

Greek and Roman Attitudes To Abortion

Socrates and Plato on abortion

In his “Republic”, the Greek philosopher Plato (427-347 B.C.) records a conversation between the pagan philosopher Socrates (469-399 B.C.) and Glaucon in which Socrates argued that infants which are born with any disability must be killed: “*And then, as the children are born, they’ll be taken over by the officials appointed for the purpose, who may be either men or women or both, since our offices are open to both sexes. Yes. I think they’ll take the children of good parents to the nurses in charge of the rearing pen situated in a separate part of the city, but the children of inferior parents, or any child of the others that is born defective, they’ll hide in a secret and unknown place, as is appropriate. It is, if indeed the guardian breed is to remain pure.*”¹

In his “Republic”, Plato records that Socrates and Glaucon taught that for the supposed good of society, women over 40 years old who conceived children must abort the child before birth or expose it to death after birth: “*A woman is to bear children for the city from the age of twenty to the age of forty, a man from the time that he passes his peak as a runner until he reaches fifty-five. At any rate, that’s the physical and mental prime for both. Then, if a man who is younger or older than that engages in reproduction for the community, we’ll say that his offense is neither pious nor just, for the child he begets for the city, if it remains hidden, will be born in darkness, through a dangerous weakness of will, and without the benefit of the sacrifices and prayers offered at every marriage festival, in which the priests and priestesses, together with the entire city, ask that the children of good and beneficial parents may always prove themselves still better and more beneficial. That’s right. The same law will apply if a man still of begetting years has a child with a woman of child-bearing without the sanction of the rulers. We’ll say that he brings to the city an illegitimate, unauthorized, and unhallowed child. That’s absolutely right.*

*However, I think that when women and men have passed the age of having children, we’ll leave them free to have sex with whomever they wish, with these exceptions: For a man – his daughter, his mother, his daughter’s children, and his mother’s ancestors; for a woman – her son and his descendants, her father and his ancestors. Having received these instructions, they should be very careful not to let a single fetus see the light of day, but if one is conceived and forces its way to the light, they must deal with it in the knowledge that no nurture is available for it. That’s certainly sensible.”*²

Hippocrates’ attitudes to abortion

There is debate in the medical profession about what the ancient Greek physician Hippocrates (approx. 460-377 B.C.) taught about abortion. One translation of the Hippocratic Oath states: “*Neither will I give a woman means to procure an abortion.*”³ One current popular theory about the Hippocratic Oath is part of it originally read, “*I shall not give a woman an*

¹ Plato, “Republic”, Book 5, 460 b-c.

² Ibid, 460e-461c.

³ Hippocrates, “The Oath” in the “Hippocratic Writings”, edited by G.E.R. Lloyd, Penguin, London, 1978, page 67.

abortive suppository.”⁴ This modern theory claims that the Hippocratic Oath only related to not doing certain types of abortion.

Note that in his writing “On the Nature of the Child”, Hippocrates advised a girl, believed to be in the sixth day of her pregnancy to abort the seed by leaping so that her heels touch her buttocks. He claimed that after her seventh leap, the seed fell down with a noise: “*It was in the following way that I came to see a six-day-old embryo. A kinswomen of mine owned a very valuable danseuse, whom she employed as a prostitute. It was important that this girl should not become pregnant and therefore lose her value. Now this girl had heard the sort of thing women say to each other – that when a woman is going to conceive, the seed remains inside her and does not fall out. She digested this information, and kept a watch. One day she noticed that the seed had not come out again. She told her mistress and the story came to me. When I heard it, I told her to jump up and down, touching her buttocks with her heels at each leap. After she had done this no more than seven times, there was a noise, the seed fell out on the ground, and the girl looked at it in great surprise...It was round, and red, and within the membrane could be seen thick white fibres, surrounded by a thick red serum; while on the outer surface of the membrane were clots of blood.*”⁵

In the above, Hippocrates speaks approvingly of abortion, prostitution and his relative using a girl as a prostitute to make money.

In his Aphorisms, Hippocrates also advised that abortion can be obtained by blood-letting: “*Miscarriage follows blood-letting in pregnant women, especially if the foetus be large.*”⁶ Blood-letting involved cutting open veins to remove large quantities of blood. Hippocrates’ advice here could have been used by physicians and surgeons in murdering older unborn babies.

Aristotle on abortion

In his “Politics”, the pagan Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) wrote that the following laws must be made about abortion and the deliberate exposing of newborn children to death: “*As to the exposure and rearing of children, let there be a law that no deformed child shall live, but that on the ground of an excess in the number of children, if the established customs of the state forbid this (for in our state population has a limit), no child is to be exposed, but when couples have children in excess, let abortion be procured before sense and life have begun; what may or may not be lawfully done in these cases depends on the question of life and sensation.*”⁷

In the above, he refers to a line between lawful and unlawful abortion and then explains this line supposedly occurs when the human fetus has sensation and is alive. In his “Historia animalium”, Aristotle claims that life begins in the human fetus only when the formation of distinct organs have happened. He said this formation occurs at 40 days for males and 90 days for females.⁸

The surrounding context of Aristotle’s words suggest that he was basing his teaching on abortion and infanticide on *the end justifies the means philosophy*. In other words, he was

⁴ Soranus, “Gynecology”, translated by Dr Owsei Temkin, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1956, page 63, footnote 120.

⁵ Hippocrates, “The Nature of the Child”, section 13 in “Hippocratic Writings”, pages 325-326.

⁶ Hippocrates, “Aphorisms”, Section 5, 31 in “Hippocratic Writings”, page 224.

⁷ Aristotle, “Politics”, Book 7, 16, 20.

⁸ Aristotle, “Historia animalium”, 7. 3.

saying that for the ultimate good of the state, many parents need to murder their living and unborn children.⁹

The earliest known Roman law code

In about 450 B.C., the earliest known official Roman law code was made. It was called the Twelve Tables. The Roman philosopher Cicero (106-43 B.C.) wrote that one of the laws of the Twelve Tables required that all extremely deformed children should be killed quickly: “*Then after it had been quickly killed, as the Twelve Tables direct that **terribly deformed infants shall be killed...***”¹⁰ The Twelve Tables also permitted any Roman father to kill any of his newborn female infants.¹¹

Also the Twelve Tables stated that if a Roman husband and his wife aborted a baby without any supposed justifiable reason, they were to be censured but not punished in any other way.¹²

The Greek historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus’ record

In his writing “Roman Antiquities” (Book 2, 15, 1-2), the Greek historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus (1st Century B.C.) recorded the commonly held Roman belief that Romulus, one of the supposed founders of the city of Rome, made the following laws about killing new-born infants: “*XV. By these institutions Romulus sufficiently regulated and suitably disposed the city both for peace and for war: and he made it large and populous by the following means. In the first place, he obliged the inhabitants to bring up all their male children and the first-born of the females, and forbade them to destroy any children under three years of age unless they were maimed or monstrous from their very birth. These he did not forbid their parents to expose, provided they first showed them to their five nearest neighbours and these also approved. Against those who disobeyed this law he fixed various penalties, including the confiscation of half their property.*”

Amazingly, Dionysius claimed that Romulus’ laws about infanticide increased the population of Rome. This suggests that Romulus reduced the scale of infanticide in Rome to being less than among other nationalities surrounding the city of Rome.

Abortion prescriptions in the first century B.C.

In the first century B.C., the poet Eubius added to his poems prescriptions for potions designed to produce abortion.¹³

⁹ Up until the 1800’s, many Hindus in India threw their children to alligators in the supposedly “holy” Ganges River (Colliers Encyclopedia, Volume 12, Macmillan, New York, 1991, page 776). Many Eskimos, Tibetans and Natchez Indians also cruelly murdered some of their defenceless new-born infants (Ibid).

¹⁰ Marcus Tullius Cicero, “Laws”, 3. 8. 19.

¹¹ Michael J. Gorman, “Abortion and the Early Church”, I.V.P., Downer’s Grove, Illinois, 1982, page 25.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid, page 16

Cicero's opposition to abortion

The first known pagan Roman to publicly attack abortion was Cicero. But his concern was not for the welfare of the unborn baby but for the father, the family name, the family's inheritance, the Roman state and the human race in general. Cicero wrote: *"I remember a case which occurred when I was in Asia: how a certain woman of Miletus, who had accepted a bribe from the alternative heirs and **procured her own abortion by drugs**, was condemned to death: and rightly, for she had cheated the father of his hopes, his name of continuity, his family of its support, his house of an heir, and the Republic of a citizen-to-be."*¹⁴

The edicts of Emperor Caesar Augustus

To try to build a strong Roman state, the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus in edicts in 18 B.C. and 9 A.D. promoted childbearing instead of abortion and infanticide.¹⁵ But he never outlawed abortion. This is because Roman law adopted the view of the Stoic philosophers that an unborn child is not a human. The Roman jurist Papinian (140-212 A.D.) recorded that the Stoic idea that unborn babies were not human beings became a part of Roman law.¹⁶

Pliny on abortion

Pliny the Elder (23-79 A.D.) was not a Christian but was a Roman with higher moral standards than many who lived during his time.

For example, even though in his writing "The Natural History", he lists some of the methods by which numerous medical practitioners at the time used to murder unborn babies,¹⁷ he opposed abortion. He wrote: *"But say, that in these cases it might be tolerable to set down in their books some poisons: what reason, nay what leave had those Greeks to shew the means how the brains and understanding of men should be intoxicated and troubled? What colour and pretence had they to set down medicines and receipts to cause women to slip the untimely fruit of their womb, and a thousand such-like casts and devices that be practiced by herbs of their penning? For mine own part, I am not for them that would send the conception out of the body unnaturally before the due time: they shall learn no such receipts of me."*

Pliny also recorded that the medical practices of the time in the Roman world were able to abort a baby up till the seventh month of pregnancy.¹⁸ This is even though such late abortions nearly always also killed the mother.¹⁹

Other pagan Romans who mildly opposed abortion

In the first century A.D., the Roman Stoic named Musonius Rufus condemned abortion, infanticide and gladiator-fighting.²⁰ In his Discourse 15 "Should Every Child That Is Born Be

¹⁴ Cicero, "In Defence of Cluentius", 32.

¹⁵ Gorman, page 27.

¹⁶ Ibid, page 32 and Justinian, "Digest", 35. 2. 9. 1.

¹⁷ Pliny, "The Natural History", Books 20, 25 and 28.

¹⁸ Ibid, Volume 7.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Raised”, Rufus condemned abortion as an offence against the family and nature but not as murder of the unborn baby.²¹

The first Roman Emperors to make abortion a crime were Septimus Severus (reigned 193-211 A.D.) and Antoninus Caracalla (reigned 211-217 A.D.).²² These laws punished abortion by a period of time in exile.²³ But the concerns of these laws were about the husband’s rights in relation to losing a child and on the wife’s duties but not on the rights of the unborn child.²⁴ These laws did not treat abortion as murder.

Abortion in Rome in the 1st century B.C. and 1st and 2nd centuries A.D.

The Roman poet Ovid (43 B.C.-A.D. 17) wrote how common abortion was during his time: *“Why cheat the full vine of the growing cluster and pluck with ruthless hand the fruit yet in the green? What is ripe will fall of its self – let grow what has once become quick; a life is no slight reward for a short delay. Ah, women, why will you thrust and pierce with the instrument and give dire poisons to your children yet unborn.”*²⁵ In his “Fasti”, Ovid wrote about the Ausonian women: *“...every matron vowed not to propagate the line of her ungrateful spouse by giving birth to offspring; and lest she should bear children, she rashly by a secret thrust discharged the growing burden from her womb.”*²⁶

The satirist Juvenal (60-140 A.D.) wrote in approximately 116 A.D. about rich Roman women having abortions: *“how often does a gilded bed contain a woman that is lying in it. So great is the skill, so powerful the drugs of the abortionist, paid to murder mankind within the womb.”*²⁷

Juvenal also recorded that the Roman Emperor Domitian had sex with his niece Julia, got her pregnant and gave her abortive drugs which killed her unborn baby: *“A vicious prince start from the incestuous bed and with stern voice those rigid laws awake at which the powers of war and beauty quake, what time his drugs were speeding to the womb his seed, the fruit of Julia’s teeming womb.”*²⁸ Julia was Domitian’s brother Titus’ daughter and died as a result of the abortion in about A.D. 91.²⁹

The Stoic Roman philosopher Seneca (4 B.C.-65 A.D.) who educated Emperor Nero as a child, wrote: *“Mad dogs we knock on the head; the fierce and savage ox we slay; sickly sheep we put to the knife to keep them from infecting the flock; unnatural progeny we destroy; we drown even children who at birth are weakly and abnormal. Yet it is not anger, but reason that separates the harmful from the sound”.*³⁰ Seneca justified such murders on the basis of the utilitarian practical argument that these killings were based on the long-term good of the individual and the future welfare of Roman society.

²⁰ Musonius Rufus, “Discourse 15” in Cora E. Lutz, “Musonius Rufus: The Roman Socrates”, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1947, and A.C. Geytenbeek, “Musonius Rufus and Greek Diatribe”, Van Gorcum, Assen, 1963, pages 78-88.

²¹ Geytenbeek, pages 78-88.

²² Gorman, page 30.

²³ Ibid and Justinian “Digest”, 47. 11.

²⁴ Gorman, pages 30-31 and Justinian, “Digest” 48. 8. 8.

²⁵ Ovid, “The Amores”, Book 2, 14:25-31.

²⁶ Ovid, “Fasti”, Book 1, 28.

²⁷ Juvenal, “Satire”, 6, 593-596.

²⁸ Juvenal, “Satire”, 2, 20-24.

²⁹ “Juvenal’s Satire’s with the Satires of Persius”, translated by William Gifford, J.M. Dent and Sons, London, 1954, page 11, footnote 8.

³⁰ Seneca, “On Anger”, I, 15, 2-3.

In his “Fifteenth Discourse: Slavery 2”, the Roman philosopher Dio Chrysostom wrote that some slave women aborted their babies or murdered them after birth: “...*but in the case of slave women, on the other hand, some destroy the child before birth and others afterwards, if they can do so without being caught, and yet sometimes even with the connivance of their husbands, that they may not be involved in trouble by being compelled to raise children in addition to their enduring slavery.*”³¹

The Roman governing authorities did not believe abortion or killing babies after birth was wrong. But the authorities regarded slaves and their babies as being the property of their Roman masters. So if a female slave aborted or killed her newborn baby without her master’s permission, this was regarded as killing her master’s property.

Murdering their babies so they could maintain their beauty and weight

In his “Attic Nights”, the Roman writer Aulus Gellius (born between 113-130 A.D.) refers to Roman women who aborted their babies just because these women did not want their physical attractiveness to be lessened by being pregnant and giving birth. He records how the philosopher Favorinus spoke of “*those who strive by evil devices to cause abortion of the fetus itself which they have conceived, in order that their beauty may not be spoiled by the weight of the burden they bear and by the labour of parturition.*”³²

Greek and Roman doctors who advocated abortion and infanticide

In his writing ‘How to recognize the newborn that is worth rearing’, the famous ancient doctor Soranus of Ephesus who worked in Rome in the first and second centuries A.D. and was ‘called by some the most important figure in gynecology in the ancient world’³³, said that after a birth of a child, the midwife should examine various specified bodily parts of the new-born to see if these parts functioned properly in order to determine if the child is worthwhile to be reared. He then sanctioned murdering imperfect babies by saying, ‘*And by conditions contrary to those mentioned, the infant not worth rearing is recognized.*’³⁴

Galen wrote: “*Now abortifacient drugs or certain other conditions which destroy the embryo or rupture certain of its membranes are followed by abortion*”, resulting in an abortion, either alone or through the assistance of other physical or chemical means.³⁵

Dioscorides (lived 1st Century A.D.), another Roman physician wrote about plant potions which were used to produce abortions.³⁶

In his writing “On the Soul”, Chapter 25, the early church father Tertullian wrote of the famous pagan Greek and Roman physicians Hippocrates, Asclepiades, Erasistratus, Herophilus and Soranus all having surgical instruments for abortion.

Ricci records that Oribasius (325-403 A.D.), the physician of Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate (331-363 A.D.) wrote a chapter in his book “Synagogae medicae” on abortive

³¹ Dio Chrysostom, “Fifteenth Discourse: Slavery 2”, 8.

³² Aulus Gellius, “Attic Nights”, Book 12, 1, 8.

³³ Roderick McGrew, ‘Encyclopedia of Medical History’, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1985, page 123.

³⁴ Soranus, “Gynecology”, Book 2, Chapter 6, 10.

³⁵ Galen, “On the Natural Faculties”, Book 3, Chapter Section 12, Point 184.

³⁶ John T. Noonan, “Contraception: A History of its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists”, Belknap Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1965, pages 13-14.

drugs: “Chapter CXXXIX mentions remedies which aid in expelling the foetus; these same drugs also ‘provoke’ the periods and expel the products of conception.”³⁷

³⁷ James V. Ricci, “The Genealogy of Gynaecology”, The Blakiston Company, Philadelphia, page 177.