

Living Together: Pregnancy and Parenthood ¹

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In this essay, I will look at arguments for and against abortion: arguments concerning the right to control one's own body, the right to immunity from bodily attacks, and stages in development such as viability or the capacity for rational thought which have been suggested as the point when human life acquires serious moral status.

Before focusing on these moral arguments, it is worth noting that abortion raises emotional, as well as intellectual problems. Many people are personally affected by abortion, or fear they may need to resort to abortion at some time in the future (for example, if their contraception fails). The idea that abortion could be morally wrong is one which may be personally very challenging. What would it mean? That we would need to look again at our own past abortions? At our sexual relationships? Accept any child we may conceive in the future, however difficult that may be? Change our job, if there is a link to abortion? Alienate our friends?

It is tempting at this point to bypass the moral question altogether, by saying that abortion is 'necessary' for women - a 'fact of life'. After all, women have projects and commitments which are not always compatible with pregnancy and childbirth at any given time. They need to be able to plan their lives, as men do, without fear of having their plans overturned by biological events. And without easy access to abortion, will we not have unplanned and unwanted children - and, indeed, women killed or injured by backstreet abortions?

These are serious questions, which I will return to later on. Here it is enough to say that the moral question of abortion cannot be bypassed simply by saying that abortion is 'necessary'. If it really is the case that the fetus is a child, as opponents of abortion claim, it will be very hard to say that it is 'necessary' to take that child's life. We might think here of street children in Brazil, who are literally shot by those who want to 'clear the streets' of their unwanted presence. To kill such children on the grounds that they are unwanted by parents or society is clearly not acceptable: we need to respond in a very different way to the social challenge they pose. Similarly, if the fetus is a child - a possibility which has to be confronted - we will need to find non-violent ways of responding to its presence, however unwelcome that presence may at first be.

Controlling our bodies

There is another way of pre-empting the question of the status of the fetus, which is to say that a woman has an absolute right to control her own body. The fetus is located within, and dependent on, the body of the pregnant woman. Even assuming that the fetus is a 'person' or human being, with all the rights that this involves, surely no other person has the right to make use of my body?

This may seem initially plausible: your body may seem like 'property' over which you have total control. When we look more closely, however, we see that *any* form of support for another person will involve your body in some way. This applies whether you are

breastfeeding a baby, spoon-feeding your disabled brother or sister, or even writing a cheque for the hostel down the road. So does that mean you need not support anyone - not even members of your own family - just because your body is involved? You may not have *chosen* to have a brother or sister, or a newborn child who needs you, but not all moral obligations are chosen: many simply arise. If you were to let your baby starve to death, because you were unwilling to feed it and no-one else could take your place, it would be a poor excuse to say that you never *chose* to have a child depending on your body. So why is it any more acceptable to withdraw bodily support before the child is born?

Bodily attacks

Moreover, abortion is not, in many cases, a mere withdrawal of bodily support. To begin with, the aim of abortion, whatever the method used, will often be to destroy the fetus, not simply to remove it from the woman's body. Often the woman and the doctor performing the abortion do not simply want to stop the woman being pregnant; they want there not to be a baby in the world for whom they are responsible. Thus in the case of a late abortion performed by inducing labour, the fetus is often injected beforehand with the poison potassium chloride, precisely to ensure that it does not survive being born.

Even if the aim is not to kill the unborn child, abortion will still very often involve a deliberate attack on the child's body. For example, in abortion by vacuum aspiration, a very common form of early abortion, the baby is sucked piecemeal down the tube. At the end of the procedure, the nurse has the unpleasant task of reconstructing the body to make sure no parts are left

inside the woman's womb. The woman herself may not be aware of just what her abortion will involve: euphemisms such as 'the contents of the uterus' are often used. However, it is clear that this procedure is not a mere 'removal' of the fetus from the womb.

We need to ask: does not the fetus - assuming it has the moral status of a human being - have a right to have its body respected, and not deliberately attacked? Undeniably, it does have this right, if it has full human status. Just as the woman has a right not to have her body attacked - for example, poisoned or pulled apart - the same is true of her unborn child.

Condemning women?

There is no avoiding the central moral question posed by abortion: does the fetus have the moral status of any human being? Before looking at this question, however, there is one point which needs to be made clear. It is often assumed that any suggestion that abortion is morally unjustified implies a harsh and hostile view of those who have abortions. This is not the case: there are many reasons why a woman who has an abortion may not be fully aware of what abortion involves. And even if she were aware, this does not mean she should be harshly judged by other people. Abortion is arguably at least as harmful for the woman herself as it is for her child: women who have had abortions need more, not less, support on that account. (Such support is available in Britain from organizations such as British Victims of Abortion, which are run by women who have had abortions themselves.)

Status of the fetus

I will return later to the impact which abortion has on women. In the

meantime, how should we deal with the question of the status of the fetus? A frequent suggestion is that 'viability', or the capacity to survive outside the womb, is what gives a child status. However, this is simply to assert that the weak (or the weakest) have no moral claim on the strong - which is not what we say about born human beings who are weak and dependent. To say that a newborn child is 'less human' than we are, just because it needs the help of others, would be morally outrageous. Strength and size can never determine the status of any human being. And we all owe our lives to the fact that we were cared-for and respected when we were small and weak and dependent ourselves.

We should remember that viability depends on the medical facilities available for premature babies: a baby who is viable in a modern Western hospital may not be viable in an African village. Can a child's moral status depend on the mere fact of where it is located? And why should a child have a serious moral claim on the pregnant woman only at the point when it is strong enough to live outside her body? Similar questions arise in relation to the claim that the fetus does not have human status because so many unborn children naturally miscarry. Do we say that terminal patients have a lower moral status than other human beings, just because they may die naturally within a few weeks? What has strength to do with status?

Again, some people claim that the fetus is not a human being until it is *visibly and obviously* human. However, no-one would deny that a child with serious facial deformities was as much a human being as a child of more conventional appearance. 'Human' appearance makes no

difference to a child's moral status, any more than size or strength. (In any case, the fetus *does* 'look human' from surprisingly early on in pregnancy. Even the very young embryo 'looks human' to those who know what a human individual looks like at that stage in its life.) There are, of course, differences in structure and appearance between embryo and fetus, fetus and infant, infant and toddler, and so on. But why should these differences have any relevance to that individual's moral status?

Some see the fetus as having human status only when the mother has bonded with the fetus: has come to see it as her child. A wanted fetus is a 'person', on this view, while an unwanted fetus is not. The problem here is that we do not normally think that people are only morally significant when other people come to see them as such. What would we say about those who refuse to recognize people of other races, or those with disabilities: are such people not human, in the moral sense, until they are *recognized* as human? Humanity makes demands on us which are objective: it is not up to us to confer human status or withdraw it when we choose.

Living human persons

Some say that only those human beings or 'persons' who are currently capable of (for example) rational thought have full moral status. This would also exclude newborn babies from the moral category of 'person' - but some claim that babies, too, are morally 'subpersonal', and have no right to life. After all, babies cannot think rationally, or set a value on their own lives, any more than unborn children.

This approach fails, however, to recognize the *bodily nature* of the human moral subject. We are not purely spiritual beings, even if we have a spiritual aspect. Rather, we are living human organisms: animals of a special kind. We belong to the rational human species, and are fulfilled by (among other things) using the powers we have to develop rational abilities. To ask when the human being or person begins, we should ask when the human animal begins. The answer to this will normally be: at fertilization.

Admittedly, not every embryo is created at fertilization: twins can be created when cells are separated from an existing embryo. However, whether an embryo is created from sperm and egg, or from cells of an existing embryo, each embryo is the first stage in the life-cycle of a human being.

Once we accept that the embryo is a human individual at the start of its life, the way is open to recognize the interests of the embryo (and fetus and infant) in its own future well-being.

Having an interest in one's own well-being is different from *taking* an interest. Imagine a 16-year-old girl with brain damage that will heal itself within nine months. The girl is deeply unconscious and cannot take an interest in her own health. Nor can she take an interest in other things which require her to be healthy, or at least, rational and conscious - for example, in going to university, making new friends, and so on. However, she *has* an interest in her own health (for example, if there is some possible treatment, she will have an interest in that treatment). She also has an interest in the things health makes possible - study, friendships, and so on - in that these things are good for the kind of being she is. Even if her body cannot heal itself, and even if it cannot be healed by medical treatment, she will

still have an interest in health and other things which are good for human beings. The same is true of an unborn child, who does not normally need to heal from damage, but merely needs to grow up in a family to have rational abilities.

We need to remember that *people* are morally important, not just their thoughts and feelings. In fact, thoughts and feelings are important precisely because they are good (or potentially good) for the human being who has them. It is good for me, as an embryo, fetus, and infant, to grow up to have thoughts and feelings of a kind I cannot have for many years. If the fetus is me, why is it not bad for me to be deprived of my life? And why is it not morally wrong for me to be *deliberately* deprived of my life - at least if I am innocent of crime or aggression?

Abortion and disability

Some say that, if the fetus is going to be disabled - and especially if it will suffer - its life may not be worth living, so that abortion in this case may be justified. However, to say this is to fail to value the lives of disabled people who are already born - as many disabled people have themselves pointed out. Are we going to kill born disabled people too, because we think their lives are not worthwhile? Should we not value the presence of all human beings, whatever their state of health? Of course we can always 'prevent disability' by killing those who are disabled. But this is no more acceptable in Britain today than it was in Germany in the 1930s, when the disabled were indeed killed as a 'burden' to themselves and the State. It is not right to treat human beings as subhuman, or their lives as having no value, whether on the ground of

disability, age, size or level of development. There is no such thing as a 'worthless' human life.

Some claim that disability is (or can be) so burdensome for the family of the disabled person that this alone justifies abortion of a disabled unborn child. This approach tends to underestimate the suffering involved in losing a child by late abortion - to say nothing of the risk of miscarriage caused by tests used to detect medical conditions in the womb. It also fails to recognize what countless families of disabled children have discovered for themselves: that the disabled child can be experienced as a blessing - a gift which enriches the family. There is much we can learn from the experience of caring for a disabled child about the meaning of life, and of love as unconditional acceptance. In contrast, what we learn from abortion is that children need not be accepted unconditionally - and may even be killed if they fail to meet our standards of health.

Abortion and medicine

Abortion is not, as some practitioners would claim, a straightforward medical procedure. Rather, it is the very reverse of medicine, which heals and supports human beings. This has implications for the doctor who is facing a request for an abortion. Should doctors carry out their patients' orders blindly, no matter how harmful this will be to the patient or to others? We are rightly horrified by the practice of female circumcision in some Muslim countries. However, we unthinkingly accept the violence done to healthy women and their unborn children in our own hospitals and clinics. Pregnancy is not a disease, and abortion is not a cure. It does not heal a woman, but rather harms her,

preventing her completing a vital human task: a task no less important for the fact that it is so often undervalued. To see the fetus as an 'invading organism' (as one abortion advocate describes it) is to take a deeply distorted view of the natural and intimate bond between a pregnant woman and her child. The child is not seen as a son or daughter, who needs the protection of its mother. It is seen as the enemy: an alien and hostile force, which needs to be violently subdued.

Women's interests

Abortion is not in a woman's interests, either medically or psychologically. Society should change to fit women's - and men's - fertility, by supporting men and women in their responsibilities as parents. Instead, we change the bodies of women to make them non-pregnant, and therefore in need of less support. But having children is a valuable social contribution, not a private project of women to be carried out at their own risk. There is a tendency for men, for example, to wash their hands of women who decide to go through with their pregnancies - for is that not their choice? The child's father may wonder why he is expected to contribute child support: after all, he did not, unlike the woman, 'choose' to have a child. Men, more than women, are encouraged by abortion to think of themselves as having 'commitment-free' sex: a sexual relationship with no parental dimension, and with no strings attached.

It comes as a surprise to many people to learn that feminists in the 19th century were strongly opposed to abortion, which they saw as harmful to the woman, as well as to her child. Now, in the 21st century, we have

ample evidence of the harm abortion does to women, in the stories of so many women who regret their abortions. Abortion is not a strong and protective choice, but a choice of weakness and fear. It is a rejection by women of their own creative and protective powers: a failure to meet the challenge of parenthood, a failure to defend one's own child. Many women have abortions in situations where they themselves see abortion as morally wrong, and struggle for years with feelings of anger, depression and guilt as a result. Those who regret their abortions will often report that it took years for them to come to terms with their feelings: only after years of 'blocking off' their emotions could they admit to themselves and to others what their abortion really meant. To treat abortion as a solution to the problems women face is to fail to recognize its impact not only on the child but on the woman herself.

Legal issues

How, then, should the legal system respond to the practice of abortion? If it is true that abortion is lethal to one human being, and also harmful to another, this is not something towards which the law can afford to be indifferent. We all expect the law to protect us from homicide at the age we are now. We also expect the law to protect those who are younger and more vulnerable than ourselves - for example, newborn babies. So why should the law not protect those who are still younger, and still more vulnerable - to say nothing of protecting their mothers from a harmful, non-therapeutic procedure?

We are not talking here of truly medical procedures, where the baby dies as a side-effect of treatment for its mother. An example might be a

hysterectomy on a pregnant, but cancerous womb, where the baby's death is foreseen, but not intended, in operating on the pregnant woman. Another example would be the removal of a fallopian tube which has been damaged by an ectopic pregnancy: in this case, the tube would need to be removed even if the child had already miscarried. The aim here is not to attack the life or body of the child, but merely to remove a damaged organ of the mother which is threatening her life. Clearly, to foresee that a child will die as a side-effect of treating its mother is something very different from deliberately aiming at that child's death.

Backstreet abortion

It is often said that making abortion illegal will result in many women dying every year from backstreet abortions. In fact if we look at figures for maternal deaths, in Britain and elsewhere, we see that they were falling in number before permissive laws on abortion were passed, and went on falling at a similar rate after the passing of such laws. It was better medical care, such as the use of antibiotics, which reduced maternal deaths. Of course, there will always be some illegal abortions, whatever the law on abortion. However, the same can be said of other forms of violence, such as child abuse or rape. Would we make these practices legal, just because they still go on, despite laws against them?

Unwanted children

The argument that we must avoid the birth of unwanted children, who will then be ill-treated by their parents, is also not supported by the facts. Leaving aside the logic of killing a child to protect it from abuse, child

abuse rates have gone up, not down, with the legalization of abortion. In contrast, it is well-known that parents who were horrified to learn of a pregnancy can be delighted once the child has been born. While adoption is, of course, a possibility for those who really cannot cope with a child, most people are able to cope with, and love, their own children. If they can be helped through the initial period of rejection, whether by friends or family or by counselors, they can be very affectionate parents, even if they still need support.

Conclusion

What has happened to society, more than three decades after the passing of the Abortion Act in Britain? Society has not become more welcoming of children, or more celebratory of pregnancy. Women have not been encouraged to accept, and use responsibly, their reproductive powers, but have rather been encouraged to reject both their children, and themselves as parents. In the same way, men have been encouraged to back away from their responsibilities for their partners and their children.

Medicine has not become more respectful of human life; instead, abortion has been joined by embryo experimentation, and by an increasing willingness to terminate lives of 'low quality'. Instead of serving the health of their patients, and supporting those who cannot be cured, doctors increasingly see themselves as mere technicians serving patients' desires.

With the coming of legal abortion, thousands of children have lost their lives at the hands of such doctors: children who would have loved us, and whom we would have loved. Every abortion is a human tragedy for the

child and for its mother: a tragedy which could - and should - have been avoided. No child can be 'replaced' by a child born later. Every child is an individual, with its own future to respect.

In the area of abortion, the hard questions must be faced, without seeking refuge in slogans or in knee-jerk reactions. Abortion is a major social injustice, directed at those who are most vulnerable. Many people have a vested interest - whether personal or financial - in this injustice not being challenged. We must look behind the euphemisms used to describe abortion, which themselves testify to people's bad conscience on abortion, to what it really means for the woman, and what it means for her child. Children are not possessions under our control, at any stage of their existence. We should learn to live in peace with our children, for the nine months when they first need us - remembering that we ourselves enjoyed the peace and safety of the womb at the start of our lives.

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