

Margaret Sanger's Multifaceted Defense of Abortion and Infanticide

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ABSTRACT

A close reading of the works of Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood, reveals that she was a champion not just of contraception, as is usually thought, but also of abortion and infanticide. She claimed that there was a natural “evolution” from infanticide to abortion to contraception, with all three stages of fertility-control offering legitimate ways for women to avoid what she called “involuntary motherhood.” Moreover, if contraceptives proved not to be foolproof, she saw no reason not to fall back on abortion (if it were “skilled”) and infanticide. Indeed, she explicitly approved of mothers exposing their infants in ancient Sparta and Rome, as well as drowning their girl-infants in contemporary China. She regarded the right to kill their infants as evidence of women’s high status in antiquity, and so she excoriated early Christians for replacing infanticide with orphanages. To make her extremist views palatable, Sanger would often package them in sentimental and religious rhetoric.

IN HER WORKS *Woman and the New Race*, *Pivot of Civilization*, and *My Fight for Birth Control*, Margaret Sanger offers a range of justifications for killing “unwanted children.” This is no surprise considering how she reacts when she witnesses an act of violence against an infant: “I saw a sickly baby in the arms of a terrified woman whose drunken husband had thrown the wailing, naked infant into the snow,” she recounts, and “I remember having keen sympathy with that man!” His wife had given birth to eleven children, six of them living, and the last “evidently had eczema” and “whined night and day,” so the situation was just “too much” for the father, and “out of the door into the snow the nuisance went!” The justification Sanger offers is purely subjective: “desperate for want of sleep and quiet,” the father’s “nerves overcame

him.” Infanticide is simply ridding oneself of an intolerable “nuisance.”¹

This passage demonstrates Sanger’s pitiless view of nascent life and shows how fitting it is that she should be the founder of Planned Parenthood, today the chief purveyor of abortions in the United States. In another place she remarks, “The most merciful thing that the large family does to one of its infant members is to kill it.”² She is remembered for her fight to legalize birth control, but a close reading of Sanger’s work shows that she saw birth control, abortion, and infanticide as differing only in degree, not in kind. They were points on the same continuum.

Sanger tells of a recurring nightmare of hers: she dreamed that “mechanical, automaton-like crowds were walking, walking, walking, always in the opposite direction” to her and crowding her to the curb, and then suddenly these people turned into “mice; they even smelt like mice.” The dream reveals her sense of superiority to the masses, who turn out to be vermin. When she sets up the Clinical Research Bureau in Brooklyn, she observes pointedly that she will be using people instead of mice: it will be “a nucleus for research, a laboratory, as it were, dealing with human beings instead of with white mice” (MF 122-23, 312).³ She refers to the Chinese as breeding “with the rapidity and irresponsibility of flies” (MF 265) and compares most American women to cattle, asking if “any modern stockbreeder” would “permit the deterioration of his livestock” as Americans permit and even “encourage” the deterioration of their race by misguided charities.⁴ In 1871, Darwin tried to show, in his *Descent of Man*, that humans did not differ fundamentally from beasts and that human morality had evolved from the social instincts of brutes. Between

¹ Margaret Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control* (New York NY: Farrar & Rinehart, 1931), pp. 12-13. This work will be cited in the text hereafter as MF.

² Margaret Sanger, *Woman and the New Race* (New York NY: Truth Publishing Co., 1920), p. 63. This work will be cited in the text hereafter as WNR.

³ Ironically, the “educated classes” were the ones who patronized the ABCL bureau, according to David M. Kennedy, *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger* (New Haven CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1971), p. 182.

⁴ Margaret Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization in Historical Perspective*, edited Michael W. Perry (Seattle WA: Inkling Books, 2001), p. 257. This work will be cited hereafter in the text as PC.

1871 and 1930, a Darwinist worldview arose in Europe, according to which humans should be bred like animals for the sake of evolutionary progress, and “the destruction of the less well-endowed” be encouraged to “win space for the expansion” of superior stock.⁵ This was Margaret Sanger’s worldview; witness her frequent use of the word *unfit* for those she thought should be sterilized, aborted, or left to die.

In her campaign for birth control, Sanger spoke of “the evolution of birth control from infanticide, through abortion, to modern methods of scientific and harmless prevention” (MF 305). But since birth control was supposed to replace infanticide and abortion in her scheme, it had to be foolproof. She tells us that women around 1920 were constantly asking her, regarding birth control, “Is it certain? Will it prevent absolutely?” Yes, she would answer, there are sure methods, and the doubts raised about “the certainty of contraceptives” come from “uninformed” doctors and neighbors. Although the law, she added, forbade her to name the failsafe methods, she could say that they had “stood the test of certainty” in Holland, France, England, and even among the wealthy in the United States; witness their falling birthrates in the past quarter-century (WNR 130-35).

After giving such unqualified assurances to women during the 1920s, Sanger flatly contradicts herself in *My Fight for Birth Control* in 1931. Now she admits that the “need for reliable methods has been far greater and more extended than the ability on the part of the medical profession or science to supply them” and that “biologists and bio-chemists are now at work perfecting the science of contraception” (MF 341, 343). So birth control offers no absolute “certainty” after all. So what happens when contraceptives fail and women are faced—to use Sanger’s term—with “involuntary motherhood”? She explains that “nearly all” working-class women fall into two groups in such a crisis: the first group will “find refuge in abortion,” while the second will be “hopelessly” resigned. The better choice, she declares, is abortion, for those “in whom the feminine urge to freedom is strongest choose the abortionist,” while the others bring children to birth “hoping that they will be born dead or die” (WNR 120).

⁵ Richard Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics and Racism in Germany* (New York NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 22, 78, 82.

Thus, according to Sanger, *nearly all* working-class women wish their unborn children dead, but only some of them act on that wish. She approves heartily of those who choose abortion because she says they follow an irresistible “urge” to guard their liberty: women are driven to defy “church and state,” she exclaims, by “the strongest force” in their nature, by an “absolute, elemental, inner urge” of the “feminine spirit” (WNR 12, 28).

Sanger was aware that abortion in Europe served as a backup to contraception, for she had visited Europe several times, and she noted that in Berlin of the 1920s “contraceptive devices could be purchased in every apothecary shop,” yet “more than half of the known pregnancies ended in abortion” (MF 305). She claimed that a child dead from abortion was no worse off than an orphan: “when the practice of abortion was put under the ban by the Church, an alternate evil—the foundling asylum, with its horrifying history—sprang up” (MF 133). In a recent book, Leslie Cannold follows Sanger in urging women to demand a dead fetus rather than give up their child to adoption.⁶

As I will show, Sanger’s defense of infanticide applies as well to abortion. One way she defends child-killing is to argue that it was universally practiced by primitive women and was of great benefit to them. She sees it as a natural stage of evolution. Citing sources alleging that it was widely practiced by Aborigines in Australia and New Zealand, Indians in the Western Hemisphere, Africans, ancient Semites, and primitives in Japan, India, China and Europe, she contends that the “privileges of women” were greatest in those places where infanticide was the rule. Rather than give proof of this, she asks two rhetorical questions: “If infanticide did not spring from a desire within the woman herself, from a desire stronger than motherhood, would it prevail where women enjoy an influence equal to that of men? And does not the fact that the women in question do enjoy such influence, point unmistakably to the motive behind the practice?” (WNR 13-15). She thinks primitive women killed their newborns down the ages chiefly for the sake of social *privileges* and

⁶ Leslie Cannold, *The Abortion Myth* (Hanover CT: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 2000), p. 115. She contends that women make an “ethical” decision when they reject an “evacuation” that would keep the fetus alive for adoption and insist, rather, on an abortion that will kill the child they cannot “mother themselves.”

influence.

It seems to defy logic to claim that women had an equality with men in places where female infants were systematically chosen for slaughter. Yet this is Sanger's contention. Evidently, she sees female infanticide as part of the law of supply and demand—limit the supply, and the value of the surviving women goes up. In the same way she calculates that the deaths of millions of soldiers in WW I gave laboring men of the 1920s a brief spike in wages: "Even with the temporary advantages gained by the wiping out of millions of workers in the Great War, labor's problem remains unsolved. It has now, as always, to contend with the crop of young laborers coming into the market" (WNR 145). Here she coolly reduces the vast carnage of the war to economic *advantages* and describes the children of the lower classes in the 1920s as a surplus *crop* that will once again bring down the wage-earner's *market* price.

In *Pivot of Civilization* (1922), Sanger again uses primitives to defend infanticide when she laments that motherhood among the masses in her day "does not rise to the level of the barbarous or the primitive. Conditions of life among the primitive tribes were rude enough and severe enough to prevent the unhealthy growth of sentimentality, and to discourage the irresponsible production of defective children" (PC 189). She considers primitives to be superior to her sentimental contemporaries because at least they killed the unfit or let them die through neglect in the evolutionary struggle to survive. Sanger laments that charities in her day are an "international menace" because they will not allow "biological and racial mistakes" to perish (PC 258-60). Here she encourages infanticide by omission of children whom she sees as evolutionary *mistakes*, echoing Agnes Bluhm, the German physician who publicly advocated, only a decade earlier, the infanticide of handicapped and imbecile newborns.⁷

A second way Sanger defends infanticide is to say that it increased as civilization advanced. She praises Plato and Aristotle for urging the elimination of deformed, sickly, or surplus children, calling Aristotle a "conscious advocate of family limitation even if attained by violent means." She is not at all repelled by *violent means*. In Sparta, she alleges, women "ruled their husbands" and owned land, so if they killed their

⁷ Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler*, 155.

“unwanted children” it had to be because they chose to do it for “personal freedom,” since they were free to abolish the practice. Sanger sets up the courtesan Aspasia and the lesbian Sappho as models for women. She claims that the Greek wives of that era were so envious of Sappho’s freedom and self-development that they killed their own children to emulate her. Instead of proof, she offers another rhetorical question: “can there be any doubt that they acquiesced in the practice of infanticide as a means to that end?” (WNR 15-19)

Sanger even approves of female infanticide in contemporary China. She complains of “meddling” Christian missionaries who campaign “to keep parents from drowning girl children” and merely cause food shortages. She also deplors the establishment of an international fund to save thirty million Chinese from a famine which, she says, they brought on by “procreative recklessness” (PC 217). She would let those millions starve to teach them a lesson about birth control. Sanger again justifies euthanasia by omission when she complains that missionaries in China engage in the “fruitless” task of “temporarily” relieving the “physical miseries of otherwise neglected elements” (MF 264, 267). Evidently, these “elements” are in her eyes “unfit” to live and should be left alone to die.

Sanger also hints that the children of “feeble-minded” Americans should be eliminated by a lethal neglect: “Are we to check the infant mortality rate among the feeble-minded and aid the unfortunate offspring to grow up, a menace to the civilized community even when not actually certifiable as mentally defective or not obviously imbecile?” On the same basis she opposes free medical and nursing care for “slum mothers” (PC 204, 215).

Yet a third way Sanger defends infanticide is to say that its unbroken practice down the ages proves that it comes from a great, irresistible “instinct” in women. She contends that “the wide prevalence of the custom is the first and best proof that women are driven by some great pressure within themselves to accede to it” (WNR 21). Her words *instinct* and *driven* suggest that women have no free will in the matter and cannot be blamed for killing their newborns. Despite heavy penalties and the availability of foundling homes, she argues, infanticide remained the most common crime in Christian Europe till the end of the eighteenth century, and it stopped then only because abortion supplanted it. For infanticide

can never be suppressed, she insists, it can only *evolve* into abortion and birth control. Child-killing disappears when the “skill in producing abortions is developed or knowledge of contraceptives is spread, and only then” (WNR 24). If infanticide is simply a point on a single evolutionary continuum, it follows that women may go back to it if contraceptives fail and abortions are costly. Indeed, Sanger finds nothing to blame in Chinese women of her day using infanticide even though there are “extremely skillful” midwives available to perform abortions (WNR 21). In her view of infanticide, Sanger resembles the Darwinist Ernst Haeckel, who wrote that killing newborns was “no different than killing other animals,” for the newborn child was “completely devoid of consciousness” just like “a lower vertebrate.”⁸

Although here and there in her work Sanger deplors back-street and self-induced abortions, this is just a strategy to win public support for birth control as the only modern alternative to abortion. After all, since she defends infanticide to the hilt, why would she draw the line morally at abortion? At one point she declares that abortion is fine when performed in a *skilled* way: “We know that abortion, when performed by skilled hands, under right conditions, brings almost no danger to the life of the patient” (WNR 200). She is concerned only with the pregnant woman and never shows compassion for the “unwanted child,” whether unborn or newborn, thus leaving ample room for the future legalization of abortion and infanticide, once the battle for birth control is won.

Sanger makes still a fourth justification of infanticide when she argues that the woman who tries to get rid of her “unwanted child” is herself the victim of social and marital “violence.” First, society commits a “slow murder” upon her when it tries to enslave her into motherhood and shields itself behind “dead creeds,” “ancient, inhuman moral creeds” (WNR 28, 75). Sanger is especially vehement against Christianity because she imagines that women had attained high “privileges” in ancient Greece and Rome through the use of infanticide and that these were “swept away by the rising tide of Christianity.” Ever since, she laments, “Sex morals for women” have been “negative, inhibitory and repressive” (WNR 177-79). The husband is also guilty of “violence,” she claims, because

⁸ Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler*, 147.

wedlock is no more than “prostitution legalized by the marriage ceremony,” “a system under which the lawful rapes exceed the unlawful ones a million to one.” Compared to what they suffer in matrimony, Sanger sees all other wrongs that women endure as “inconsequential in nature and in number” (WNR 112, 178).

As a victim of “violence,” then, the woman who kills her unwanted offspring is not committing a “crime,” Sanger contends, but only fulfilling her “highest duty.” By choosing “the surgeon’s instruments” she becomes a “martyr,” in that she refuses to sacrifice “what is highest and holiest in her—her aspiration to freedom, her desire to protect the children already hers” (WNR 86, 129). Almost always when she mentions the crime of abortion, Sanger puts quotation marks around the word *crime*—another way of justifying the violence done to babies. She writes, “When society holds up its hands in horror at the ‘crime’ of abortion, it forgets at whose door the first and principal responsibility for this practice rests.” The blame rests “squarely upon the heads of the lawmakers and the puritanical, masculine-minded person who insists upon retaining the abominable legal restrictions” (WNR 121, 127-28). But Sanger does *not* put quotation marks around the word *crime* when she charges the Catholic Church with teaching nothing “about the crime of bringing an unwanted child into the world” (WNR 168), a “crime” she considers the greatest of all. She even sees the infant who dies in the first year as “more fortunate” than the one who lives to be punished by his parents’ “fecundity.” Not even an education can compensate one for “the misfortune of being a superfluous child” (PC 195, 201).

Sanger is zealous not only to free women from “involuntary motherhood,” but also to browbeat and coerce those who disagree with her into compliance—especially those who welcome disabled children or large families. No man or woman, she declares, has “a right to bring into the world those who are to suffer from mental or physical affliction” (WNR 89). Since such cases were detected at the time only after birth, she is making here another justification for infanticide. Sanger repeatedly browbeats the woman who *wants* a large family by telling her that she is reducing herself to a “brood animal” and a “breeding machine,” engaging in “the most immoral practice of the day,” and doing an “injury to society.” If the woman is working-class, she should consider that “Every jail, hospital for the insane, reformatory and institution for the feeble-

mind ed cries out against the evils of too prolific breeding among wage-workers,” and if she is rich, that it is “immoral” for her to have a large family and halt her “self-development” (WNR 2, 53, 57-58, 63-64, 68).

Sanger also wants to curb the procreative liberty of the masses through population control. A recent historian notes that Sanger regarded at least a quarter of Americans as “unfit” to breed and advocated sterilization for all “defectives.” In *Pivot of Civilization* (1922) she recommends that the state handle the problem of the “unfit” with “force or persuasion”—“propaganda for the many and coercion for the resisting few.” This policy would weed out the “least desirable members” of society by “the very roots.”⁹ She warns that “Possibly drastic and Spartan methods may be forced upon American society if it continues complacently to encourage the chance and chaotic breeding that has resulted from our stupid, cruel sentimentalism.” *Spartan methods* originally included infanticide.¹⁰ Of course, Sanger does not consider such browbeating and coercion as a form of *violence*. Among the “unfit” to breed, she numbered not only the disabled, but also the “chronically indigent.”¹¹

Besides all this, after winning a legal victory on January 8, 1918, in the New York Court of Appeals, Sanger wanted to force physicians to prescribe more contraceptives. Judge J. Crane’s ruling was that a physician could prescribe contraceptives for health reasons, but, as Sanger noted, “few physicians” were taking advantage of his ruling in the two years that followed, though “under that decision, a physician has a right, and it is therefore his duty, to prescribe contraceptives in such cases.” Here Sanger changes the court’s *permission* into the doctors’ *right*, and then imperiously transforms *right* into *duty*. Allowing no room for conscience, she insists that doctors are *bound*, “bound, in the very nature of things” to prescribe contraceptives “to an increasing degree” (WNR 218-19, 222). At that time as in ours, *health* was an elastic term, so the 1918 ruling, according to one historian, “allowed physicians a wide

⁹ Angela Franks, *Margaret Sanger’s Eugenic Legacy: The Control of Female Fertility* (Jefferson NC: McFarland and Company, 2005), pp. 12-3, 16, 71, 187.

¹⁰ *Pivot of Civilization*, p. 187. Michael Perry notes the implication of infanticide here.

¹¹ Franks, *Sanger’s Eugenic Legacy*, pp. 47-50.

latitude” in prescribing contraception “as a preventative or a therapeutic device.”¹² But that was not enough for Sanger, who saw family limitation as the panacea for all social problems. In her *Birth Control Review*, she wrote that medicine “should broaden its conception of its responsibilities to include the amelioration of eugenic, economic, and social problems through the application of medical knowledge.”¹³ Thus she yearned to make the practice of medicine a robotic arm of eugenics and population control.

One may well ask how Sanger could defend abortion and infanticide, not to mention forcible sterilization, and yet take such a righteous tone. She did it by throwing a veil of religious-romantic language over much of what she said. She recounts how in the years before World War I, “a new religion” began to spread that had “no definite name.” All its followers were “freethinkers, agnostics or atheists” like her, yet they were just “as fanatical in their faith in the coming revolution as ever any primitive Christian was for the immediate establishment of the Kingdom of God” and, like members of the “early Church,” they had “martyrs aplenty” (MF 76-77). She thinks H. G. Wells summed up the “creed” of this “new religion” when he said that the subject of sex was “obscene when whispered in secret,” but “decent and clean” when “proclaimed from the housetops in the open” (MF 276).

Furthermore, Sanger warns that *not* to speak openly about sex leads to *hidden crimes*: “Truly the church and those ‘moralists’ who have been insisting upon keeping sex matters in the dark have a huge list of concealed crimes to answer for” (WNR 110). She blames “grossly immoral ‘moralists’” for the “miseries, diseases, and social evils” of her age (PC 224), because she thinks “all our problems are the result of overbreeding among the working class” and the moralists who deny birth control to this class are responsible for that overbreeding.¹⁴ Sanger excoriates as “indecent” those who want to keep women pure by depriving them of the “scientific knowledge” of sex. She exults that “The barriers

¹² Kennedy, p. 88.

¹³ Kennedy, p. 181. (He is citing the March 1917 issue, p. 14).

¹⁴ Kennedy, pp. 111-12. (He is citing *The Birth Control Review*, February-March 1918, p. 14).

of prurient puritanism are being demolished” and that the new woman is tearing “the veil of indecency” from the secrets of sex, revealing them in all “their purity,” as well as blasting her way “through the debris of crumbling moral and religious systems toward freedom.” In a few years, she predicts, the obscenity laws will be “ridiculous in the public mind” and sex-education will “make the race completely free” (WNR 224-25, 187-88). It was the “union of science and romanticism” in Sanger’s rhetoric, one scholar notes, that made Americans accept the sexual revolution she preached.¹⁵

Sanger scorned such minor political victories as the women’s vote and equal pay for equal work. Women must “create a new and a better order,” she announces, by solving the “problem of motherhood.” She explains that control of fertility and sexual knowledge will work together to “lift woman” to “spiritual heights,” to a “plane” inconceivable to “those holding fast to the old standards of church morality.” Once modern woman learns about “the power of the sex force, its use, its abuse,” she will create a “new sex morality” to be the “glory of our sexual natures” (WNR 5-6, 94-95, 167, 181-85). A lot of this mystical language about sex comes out of Sanger’s reading of Edward Carpenter, Havelock Ellis, and the Swedish feminist Ellen Key.¹⁶ Later she adds mysteriously that invisible “forces” are helping the new woman: “the vision is clear, the faith deep, forces unseen rally to assist and carry one over barriers which would otherwise have been insurmountable” (WNR 212). Sanger cannot conceive that the “forces unseen” assisting her might be the powers of darkness.

When the new woman has rid society of the “old systems of morals” and “Dark-Age religious concepts,” Sanger exclaims fervidly, she will create “a new race” that is “spiritually free and strong enough to break the last of the bonds of intellectual darkness.” In this race will arise “a Jesus” who does not “die upon the cross” (WNR 70, 170, 234). She claims to be “certain” that Jesus himself, if he were alive, would champion the birth control movement, for it was “never the intention of the founder of the Christian religion to impose a hard and set sexual code upon the human

¹⁵ Kennedy, p. 71.

¹⁶ Kennedy, pp. 13, 29.

race.” He who “attached so little importance to the sins of the flesh” would surely find his “religion of love and brotherhood” better expressed in her “clinics” and in “scientific progress,” than in cathedrals and rituals (MF 348).¹⁷ Curiously, in such passages Sanger sounds a lot like liberal Christians of our own time, e.g., Daniel Maguire, Tom Davis, Daniel Dombrowski, Robert Deltete, and others who defend abortion on demand on specious religious grounds.

In *Pivot of Civilization*, Sanger sets Christ against age-old Christianity: she boasts that her allies among the “enlightened clergy” –such as William Inge, Dean of St. Paul’s–agree with her repudiation of traditional Christian morality: “Sincere and thoughtful defenders and exponents of the teachings of Christ now acknowledge the falsity of the traditional codes and their malignant influence upon the moral and physical well-being of humanity” (PC 242-43). She claims that the removal of “ethical dogmas of the past” will make possible a religion of “self direction and salvation” (PC 250-51).

Besides trying to dragoon the Lord Jesus Christ into her sexual revolution, Sanger also uses specifically Christian language to narrate *My Fight for Birth Control*. She compares herself to the Good Samaritan, saying that when “doctors and nurses and social workers” saw woman’s plight and passed by “on the other side,” she stopped to help. She glories that her word has gone round the world “to herald the coming of a new dawn,” that she suffered “a spiritual crucifixion,” that her sister Ethel was a “martyr” for the cause, and that a doctor who instructed others in birth control was her “missionary” (MF 56, 83, 92, 167, 317). Several times she repeats that the birth-control movement has been her “crusade” (MF 85, 158, 299, 313). She also depicts her movement as a Church that gathers in all manner of believers: “Jews and Christians, Protestants and Roman Catholics alike made their confessions to us, whatever they may have professed at home or in church.” She is spreading a “gospel of voluntary motherhood” that will renew all things, even though the “minister” who

¹⁷ Daniel C. Maguire, *Sacred Choices: the Right to Contraception and Abortion in Ten World Religions* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2001); Tom Davis, *Sacred Work: Planned Parenthood and Its Clergy Alliances* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2005); Daniel Dombrowski and Robert Deltete, *A Brief, Liberal, Catholic Defense of Abortion* (Urbana IL: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2000).

tries “to keep abreast of the times” and proclaims her message “from the pulpit” does not yet fully realize its “regenerating import” (WNR 154, 223-24). For by “controlling birth” the new woman will “remake the world” into something thoroughly “feminine”: “hers is not to preserve a man-made world, but to create a human world by the infusion of the feminine element into all of its activities” (WNR 99).

Sanger’s pervasive use of religious language in 1931 was part of her campaign to win over religious liberals. At the time she wrote *My Fight for Birth Control*, she was lobbying “individual Protestant clergymen” and sending “representatives to nearly every church convention in the 1930s.”¹⁸ Through contacts, she placed articles in denominational publications and introduced resolutions at church conventions, where she had representatives distributing her literature. The clergymen who supported her were also those who had bought into a Darwinian world-view. In 1935, when a Catholic cardinal condemned birth control as being against divine law, around a dozen Protestant and Jewish clergymen replied, “that God is revealed in the endless sweep of evolution,” and birth control simply gives “sight and intelligence to what in nature is a blind and groping impulse,” and therefore represents “an evolutionary advance sanctioned by the Deity.”¹⁹ Birth control would soon become an industry managed by doctors, pharmacists, insurance companies and population-control groups, all of whom saw population control as the panacea for social problems.²⁰

Sanger’s campaign succeeded beyond her dreams, and she quickly moved to the next step. By 1932, she was instructing her staff physicians to make referrals to hospitals whenever a so-called “therapeutic abortion” was indicated. Her biographer Ellen Chesler observes that “Medical standards for determining when a pregnancy might endanger life were considerably more lenient at this time than they became after World War II,” and abortions “became so widespread during the Depression that they provoked a conservative reaction in the 1940s.” Even so, Planned Parenthood would give referrals for illegal abortions right into the 1960s.

¹⁸ Kennedy, pp. 168-89.

¹⁹ *The New York Times* (16 December 1935), p. 14, cited in Kennedy, p. 143.

²⁰ Franks, *Sanger’s Eugenic Legacy*, p. 212.

A Planned Parenthood administrator remarked that the “unofficial abortion referral policy,” which she assumed had been there in Sanger’s time, showed their deep commitment to the “right of women to autonomous control over their own bodies.”²¹

Occasionally Sanger speaks of *gods* in the plural, as when she recounts that she put her work “into the hands of the gods” and trusted “the gods to do the rest.” She calls sexologist Havelock Ellis “a veritable god” and refers to a “universal intelligence” that makes the success of birth control inevitable: “We are all in the same current of evolution” (MF 58, 85, 101, 344). All her glancing references to gods, unseen forces, irresistible evolution, and universal intelligence can easily be explained. From the 1920s Sanger dabbled in the occult to combat her “periodic bouts of depression.” She saw her visits to theosophists and fortune-tellers as compatible with her atheism because, she said, “science and mysticism” can “coexist.” Chesler writes that Sanger was especially drawn to “Rosicrucianism, then a fashionable mystical cult among British intellectuals to which Havelock Ellis had first introduced her in London.” This cult offered a course of meditation for reaching the “god within,” allowing Sanger to persuade herself that she possessed a “spark of divinity.”²²

Due to the solace she had found in the occult, as well as in Demerol and alcohol (two substances to which she was addicted),²³ Sanger would defend the indefensible to the onset of senility. In the 1950s, she returned to Rosicrucianism and became convinced that she would not die because she “embodied the aspirations of all women on earth” and was “their chosen agent of liberation.”²⁴ Yet she died for all that on Sept. 6, 1966.

In conclusion, infanticide, abortion and birth control were, for Sanger, an undivided, unholy trinity. Although she argued that the path of “evolution” was from infanticide to abortion to birth control, this was a strategy to legitimize birth control and make way for the other two. The

²¹ Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* (New York NY: Simon and Schuster, 1992), pp. 300-02.

²² Chesler, pp. 133-35, 172, 234, 395, 500 n11.

²³ Chesler, pp. 417, 457.

²⁴ Chesler, p. 418.

proof is, she defended infanticide to the hilt, whether committed by primitives, ancient Greeks, Romans, or contemporary Chinese. Moreover, she justified abortions when they were “skilled,” and praised as a “martyr” the woman who chose an abortion to avoid “involuntary motherhood.” Besides all this, she cites Annie Besant, the apostle of birth control in England, who at her trial more than a generation earlier had (like Sanger) excused violence against the “unfit” for the sake of evolutionary progress:

I have no doubt that if natural checks were allowed to operate right through the human as they do in the animal world, a better result would follow. Among the brutes, the weaker are driven to the wall, the diseased fall out in the race of life. The old brutes, when feeble or sickly, are killed. If men insisted that those who were sickly should be allowed to die without help of medicine or science, if those who are weak were put upon one side and crushed, if those who were old and useless were killed, if those who were not capable of providing food for themselves were allowed to starve, if all this were done, the struggle for existence among men would be as real as it is among brutes and would doubtless result in the production of a higher race of men. (WNR 160)

In citing this paean to the Darwinian struggle for survival, Sanger expresses no horror. Her only comment is that it would be better still to prevent the births of all these people. Yet she does not say how one may recognize before birth those who will end up *weak*, *old*, and *useless*!

The legacy of Margaret Sanger today is around fifty million babies dead from surgical abortions in the United States alone, countless millions more destroyed at the embryonic stage by abortifacient pills and IUDs, and thousands upon thousands of infanticides caused by partial-birth abortion and the lethal neglect of newborns deemed defective.