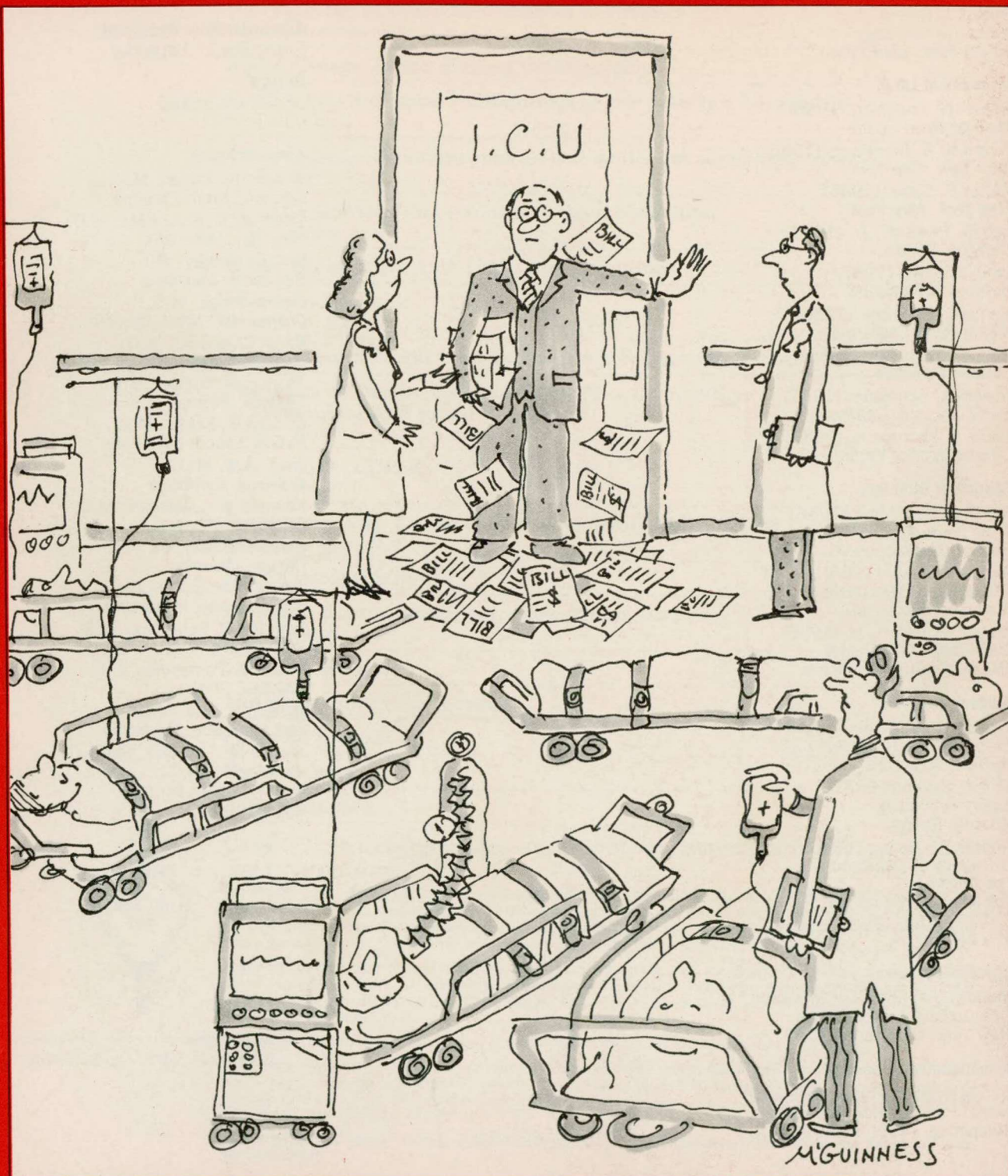


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The other Flexner report: How Abraham Flexner was diverted from medical schools to brothels

Horton A. Johnson, M.D.

The author (ΑΩΑ, Tulane University, 1979) is professor of pathology at the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons and director of pathology at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center in New York City.

The decade before World War I was a rowdy time in adolescent New York City, a time of trust busters and Wall Street robber barons, of political reformers and corrupt machine politics, of moral crusaders and rampant vice. It was all of these intrigues that converged upon Abraham Flexner to turn him from his well-known study of medical education to his rather similar but less well-known study of prostitution.

In the year 1911 Flexner was out of a job. After a classical education at Johns Hopkins University, he had returned to Louisville, Kentucky, his boyhood home, where he taught in the public high school for four years and then in his own private preparatory school for another 15 years. In 1908 his first book, *The American College*, caught the attention of Carnegie Foundation President Henry S. Pritchett, who asked him to evaluate, as a layman, the medical schools of the United States, Canada, and Europe. In the course of these projects Flexner developed the style he would later use in his study of prostitution: the whirlwind tours, the first-hand observations, the countless face-to-face interviews. The publication of the last of his reports on medical education completed his specific commission undertaken for the Carnegie Foundation. Now, age forty-five and living in a Manhattan apartment with his wife and two children, Flexner faced an uncertain future.

In the year 1911, following his father's retirement, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., took over the active management of the family's vast financial interests. These were stormy times for the Rockefeller family. Since the turn of the century the senior Rockefeller had been denounced in the press, the pulpit, and the courts as



Abraham Flexner accepted an assignment to study the ladies of the night. Portrait in Flexner, A: I Remember: The Autobiography of Abraham Flexner. New York, Simon & Schuster, 1940, frontispiece. Reproduced with permission of the publisher.

a paradigm of capitalist ruthlessness and greed. Court action had, in 1892, dissolved the Standard Oil Trust, and in 1907 Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis fined the Standard Oil Company of Indiana some \$30 million for forcing rebates on the railroads. In 1911, the year of the elder Rockefeller's retirement, the Supreme Court called for the dissolution of his holding company, the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey. There were frequent references to his "tainted money" in sermons and editorials. He was attacked repeatedly and bitterly by the newspapers, which even questioned the motives behind his considerable philanthropic enterprises. The public had, by and large, come to view Rockefeller very much as Diego Rivera portrayed him years later in the quickly whitewashed murals of Rockefeller Center: as an evil villain. John D., Junior, his father's only son, was not only heir to the throne but also heir to the ridicule, often libelous, being heaped upon the family. He was a deeply religious man with a strong social conscience, and it was no doubt his desire to reverse the family's public image as well as his

growing disillusionment with business that forced his decision to resign his directorships of the Standard Oil Company and U.S. Steel and to devote his life to spending his money for the betterment of society. In 1911 John D. Rockefeller, Jr., age 37, was, like Flexner, looking for new directions in which to turn his energies and resources.

In 1911 New York City's cantankerous Tammany mayor, William Jay Gaynor, was not only besieged by political opponents, but was the brunt of scathing editorials and cartoons in nearly all of the city's newspapers and the subject of abusive sermons by some of the city's most prominent clergymen. The clerical attack was led by the most notorious reformer of the time, Dr. C. H. Parkhurst, minister of the Madison Square Presbyterian Church, who was famous for his tours of underworld haunts in search of material for his sermons. Gaynor was accused of moral laxity in his failure to control saloons, gambling, and prostitution. He did, in fact, seem to have a "live and let live" attitude. A few years before, while justice of the New York Supreme Court, Gaynor had ruled that any regulation of automobile or carriage traffic on New York City streets would be a curtailment of the constitutional liberty of the individual. He felt that prostitution could not be stifled by law, saying that prostitutes "were in the world at the beginning of history, . . . and they are here yet. They will continue to be here until by the aid of moral teaching the hearts and propensities of men shall be subdued and made better."¹ But prostitution had become a traditional issue for the opponents of Tammany Hall. When Tammany's George B. McClellan, Jr., ran against incumbent Seth Low in 1903, Low supporters distributed leaflets saying, "A vote for Low is a vote for the home, a vote for McClellan is a vote for the brothel."² This topic emerged again as a partisan issue during William Randolph Hearst's unsuccessful campaigns against McClellan in 1905 and Gaynor in 1909. There were implica-

tions that prostitution and the "white slave traffic" were part of organized crime, which was, in turn, receiving protection from Tammany Hall.

Soon after he took office in 1910 Mayor Gaynor had attempted to put the matter to rest by requesting that Tammany's Judge Thomas O'Sullivan impanel a special grand jury to probe, perhaps not too deeply, into

the question of organized prostitution. For the foreman of the jury, the judge needed a man with a proper image. He sought a man who was above politics, a man who could not be bought, a man long known to the public at large as the leader of the Men's Bible Class of the Fifth Avenue Baptist Church. He called upon John D. Rockefeller, Jr.

John D. Rockefeller, Jr., his father's heir, looked for ways to better society. Photograph in Goulder, G.: *John D. Rockefeller: The Cleveland Years*. Cleveland, The Western Reserve Historical Society, 1972. Reproduced with permission of the publisher.



Understandably, this proposal did not appeal to Rockefeller at first blush, but under pressure from O'Sullivan he accepted the assignment.³ Once turned on to the task, however, he attacked it with a vengeance that actually began to frighten Judge O'Sullivan. The grand jury returned some fifty-four individual indictments, but it presented no evidence to link Tammany with organized prostitution. The grand jury also recommended that the mayor appoint a permanent commission to carry on the work begun by the grand jury. Mayor Gaynor, by now thoroughly exasperated by Parkhurst and other moral zealots, had no enthusiasm for such a commission and dismissed the proposal out of hand.

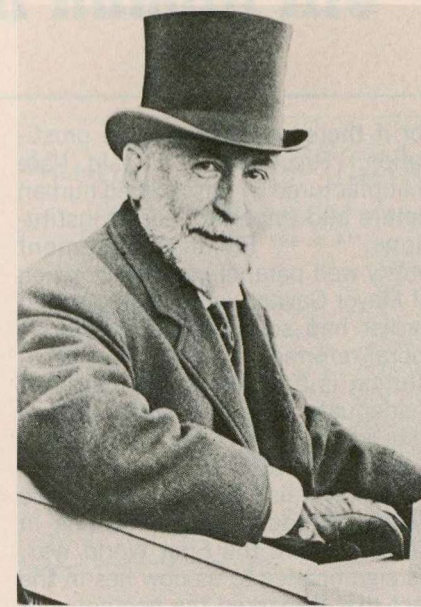
By this time Rockefeller had become thoroughly engrossed in the problem and was not to be put off the track by such a small obstacle as City Hall. He would go it alone by establishing and supporting, with more than \$5 million, the very innovative and farsighted Bureau of Social Hygiene. As one of its first projects after its establishment in 1911, the bureau decided to undertake a survey of prostitution in Europe, its extent, its modes of operation, and the laws and methods used by government agencies to control it. Rockefeller looked about for the right person to conduct such an unusual survey. His good friend at the Rockefeller Institute, Simon Flexner, had a younger brother who had experience in European fact finding. It just so happened that this younger brother had recently conducted a survey of medical education in Europe for the Carnegie Foundation. And it just so happened that at that very moment this younger brother was looking for a job.

Abraham Flexner viewed prostitution as an object of study with about as much enthusiasm as Rockefeller had shown initially. At first he declined, but he was eventually persuaded by his brother to commit the next two years to this field of study. In the winter of 1911, Flexner left for England.

The grand tour began in London and ended in Budapest. All in all Flexner visited twenty-eight major cities in twelve countries. At each stop he talked with government officials, police officers, and physicians; he studied the laws and regulations pertaining to prostitution; he visited venereal disease clinics; and he carefully reviewed the local attitudes and social histories of this ancient profession. In this way he gathered more than enough data to fill the 450-page book he would eventually write on the subject.

To most itinerant investigators the completion of this assignment would have seemed to be a job well done, but Mr. Flexner had learned during his survey of conditions in medical schools that second-hand or official versions often have little to do with reality. He had to see things for himself. To do so, of course, demanded a drastic adjustment of life-style: from that of a scholar who rarely retired after eleven to that of a habitué of red-light districts and brothels at three and four in the morning. He was evidently a persuasive conversationalist, this Louisville schoolteacher, as adept at extracting inside information from a streetwalker as at inspiring the generosity of a millionaire. In a sympathetic and naively charming way his report recounts a number of casual but revealing encounters with prostitutes in various European cities.⁴

In Paris he developed a close and trusting friendship with a prostitute who became his guide through the streets, cafes, and brothels of the city. In his biography he tells of taking this woman to dinner the night after their first meeting.⁵ Afterward they went to her flat in Montmartre, where they talked for an hour or so. Rising to leave, he gave her several gold coins in payment for her time. "Is this all?" she asked, taken by surprise. When he replied that nothing more was to be asked of her, she said, "Why, then you are not a man; you are an angel." "No," he protested, "I am a man all right." In their jaunts through the Paris un-



William Jay Gaynor, Mayor of New York City, was criticized for failing to control prostitution. Photograph in Smith, M.: *William Jay Gaynor: Mayor of New York*. Chicago, Henry Regnery Co., 1951, frontispiece. Reproduced with permission of Regnery Gateway, Inc.

derworld Flexner had a chance to see many things that the police had chosen not to see. Months later, as he passed through Paris on his way home he took the woman out to dinner. As he said goodnight, he asked

if there was anything he could do for her before he sailed for the United States. She replied that there were two things she would like very much: to dine with him some evening like a lady and then to go to the opera. Flexner saw to it that she got her wish. On the appointed evening they dined at the Café de Paris on the Avenue de l'Opéra, he in his formal dinner jacket and she in the height of fashion. After dinner they went to the opera.

So it went in the other cities of Europe. Seeking out mercenary, unofficial guides, he saw far more than the police had been instructed to show him.

Mr. Flexner was primarily interested in estimating in some way the relationship between the extent of prostitution and the local methods of dealing with it. There were two general methods in operation: regulation with licensing of prostitutes, as in Paris, Berlin, and Vienna; and abolition of regulatory laws and licensing, as in England and Scandinavia. In trying to compare the

"Prostitutes are manufactured by unschooled human nature," concluded Flexner. Bettmann Archive



relative intensities of prostitution under different systems of regulation, he needed quantitative data. Being of the opinion that police data were generally gross underestimates and of little value, he resorted at times to standing on street corners at night doing head counts of "unmistakable women." In Paris, for example, where the police had registered some six thousand prostitutes, Flexner reckoned the number to be closer to fifty thousand. It is interesting to recall that at that time the total population of Paris was under three million. If half of these people were female, and half of the females were between fifteen and forty-five years of age, one out of every fifteen young Parisian women was, according to Flexner's estimate, a practicing prostitute.

Flexner returned home in 1913 to write his report, which, with an introduction by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., was published by the Century Company in the following year.⁴ He concluded that, at least in Europe, repression of prostitution by laws and law enforcement agencies had little to offer beyond superficial tidying up and that police regulation had probably even had a harmful effect on the spread of venereal disease. In general, prostitution was bound to follow the laws of supply and demand: as long as there is a demand

for it there would always be prostitution. "Prostitutes," he said, "are manufactured by unschooled human nature and imperfect social institutions."⁴ p. 397 Flexner's judgment pretty well paraphrased the position of Mayor Gaynor, which when stated earlier had so enraged New York's moral reformers, namely, that prostitution is basically not a matter of inadequate laws or insufficient police action, but is part of a much larger social problem.

Whatever use this report may have been to students of prostitution in Europe before the First World War, its significance to us now lies in the fact that it marked the beginning of the long and productive association of Abraham Flexner with John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and the men around him. While still in London, nearing the end of his unusual field trip, Flexner was invited to become a member of Rockefeller's General Education Board, which, during the fourteen years of his tenure, would invest many millions of dollars in educational projects in this country and abroad. Building upon the experience and contacts gained from his years on the General Education Board, Flexner would then conceive of and bring into being his crowning achievement, the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton. So it happened that in the chain of events

that led Flexner to the Institute for Advanced Studies, the first link — the Rockefeller connection — was hinged upon the embarrassment of Tammany Hall over flagrant prostitution in New York City.

Time leaves in its wake many curious little eddies, but surely one of the most bizarre of these is the picture of the man who has influenced education in the United States as much as anyone in this century, the man who brought Albert Einstein to these shores, standing on a street corner somewhere in Europe, in the wee hours of the morning, dutifully surveying the ladies of the night.

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Send reprint requests to author at:
Department of Pathology
St. Luke's/Roosevelt Hospital Center
Amsterdam Avenue at 114th Street
New York, New York 10025

Alpha Omega Alpha visiting professorships

The following schools were awarded visiting professorships for 1986-87:

American University of Beirut School of Medicine
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Georgetown University School of Medicine
George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences
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Howard University College of Medicine
Louisiana State University School of Medicine in New Orleans
University of Maryland School of Medicine
University of Michigan Medical School
University of Mississippi School of Medicine
University of Nebraska School of Medicine

New York Medical College
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Medicine
Northwestern University Medical School
University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine
University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey — Rutgers Medical School
Medical University of South Carolina College of Medicine
University of Southern California School of Medicine
University of Utah School of Medicine

With next year's 20 awards, a total of 321 have been made since the initiation of the program in 1969.

Inquiry into the moral prerogatives of the potential human life

Oliver A. Cvitanic

The author is a third-year student in the Medical School of the University of Pennsylvania. The paper, which was entered in the 1985 Alpha Omega Alpha Student Essay competition, was accorded honorable mention.

Introduction

The case of Elisabeth Bouvia, a young quadriplegic afflicted with cerebral palsy, presented a challenge to the established norms of medical ethics when she asked a California hospital to assist her in ending her life. The medical profession and hospitals, as is generally recognized, endeavor to save and prolong lives, not to assist in suicides. The extensive media coverage of this case, as well as the pointed remarks made by Colorado Governor Richard Lamm, in which he decried the large expenditure of public funds merely to delay the death of terminally ill elderly patients, has left the impression that some of the established principles of medical ethics may be worth reexamining, if not revising.

The direct impetus for writing this essay came not so much from what reporters covering the case of Elisabeth Bouvia have said, but rather from what they did not question or probe. It seems paradoxical that the marginal life of a living human is treated as invaluable while potential lives (that is, lives that might have been) seem without value, and hence, disposable. While national attention has focused on the efforts of one hospital and its staff to keep alive a severely handicapped and incurably ill patient, and to convince her to stay alive, countless lives have been prevented from being conceived or have been aborted after conception. This seeming paradox is the primary subject of inquiry in this essay. A rational person cannot help but ask why the saving of a marginal helpless life that is painful and with no hope of ever being restored to full health is considered a triumph of life over death, when potential lives that



would have come about without any extraordinary intervention are being dismissed and discarded as a matter of sanctioned policy.

As our inquiry into this seeming paradox labors to explore the morality of the contemporary attitude towards both the extant and the potential human life, it will become necessary to discuss related ethical issues such as: What theory of normative ethics is most appropriate for use as a foundation in evaluating the subject? and, What makes human life so inviolate in our ethical thinking? Consequently, these subject matters have also become a part of the inquiry.

Assessing the relative merits of ethical arguments

It would be ideal if the relative merits of ethical arguments could be assessed according to a universally accepted theory of normative ethics. Although a number of such theories has been offered and many truths about moral behavior have been clarified as the result of these theories, we today do not have a theory of normative ethics that is universally accepted. As a rule these theories are built around a central axiom (act utilitarianism: the greatest happiness for the greatest number) or an imperative (the Kantian categorical imperative), which is intended to be a touch-stone of ethical behavior. Without desiring to detract from the merits of those who conceived such

theories, I submit that everyday experience suggests that life situations and the resulting moral controversies are too varied and complex to allow for a meaningful evaluation when assessed against such idealized general principles.

That leaves us in many situations with only our intuitive grasp as the criterion with which we can distinguish what is moral from what is not. Indeed, the vast majority of people, while they have never heard of normative ethics, do pass judgments on moral issues and do readily form new moral judgments as problems arise. These judgments are obviously not supported by reasoned principles, but are based on unsupported personal intuition.

This essay will not avail itself of the axioms and imperatives put forward by the so-called established theories such as utilitarianism or the Kantian ethical theory. Instead, this essay bases its reasoning on what the majority of informed and reflective people would intuitively sense to be right or wrong in a given situation. This approach is not uncommon in our society for those disciplines that are outside the range of the exact sciences. For example, it is the intuitive perception of the jurors that establishes the guilt or innocence of the accused on the basis of the facts presented by the learned jurists. Likewise, our national leaders are elected by the vote of people, who are more prone to intuitive judg-