

Birth Control or the Limitation of Offspring, by William J. Robinson

Birth Control or the Limitation of Offspring was written by American eugenics and birth control advocate William J. Robinson. First published in 1916, the final edition (forty-eighth) was published in 1936, the same year that Robinson died. As a medical doctor and author, Robinson used his influence to promote propaganda for “fewer and better babies,” by focusing on contraception. Margaret Sanger, another prominent eugenics and birth control advocate, took great interest in this book. Robinson had three goals in mind when writing Birth Control. First, he advocated for limiting the number of children to parental financial means through prevention of conception. Second, he addressed the various forms of preventing conception, and suggested the best and most harmless way of doing such. Last, Robinson wanted information about birth control to be readily available to anyone who sought it.

The first section of the book, chapters 1 through 3, includes an introduction to contraception, the goals of the author, and orthodox solutions to the growing problem of overpopulation. Robinson wanted to make awareness about preventing conception more socially and legally acceptable. He acknowledges the detrimental effects of a large family, number not specified, on the poor, especially during a time of economic unrest like the Great Depression. He considered that for any family, other than those economically well off, having more than two children was committing a crime to society. Though he hoped for people to limit the number of offspring they procured, he knew this could not be done through force.

After establishing the need for birth control, Robinson then analyzes two orthodox remedies to solve this issue: preventing the poor from marrying until late in life or when they can support a family, or having married individuals completely abstain from sexual intercourse. Robinson dismisses these two solutions, claiming that most people could not support a family at any point in their lifetime, and abstaining from sex in marriage would lead to increased prostitution and risk of sexual diseases.

In chapters 4 through 18 and chapter 27, Robinson discusses and dismisses several common arguments against contraception. First, an objection he often heard was that the use of contraceptives would lead to a dramatic decrease in population, leading to the extinction of the human species. The author argues that families in other countries where contraceptives were sanctioned were still present and in fact growing. The most common objection against contraceptives was that they would lead to immorality, which actually meant female promiscuity. According to the author, society believed that the fear of pregnancy kept women chaste. Robinson argues that this fear actually increases sexual immorality, which influences individuals to commit other sexual perversions other than “natural relations.” Next, it was believed that contraceptives caused injuries, and that their use was harmful to health. Robinson dismisses this argument as it was based on the association of contraceptives and abortion, an idea to which he dedicates an entire chapter (27). Other arguments addressed and dismissed include the beliefs that contraceptives cause sterility, inefficiency, and divorce. He concludes this section with the claim that conscious control of the number of children birthed is an act of high morality.

Chapters 19 to 26 contain discussions on the benefits of contraceptives and the consequences of ignoring such knowledge of birth control. Here, Robinson is not clear on the forms of contraceptives he was advocating; rather, he uses the term in general. First, contraceptives would promote people to marry younger. Robinson argues that men were waiting longer for marriage out of fear they would not be able to support a family with many children. Contraceptives would ease these fears and encourage men to marry younger. After that, Robinson makes the case for contraceptives

preventing the proliferation of venereal diseases like gonorrhea, within married couples. He uses the example of physicians who fail to clear males of gonorrhea, only to see the husbands infect their wives after getting married. Third, Robinson argues that the availability of contraceptives would eliminate the need for abortions, or at least minimize them, which he considered the most important benefit of contraceptives since abortion often led to death of women.

Robinson also discusses the eugenic benefits of preventing conception in certain segments of the population. He identified these people as unintelligent, behaviorally inept, or carriers of hereditary diseases. He argues that people labeled insane, imbecile, moronic, or perverted could be prevented from reproducing by sterilization or by segregating them from society. But the reproduction of those people with what were then considered hereditary diseases, like tuberculosis, epilepsy, cancer, and some mental abnormalities, could be controlled with contraceptives. This would help eliminate these "hereditary" diseases.

The last few chapters, 28 through 31, addresses laws that at the time disallowed the dissemination of knowledge about and the use of contraceptives. Those who broke the law faced long jail times and heavy fines. For this reason, the book contains no descriptions of means and methods of contraception. Robinson even provides a list of states with laws that prohibited the distribution of contraception information; even those states with no specific laws against this did not signify that physicians would share the information. He concludes the section by discussing the methods by which such laws could be changed. Robinson's method was first to establish knowledge of the subject through publications such as this book. Then, when the time was "ripe," the abolishment of the law should be tested. Robinson believed it was through the support and endorsement of a few rich or influential women that these laws would fall. He believed this because their arrest would cause social unrest.

Birth Control or the Limitation of Offspring was written to argue for the spread of knowledge and use of contraceptives rather than actually describing such methods. Though Robinson believed that these arguments should be sufficient to convince others of the birth control movement, he included a final chapter with quotes from people of authority. Included were Abraham Jacobi, former president of the American Medical Association, and the former president of the British Medical Association. The author himself, through the several revised editions of this book, became a pioneer among physicians in the birth control movement during the early twentieth century.

Sources

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