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The Pro-Life Pregnancy Help Movement: Serving Women or Saving Babies?

By Laura S. Hussey, Lawrence, University of Kansas Press, 2020, Pp. 328, £38.50, ISBN: 978-0700629008

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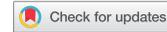
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contribution to the literature deserving of a place on the shelf a many a student and teacher.

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The Pro-Life Pregnancy Help Movement: Serving Women or Saving Babies? By Laura S. Hussey, Lawrence, University of Kansas Press, 2020, Pp. 328, £38.50, ISBN: 978-0700629008

This book is crucial reading for anyone interested in the politics of abortion in the United States of America (USA) and around the world. This is perhaps ironic since, as Laura Hussey demonstrates, her subjects, pro-life pregnancy help centres, go to great lengths to forgo political involvement. Amid controversy about the lengths to which pro-lifers go to aid mothers and their children *after* birth, Hussey provides a reasonably definitive answer with her comprehensive empirical study on pregnancy help centres in the USA. This book joins her previous work on the extent to which abortion decisions depend on financial and other support (Hussey 2010, 2011). That work found that state welfare provision can reduce the abortion rate, but only in states supportive of pro-life policies and cultures. In pro-choice states, welfare provision appears to *increase* the abortion rate.

In this work, Hussey's attention turns to another form of provision, in the domain of private sector charity. Some of Hussey's most powerful contributions are relatively simple statistical data, which no one else has yet collected so comprehensively. Pregnancy help centres number nearly 3000 in the USA, each having an average of 40 volunteers. Those volunteers contribute an average of five hours a week, and have been volunteering for an average of five years. This is on top of an average of 5.7 paid staff, only a tiny proportion of whose funding comes from the state. The overwhelming majority of centres either provide or refer women for a wide range of goods and services, ranging from baby care products to furniture, food, housing, childcare, medical care, and even cash. Likewise, 79% of centres continue offering help after the baby's first birthday, and 20% continue support after the 5th birthday.

Against the allegation that pregnancy help centres are merely trying to discourage abortion rather than truly helping women, Hussey points out that only a minority of women using their services were considering abortion to begin with. Hence, the centres inclusively support women even when abortion is not being considered – indeed, some pro-lifers have criticized pregnancy help centres for not doing enough to prevent abortion.

The data that Hussey provides – of which I have cited only a small sample – appear to decisively refute the claim that pro-lifers do not care about supporting women and their babies after birth. Until similarly comprehensive data are provided in support of the opposite conclusion, Hussey's work will remain the authoritative academic work on this issue.

The author also provides a detailed history of the pregnancy help movement, carefully distinguishing the various kinds of pregnancy help (the pregnancy centres on which she focusses are only one kind of pro-life welfare community in the USA, others including maternity homes and adoption agencies). She describes the different religious (the volunteer base is almost entirely religious), strategic and political stances of the organizations and their volunteers, finding a relatively consistent determination to focus on helping women and avoid party politics. Nevertheless, she notes that the movement has become increasingly involved in political and legal advocacy in recent years out of self-defence, as some states have sought to impose restrictions on their operations which would compromise their values, for example, requiring that women be referred for abortion if requested. She describes other significant changes in the movement over the last few decades, perhaps most notably the medicalization of many centres, as they try to appeal more to women who are genuinely considering abortion. This has involved significant costs for increased provision of medical staff and services, and ultrasounds. The huge success – a massive expansion of centres and a significantly higher proportion of clients who were initially considering abortion – of this strategic shift is, in an ironic turn, traced back to attempts by Californian authorities to shut the centres down by claiming that, in performing pregnancy tests, they were practising medicine without a licence. These and other moves against pregnancy centres turned out to be one of the main driving factors behind their expansion in recent decades (the number of centres affiliated to Heartbeat International and Care Net – two of the biggest pregnancy centre networks – doubled between 2000 and 2008).

While Hussey is not uncritical of the relatively few cases where pregnancy centres have acted inappropriately, she does provide empirical data alleviating possible concerns raised about pregnancy centres. For example, against the allegation that pregnancy centres pretend to be abortion clinics to attract clients, she notes that 90% explicitly declare on their websites that they do not refer for abortions, while litigation history on this question reveals a stark lack of *any* evidence for the allegation. Indeed, Hussey shows that the empirical evidence reveals very high client satisfaction from pregnancy centres.

The empirical data also reveal some of the limits of welfare and social support, whether public or private. Only a small minority of women having abortions surveyed, for example, said that they would make a different decision given a European-style safety net. This comports with evidence showing that abortion rates in the USA are no higher than the European average, and in fact significantly lower than in European countries with particularly strong social support safety nets, such as the Nordic countries (Guttmacher Institute 2019, European Health Information Gateway 2021). Although many women cite financial reasons for having an abortion, women who do so typically offer additional reasons: even in

the absence of financial concerns, they consider those other reasons sufficient to seek an abortion. This confirms other research suggesting that only a minority of women consider financial support relevant to their decision (Husfeldt *et al.* 1995).

There are some areas which Hussey could have covered in more detail, although this is not so much a criticism of the book as a suggestion for future research. There is limited discussion of centres outside the United States – although Heartbeat International alone claim over 1000 affiliates across 75 countries – and limited material on what would encourage women requesting abortion to reconsider their decision. It would also be interesting to compare the services – medical or otherwise – provided to help a woman who chooses to continue the pregnancy with the same services provided by abortion clinics. This could confirm or disconfirm the common claim by pro-lifers that, while pro-lifers do an enormous amount to support a woman to choose life, abortion providers do relatively little to support women's choice unless that choice is for abortion. Such a study is however perhaps beyond the scope of this book.

There are two areas which are arguably within this book's scope, however. Firstly, more could have been said about the services to which pregnancy centres primarily *refer* rather than directly provide. For example, most centres do not provide childcare services, but most centres do refer women to other services able to provide these. The movement is thereby – at least in theory – open to the criticism that referring to alternative services is not particularly onerous and may not be sufficient to give women the resources to continue their pregnancy. At present this criticism is merely a claim with no evidence to support it. But if Hussey could show that such referrals involve considerable work relieve women of a considerable burden, it would certainly strengthen the pro-lifers' case that they are truly motivated to help women further.

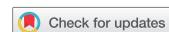
Secondly, adoption is not discussed in great detail. A common argument against pro-lifers is that banning abortion would lead to large numbers of children requiring adoption. This argument is weak for a number of reasons – not least because moderate abortion restrictions – making access more difficult or limiting abortion to certain grounds – do not increase the birth rate, and stricter abortion restrictions – a total ban or close to it – increase it only temporarily (Levine 2004). But it would have been helpful to have more empirical data on pro-life adoption agencies and on the extent to the need for adoptive parents is fulfilled in the USA, since empirical data on the limiting factors for adoption are sparse.

Nevertheless, the book is not significantly hindered by these limitations. It remains a highly compelling, unique and ambitious work, and is an essential contribution to the literature on pregnancy, abortion, and welfare of women and children.

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Persons, Moral Worth, and Embryos. A Critical Analysis of Pro-Choice Arguments. Edited by Stephen Napier, Dordrecht, Springer, 2011, Pp 283, RRP £87.50, eBook, ISBN978-94-007-1602-5

That abortion is the unjust killing of an innocent human person is the contention of the authors of this book. It does not intend to be a comprehensive defence of a pro-life position; rather, it addresses specific abortion-rights claims in three disciplines — philosophy, science, and socio-political sciences. In philosophical literature, such claims fall under three themes: (1) the nature of a person; (2) the wrongness of killing; (3) the nature of the embryo.

Regarding the nature of human persons, each author of the philosophical section appears to hold to the substantial identity view of persons (also referred to in the book as the substance view). This account is most clearly expressed by Francis Beckwith (Chapter 5) and Christopher Tollefsen (Chapter 9). Beckwith defines a substance as ‘an individual being of a certain sort’ (p. 68). Dogs are such by virtue of their canine substance and human persons are such by virtue of their human substance. Beckwith refers to ‘ultimate capacities’ (equivalent to ‘radical’ capacities as described by others such as John Finnis) as those tied to substance. Thus, they do not change, although the degree to which they are expressed may. A dog, whether it can bark in practice, always has the ultimate capacity to bark. This capacity is rooted in its *canine* nature. Similarly, a human always retains ultimate capacity for rationality by its nature as a rational animal. If a person is defined according to the Boethian formulation as ‘an individual substance of a rational nature’ (p. 86) then a human being is always a person, no matter how actualized or otherwise his/her capacities are. Indeed, it is only by reference to something’s nature that we can understand its aberrations. It is only because a dog has a canine nature that we see its inability to bark as a privation. Similarly, it is only because a human being is a person — a rational animal — that we recognize the failure to develop rational capacities as a privation. Despite humans performing differently, they retain their identity through time as a member of the class ‘human’ by virtue of their substance.