

Some Thoughts on Abortion and the Adoption Option

[*Background:* In Spring 2003 I taught Philosophy 230 Bioethics at Ithaca College. One issue that we studied was abortion. In class discussion, one claim made several times was that women considering abortion should instead put their newborns up for adoption. This made me curious just how many more babies would be put up for adoption if this advice were followed. Surprisingly, I was unable to find another study of this issue. Looking into the issue myself, then, I typed up the following notes, which I posted on a webpage I had created for the course and my students. While the piece was written with my students in mind as the audience, a number of people outside of Ithaca College over the following months and years wrote to me to say that they found my reflections valuable (a Google search had led them to my piece). So I believe I should continue to make these reflections available; even though the statistics are out of date by now, the general reasoning holds up still, I believe.]

In discussions of abortion, the subject of adoption as an alternative to abortion comes up frequently. This is indeed a possible alternative. But is it realistic to propose that all unwanted babies can be put up for adoption? The following thoughts can help you decide.

First, you must consider the number of abortions. More than a million abortions are performed yearly in the U.S. For example, in 1997—the last year in which data from all 50 states was collected by the CDC—1.186 million abortions were performed. (Starting in 1998, the CDC began collecting data from only 46 states, for reasons unknown to me; click [here](#) for the CDC website). This means that approximately 3250 abortions per day were performed in 1997. In 1999, the CDC estimated that 20% of all pregnancies were ended through abortion.

One question to ask is whether there would be enough adoptive families available to care for unwanted children if adoption were to replace abortion as the option of choice. Data on adoptions is pretty sketchy, but the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse (associated with the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services) reports that in the 1990s there was an average of 120,000 adoptions a year (click [here](#) for their website)—barely over 10% of the number of abortions per year. Of these adoptions, moreover, over 40% are “kinship adoptions” involving stepparents and other relatives, e.g. grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc. (In 1992, for instance, the figure for kinship adoptions was 42%; I don’t know of any reason to suppose other years were different.) This means that in the 1990s there were just 72,000 adoptions per year of non-kin babies.

Perhaps, though, these numbers are low because there are more people seeking adoption than there are babies to adopt. Haven’t we all heard about long lines of people waiting to adopt a child, and even going overseas to find them? If so, then might there be enough adoptive parents to handle the increase in unwanted children if abortion weren’t used? To answer this we would need to know how many adoption seekers there are. As reported by the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse, the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth found that 500,000 women were currently seeking to adopt a child, though of these only 232,000 were taking concrete steps toward adoption, and only 100,000 had actually applied to adopt a child. I don’t

know how long these women had been trying to adopt. That is to say, if all 500,000 of these women were to succeed in adopting a child *this year*, I don't know whether there would be 500,000 *new* women wanting to adopt the following year. Perhaps the most helpful statistic is from the 1988 National Survey of Family Growth, which estimated that there are 3.3 adoption seekers for every actual adoption. Combining this with the 120,000 adoptions a year statistic from above makes for just under 400,000 adoption seekers a year.

So suppose abortion were to be made illegal (except, say, in cases of rape and danger to mother's health—a very small fraction of yearly abortions). Would the “supply” of unwanted babies outstrip the “demand” of adoptive parents? (I hate to use those terms, but they're the easiest way to get a handle on the issue.) I don't know the answer. The lack of the abortion option *might* inspire some people to be more careful with contraceptives, or have less sex in the first place. Plus it is likely that many women who would otherwise have aborted would end up choosing to keep their babies. These effects mean that one cannot simply say “1.2 million abortions a year, therefore 1.2 million babies put up for adoption a year if abortion is made illegal.” (There is also the fact that some women would procure illegal abortions or travel to other countries to get them. This would be only cold-comfort to abortion opponents, however, and thus they will not want to place great emphasis on these factors.)

Still, even taking account of these effects, the supply of unwanted babies would surely increase dramatically if abortion were made illegal. Just to make things concrete, suppose that increased abstinence and increased care with contraceptives led to 20% fewer unwanted pregnancies a year, and that of the unwanted pregnancies that still arise, fully 1/3 of the pregnant women decide to keep their babies. Starting from the current baseline of 1.2 million abortions a year, these changes would still mean an increase of 640,000 babies put up for adoption per year, in addition to the 120,000 that are already put up per year. Would there be enough demand to handle 760,000 unwanted babies a year—over 6 times more than there are now? If we rely on the (somewhat optimistic, I think) figure from above positing 400,000 adoption seekers a year, that still leaves 360,000 babies—almost half—left over *per year*.

Problems remain even on the more optimistic assumptions that, say, increased abstinence and increased care with contraceptives leads to 50% fewer unwanted pregnancies a year, and that of the unwanted pregnancies that arise, fully 1/2 of the pregnant women decide to keep their babies. This would still create an increase of 300,000 babies in addition to the 120,000 that are already put up for adoption each year. Again assuming 400,000 adoption seekers per year, this would leave 20,000 babies per year unwanted and unadopted.

This might not be the end of the story, however. For I suppose we can imagine that many people who wouldn't otherwise consider adoption would begin to consider it once they, say, saw TV footage of orphanages filling up. The key question is whether this increase in demand for adoptive babies would match the supply. Again, I do not know; it might or might not. More likely, I think, is that we would never get to the orphanage stage. If there weren't willing adoptive parents, my guess is most women would choose to keep their baby rather than give it to an orphanage. That is the good news, I suppose—namely, that replacing abortion with adoption probably (though not certainly) could be done without orphanages. But in a way it is not-so-good-news for abortion opponents. For recall that the whole point of mentioning the adoption

option is usually to suggest that even absent an abortion option, no one needs to raise an unwanted child; one need instead only to give it to adoptive parents and be (more or less) confident it will be loved. This would not be true, however, if in a post-abortion world there are not enough adoptive parents to go around. Choosing between keeping the baby or sending it to an orphanage would be in the eyes of most mothers no choice at all. For many people, then—namely, those whose babies the adoption “market” judges to be less desirable than others—the “adoption option” would be no real option. In short, even if orphanages would not abound absent abortion, our evaluation of the “adoption option” should *still* be influenced by whether there are likely to be enough adoptive parents to match the number of mothers who would prefer that someone else raise their babies. I’ll let you be the judge of how likely this is.

On a different note, I should point out that even if it is *unlikely* that there would be enough adoptive parents, this does not by itself settle the matter of the moral permissibility of abortion. Abortion opponents after all can still argue that even if many mothers feel forced to keep their child due to a shortage of adoptive parents, it is still likely that many, many babies who *begin* life unloved will eventually come to be loved by their mothers (and fathers). True, there will be some mothers and fathers whose hearts will never come around, who will always resent the sacrifices they had to make for their children. But abortion opponents can still argue that even if a pregnant woman and her sexual partner could somehow know they would *never* come to love their child, this still does not justify ending its life in the womb.

Moreover, on the other, pro-choice side there are arguments I have not explored. Pro-choice supporters might for instance say that even if there *were* enough adoptive parents to absorb the increase in unwanted babies brought about by an absence of abortion, there still is reason to keep abortion legal. This is so because even if a woman is certain she cannot raise her baby and thus is certain she ought to give it up for adoption, it still must be *very traumatic* for her to carry her baby to term and go through with the process of giving it up. Hence pro-choice supporters might insist that we should force pregnant women into this traumatic situation only if there is very good reason to do so—say, only if abortion is grossly immoral. But they will insist (for reasons we will study) that abortion *isn't* grossly immoral, and so there is no need to force pregnant women to go through such trauma.

Hence there is much more to be said on either side. By way of closing, let me say the following. The point of this discussion is not to argue for or against one side of the abortion issue. Rather, it is just to argue that credible appeals to the “adoption option” as a solution to every unwanted pregnancy cannot be one-sentence long. There are tough questions that turn on various empirical predictions about unclear matters, and whatever answers are given to these questions must be defended. This is not to say no such defense is possible, only that one is necessary.

-- Prof. Duncan