sexual relations between father and daughter, brother and sister, rapist and victim, participants in pornographic spectacles? Are these somehow invested by God with sufficient sanctity to extend this sanctity to the fetus that may be the result of such odious liaisons? In the entire Christian Bible, in the works of the Church Fathers, indeed in the pronouncements and works of any known religion, it is impossible to discover such sanctification.

Rousseau, true founder of totalitarian political theory, asserted: "The most absolute authority is that which penetrates into a man's inmost being, and concerns itself no less with his will than with his actions." In Rousseau's proposed commonwealth all who enter must abandon their native rights and freedoms of any kind, individual or communal, in the interest of the closest and most direct possible relation between the state and the most intimate recesses of the individual spirit. Nothing less than this abhorrent Rousseauian power lies potentially at least in the antiabortionist proposal that the origin of life be made a matter of political or constitutional law. The "power which penetrates into one's inmost being" penetrates into the very womb, fragmenting in the process the moral authority that properly belongs to the family. Define life as the second in which sperm and egg unite, thus making abortion automatically a murder under the Fourteenth Amendment, and heretofore private natural miscarriages will become overnight subject to innuendo, suspicion, perhaps outright arraignment. Rarely has sheer zeal overtaken a moral question in the measure that is found on both sides of the abortion question. What is badly needed at this juncture is a liberal infusion of expediency in Edmund Burke's noble sense of that word.

Hegel noted that the greatest crises of history are not those of right versus wrong, but of right versus right. Who was right and who was wrong in the Reformation? Who, by their own lights at least, was right and who was wrong in the American Civil War, given all the issues attending it—the rights of the states, as well as the abolition of slaves? Who is right and who is wrong with respect to alcohol and

tobacco and the abolition of each? Without doubt, impressive cases have been made for the deleterious, often fatal, effects these substances have upon their users and, it is increasingly argued, upon others around the users. From the zealous vegetarian's point of view, the eating of any meat verges upon human cannibalism, just as the killing of any insect is, for the member of certain Buddhist sects, tantamount to the taking of human life, the web of life being seamless.

These are matters to be decided, not by coercive law of the states, but by Burke's "expediency," meaning respectful recognition of the powerful and necessary role in human existence of privacy, use and wont, tradition, and practicality, not to forget larger or long-range consequences. Burke argued that "very plausible schemes, with very pleasing commencements, have often shameful and lamentable conclusions." He added: "Is, then, no improvement to be brought into society? Undoubtedly; but not by compulsion—but by encouragement, by countenance, favor, privileges, which are powerful and lawful instruments. The coercive authority of the state is limited to what is necessary for its citizens."

So much is true and was once descriptive of the situation which existed with respect to abortion. But it appears now that, unless some extraordinary event or change intervenes, passion and zeal and sheer hatred have reached an elevation, a plateau, on which only continuing, worsening war is possible.

ALIENATION

IT SHOULD BE at least a misdemeanor to be found using this word without immediate and explicit referent. Alienation? Of and from what? Even when that question has been answered, though it rarely is, one should remain wary, for on the evidence of much twentieth century writing, the referent is all too often some boneless abstraction or empty generalization. These specimens give one pause: "Anxiety is the natural state of twentieth century man" intones a leading novelist; "crime is caused by alienation" concludes a committee of clerics and others innocent of any knowledge of crime; "America suffers from a spiritual malaise" declares a recent President for want of anything to say on revitalization of the economy; "alienation is the chief cause of revolutions" concludes the editor of a two-volume

work on the idea; “the human spirit is alienated by technology from its roots in nature” is said *ad nauseam*. Such declarations give cant a bad name.

Sadly, alienation, anxiety, *angst*, all can be and are learned in the schools. It is a rare course in literature or philosophy that is not anchored in alienation consciousness under whatever actual label. Modern youth is pronounced alienated by its teachers, with the result that youth knows nothing else to do but try to live up to its labeling. Alienation is taught from high school through college as the Gospel once was, chiefly in letters and arts. If there is one thing that has given twentieth century literature and philosophy increasing monotony, it is its combination of subjectivism and the recurrent image of alienation.

Ideally, the word should be confined to the legal context it had for so long. It was clear enough when reference was simply to alienation of property. Nor can one quarrel with the word when used to express the loss of a spouse, though given the current state of morality, it is not likely that many cases will appear in the courts having to do with the alienation of affections, once fairly common.

Law is not, however, the oldest context of the word. That appears to be theology. Wyclif wrote in 1388 of the widespread sloth among clergy as a manifestation of the “alienation of God.” By the seventeenth century, the word had acquired political meaning, and Robert Burton noted Alexander the Great’s sorrowful recognition of “an alienation in his subjects’ hearts.” Still later Burke remarked of the American colonists that “they grow every day into alienation from this country.” Such uses are unequivocal, direct, and free of sponginess. There would be no reason for eschewing the word today if the simple theological, legal, and political referents were still the standard of usage.

But they are not, and the reason lies squarely in German philosophical thought in the nineteenth century with its limitless capacity to blow up the concrete into the cosmic and the abstract. Borrowing from Protestant theology, Hegel wrote of the self as being endowed with *Entäusserung*, literally “self alienation.” It is the nature of the human mind to be alienated, Hegel observed, for there is conflict between the “I” as actor and the “I” or “me” as object. By virtue of the gift of soul or self-consciousness, man is condemned in effect to being an “alienated spirit.”

Matters become a good deal worse in the writings of the young Hegelians. Among them is Feuerbach, who announced that all supernatural religion is a reflection of man’s alienation or estrangement (*Entfremdung*) from himself. Religion is alienation, declared Feuerbach.