

Infanticide: A Historical Perspective (Private)

'YENİDOĞANIN ÖLDÜRÜLMESİ' OLAYINA TARİHSEL BİR BAKIŞ

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Summary _____ Özet

Recent achievements in medical science and technology, beside their favours, made health care professionals and parents face ith new moral dilemmas. One of them was improvements on the treatment of 'handicapped' or 'disadvantaged' children. In these cases, infanticide is one of the options. In this article, infanticide is examined from a historical perspective, aiming to reveal the roots of present tendency to practice in and filtered two different versions of infanticide, namely 'Western version' and 'Non-western version'.

Key Words: Infanticide, Handicapped, Antiquity

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The recent achievements in medical science and technology, beside their favours, made health care professionals and parents race with new moral dilemmas. One of them was improvements on treatment of 'handicapped' or 'disadvantaged' children.

Newborn malformations and extremely premature births are still one of the mayor health problems in paediatrics. It has been reported that 2% of newborn infants have a serious malformation that has surgical or cosmetic importance (1). The incidence of congenital anomalies among perinatal deaths varies in different studies according to the overall perinatal mortality. More recent studies generally indicated that about 20 to 25% of perinatal deaths

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Tıp bilimi ve teknolojisindeki en son gelişmeler, sağlamış olduğu faydalar yanında, sağlık elemanları ye aileleri yeni çıkmazlar ile karşı karşıya bırakmıştır: Bu gelişmelerden bir ianesi, 'sakat' veya 'dezavantajlı' doğan çocukların tedavisindeki yeniliklerdir. Bu vakalarda 'yenidoğanın öldürülmesi (infantisid) seçeneklerden birisi olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır.

Bu makalede, 'yenidoğanın öldürülmesi' tarihsel bir bakış açısından ele alınarak, bugün 'yenidoğanın öldürülmesi'ne karşı mühletli toplumlunla var olan eğilimin kökleri ortaya çıkarılmaya çalışılırken, infantisidin 'Batı versiyonu' ve 'Batı-dışı versiyonu' karşılaştırılmıştır.

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are caused by lethal malformations (2). In the last two or three decades we have been able to help these disadvantaged and less fortunate babies due to the recent improvements in medical technology and NICUs (neonatal intensive care units).

However, sometimes these medical interventions do not give 'satisfactory' and 'most desired' outcomes. Despite all expensive procedures and painstaking efforts, these babies live a few days, weeks or months. Even if they live longer, they may have too serious defects, that affect the quality of future life of the baby negatively. And these 'unsatisfactory' and 'undesired' outcomes have made the issue even controversial.

Newborns with extreme prematurity or severe handicap could not have lived anyway due to the level of medical technology about 40-50 years ago. For instance, twenty years ago, most of these babies would have posed no problem. They would simply have died. But today neonatology has be-

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come a highly specialised discipline in both the medical and nursing professions (3). About four decades ago a study which is entitled, 'decision making on treatment of handicapped newborns' would not be as meaningful as today. Because, improvements in medical science and technology enabled us, very recently, to struggle, and sometimes overcome these unwanted situations. However, the possibility of having a baby with very poor quality of life have left open infanticide as an option for parents and health care professionals. Termination of the lives of those disadvantaged and unfortunate newborns by their parents or someone else who are chosen by the parents is not a new matter, and has been practised in different parts of the world throughout the history.

In this article, I will try to search the historical background of infanticide in different societies, particularly in the West, as it may serve to understand the mentality of being in favour of terminating the lives of these 'disadvantaged' children.

It was stated by Kuhse that, if we want to explore the roots of the Western tradition, we should examine the antiquity, namely Greek and Roman times (4). When we look at those times, it will be observed that infanticide was widely accepted, like suicide and euthanasia. Parents throughout Greece and Rome had the legal right (though seldom the obligation) to kill their newly born children for virtually any reason. However, the typical reasons were defined as; 1) The desire to have male offspring in greater proportion than female offspring based on perceived military and economic advantages, 2) The desire to rid society of future citizens who, because they are born weak or defective, are considered to be a worthless burden to themselves or society, 3) The desire to protect one's family or estate from a child of doubtful legitimacy (5).

Apparently, the philosophers of those times had had great influence on parents attitudes towards their children. Especially Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle and Seneca were quite prominent. Amongst them, only Pythagoras (580-497 B.C) opposed both abortion and infanticide, as he believed that the fetus possessed a soul and was an animate being from the very moment of conception, and it was a duty to God not to injure human or other sentient life (6). Although, Plato (429-347 B.C.) held

that human life begins at the moment of birth, he favoured infanticide for the purpose of securing the best possible Guardian class, and that he specifically recommended getting rid of defective newborns, judged to be below some minimal standard of fitness. Plato reveals in his Republic; "As soon as children are born, they will be taken in charge by officers appointed for the purpose, who may be men or women or both, since offices are to be shared by both sexes. The children of the better parents they will carry to creche to be reared in the care of nurses living apart in a certain quarter of the city. Those of inferior parents and any children of the rest that are born defective will be hidden away. In some appropriate manner that must be kept secret" (7).

Similar to Plato, Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) judges both abortion and infanticide to be morally justifiable. However Carrick, quite rightly, defines Aristotle's position on abortion and infanticide a bit more complicated than the comparatively unqualified approval given it by Plato in the latter's morally eligible cases, and cites Aristotle's statement; "The question arises whether children should always be reared or may sometimes be exposed to die. There should certainly be a law to prevent the rearing of deformed children. On the other hand, there should also be a law, in all states where the system of social habits is supposed to unrestricted increase, to prevent the exposure of children to death merely in order to keep the population down. The proper thing to do is to limit the size of each family, and if children are then conceived in excess of the limit so the size of each family, and if children are then conceived in excess of the limit so fixed, to have miscarriage induced before sense and life have begun in the embryo" (8).

In contrast to Aristotle. Seneca (94 B.C.-65 A..D) considered human life in the biological sense to begin at birth with the child's first breath, however, it was not until the individual reached young adulthood (around the age of 14) that he became a person in the moral sense. Therefore, like Aristotle, Seneca and other Stoics prescribed infanticide for defective newborns alone on moral, if not on religious grounds (9).

The philosophers that are mentioned above built the foundations of Western thinking, and have

influenced nations and states throughout the ages. Societies as different as ancient Greece, classical Rome, Renaissance Italy and Western Europe have had infanticide as part of their moral landscape and have displayed inconsistent legal patterns in dealing with the problem of child destruction (10). Although girls were killed more often than boys in middle ages, the major issue in determining whether an infant would live or die was its 'health' rather than its gender or its legitimacy. And this application recall the arguments of the prominent philosophers of antiquity.

If we move from antiquity to closer times we will see that the situation was not very different. In spite of the condemnation and ban of Christian Church, infanticide became almost epidemic in Western Europe during the eighteenth century. As Italy had earlier institutionalised infanticide through the system of *balie* (11) and eighteenth-century France through the founding hospitals, so England during the past century saw the rise of burial clubs and 'baby farms' (12). Saner stated that, merely an updated version of the abandonment practices of classical Rome and Renaissance Italy, those farms provided infanticidal parents a place to 'put out' their infants for a fee with the expectation that the children would be killed and their bodies concealed. Until the execution of some baby farm owners stopped this business of infanticide for profit, the mortality rate at some of the farms reached 90% (13).

Of course not only Western societies, but also some tribal societies in various parts of the world have practised infanticide for centuries, like ancient Hebrews, for instance, accepted the killing of first born children as religious obedience, as suggested by the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 22). Other biblical passages reveal infanticidal practices during the period of Moses (13 B.C.). The selective destruction of children continued among the Hebrews at least until the sixth century B.C. (14). The infanticide was practised in the Bedouin tribes of ancient Arabia. In those times, as only sons were highly prized, the birth of a daughter was a shameful event that often resulted in a simple homicidal act: the parents buried the girl in the desert sand. By the time of Prophet Muhammad (570-632 A.D.), female infanticide was a widely

accepted practice in the area. However, the Qur'an condemned and banned this practice; it was stated in the Qur'an that, "And thy assign daughters unto Allah! -Glorified (and Exalted) be He above all that they associated with Him!- And onto themselves what they desire (sons); And when the news of (the birth of) a female (child) is brought to any of them, his face becomes dark, and he is filled with inward grief! He hides himself from the people because the evil of that whereof he has been informed. Shall he keep her with dishonour or bury her in the earth. Certainly, evil is their decision" (15). And the prophet Muhammad said, "Allah has forbidden for you; 1) to be undutiful to your mothers, 2) to bury your daughter alive, 3) not to pay the rights of the others (e.g. charity, etc.) and 4) to beg of men (i.e. begging) (16). However, despite these condemnations, infanticide remained a part of Bedouin tribal life for centuries.

In their book, 'Should the Baby Live?', Kuhse and Singer gave some example for infanticide practices in different communities around the world, like The Nctsikil Eskimo, The !Kung of the Kalahari, The Tikopia of Polynesia (17). The Nctsikil Eskimo live in Canada's remote Northwest Territories, often well inside the Arctic Circle. At the beginning of this century, Knut Rasmussen carried out a detailed survey of infanticide among the Nctsikil people. He found that out of a total of 96 births, there had been 38 cases of infanticide. All the infants killed had been females. Several different techniques were used to put these new-born infants to death. In winter, the child was abandoned and left frozen to death, during summer, a small grave was dug and the infant placed inside it, and left there until it died (18).

Beside these traditional tribal practices, major civilisations have permitted and sometimes encouraged the destruction of infants thought to have little value. In the ancient cultures of China and India female infanticide served other purposes in addition to population control. While for the Chinese, female infanticide was a way of reflecting their belief in the basic inferiority of females; the practice of offering female infants (and occasionally first born males) as a sacrifice to the gods was widely accepted among some Hindus until the nineteenth century (19).

As it has appeared from these historical and sociological facts, while in 'Western (20) version' of infanticide the major factors have been the health and perfectness of the newborn (21), in 'Non-western version', the dominant concerns have been the gender of infant (as in the Bedouin tribes of ancient Arabia, The Netsikil Eskimos, Chinese and Indian civilisations) or population control (as in the several Polynesian and Australian tribes, as well as in Chinese and Indian civilisations). It is a matter of fact that, infanticide carries on in various forms all around the world. Different societies have had their own justification for it, though none of which is necessarily acceptable for another. For instance at present, with the vast influence of utilitarianism, it is quite normal to end the life (passively or actively) of a 'severely handicapped' infant in Western (or Western-minded) societies. However, this may not be a very good reason, in a non-western society, while they may practice infanticide, due to their ignorance and wicked-traditions, on gender base.

In this article, it has been tried to give, some historical background for infanticidal practice. Although it seems that the author is quite keen on making distinction between 'Western version' and 'Non-western version' of infanticide, he is also very well-prepared to admit the exceptions, by interpreting that fact as the heterogeneity and the diversity of every individual society within themselves.

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18. Balikci A. The Netsikil Histoty, The Natural History Press, Garden City, NY, 1970, 148-9, and cited in *ibid.*, 99-100.
19. Weir. *op. cit.* p. 7.
20. Since the 'West' is a relative geographic concept varies depending upon your localisation on earth, I use the 'West' as a concept which defines the states or countries which have widely influenced from ancient Greek and Judeo-Christian culture.
21. As it was seen in ancient Greece, classical Rome, Renaissance Italy and Western Europe societies in more centuries and present day. However, in 15-18. centuries the legitimacy of the newborn was another factor for It,