

# Abortion: An Exercise in Moral Imagination

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All around the world people of good will are deeply divided about abortion, and talk past each other. We will move beyond this stalemate only if we examine what lies behind our differences. In this paper, I invite you, the reader, to exercise your moral imagination and try to reconceive pregnancy.

Ethical reflection is usually thought of as problem-solving, and indeed, this is an important part of ethics. But ethics also has to do with problem-setting, that is, with the assessment of the myths and metaphors that influence our perceptions of particular moral issues and the human situation in general.

Any approach to abortion is greatly influenced by the assumptions that lie behind it. We have access to the so-called 'facts' of the situation only as they are filtered through the interpretative frameworks we bring to pregnancy. Among other institutions, our civil laws and gender-based structures of power frame our account of the issues deemed important in the moral analysis of abortion. In addition, myths about and metaphors for pregnancy influence our judgments. These metaphors will be the focus of this essay. They have great moral significance. Yet people are surprisingly unconscious and dangerously uncritical of these interpretative frameworks.

In light of this fact, it is important to do three things. First, it is important to focus on and to evaluate critically the prevailing metaphors for childbearing, attending with special care to the way they do, or in this case do not, take seriously women's experience of pregnancy. Second, it is important to propose and defend alternative metaphors for childbearing. The work of problem-setting exercises the moral imagination. With regard to abortion, it invites the reconception of pregnancy. Third, it is important to explore the moral implications of these new

ways of imaging pregnancy, especially as they impinge upon the abortion debate.

## INADEQUATE METAPHORS FOR PREGNANCY

The search for a flawless perspective on pregnancy, which is unique among human experiences, is futile. Nevertheless, we can still seek interpretative frameworks whose assets at least outweigh their shortcomings.

The weaknesses exceed the strengths of two of the metaphors for pregnancy which inform most of the debate about abortion around the globe. As a result primarily of the extraordinary influence of photographic essays on the imagination, many people conceive of childbearing as being like space-walking. The fetus is thought of as a mini-astronaut attached by an umbilical cord to its 'mother-ship'. The strengths of this metaphor are clear: it highlights the 'humanness' of prenatal life and its dependency and vulnerability. But it obscures much of importance as well. Mothers are not machines. Unlike astronauts, the fetus is not a 'stranger' to, but part of its mother and has no independent existence.

These distortions are overcome by another common metaphor for pregnancy. Childbearing is thought of as being like childrearing. This metaphor encourages people to think of pregnant women as mothers rather than as machines. It encourages parents to think of their obligations to prenatal life as family responsibilities. Additionally, the metaphor frames life in the womb so that both its vulnerability and its demanding character are highlighted.

However much improved this interpretative framework may be, it obscures three morally important dimensions of childbearing. First, pregnant women are persons; they are not only

mothers, however significant that vocation may be. Nor would everyone consider a pregnant woman to be a mother, but rather a mother-to-be. Second, the life-support given during gestation (and lactation) is bodily. Therefore it differs dramatically from all other forms of parental care-taking, however requisite for life they prove to be. Third, while pregnancy is borne only by the woman, parental responsibility for new life belongs equally to the father. These realities of pregnancy need to be illumined by an alternative metaphor, one that does not obscure what the childrearing metaphor succeeds in highlighting.

### **AN IMPROVED METAPHOR FOR PREGNANCY**

Progress in the abortion debate might be made if we came to see how much childbearing is like organ donation. Imagine a parent whose bone marrow, kidney or liver lobe is vital to the very survival of his or her own child. Some people think that some kinds of moral activities (e.g., self-sacrifice for children) are more appropriate to and obligatory for women than for men. In my opinion, no convincing case can be made for this sexist axiom. My argument rests on the premise that fathers and mothers mutually share both parental responsibilities and privileges. Therefore I would counter the pervasive influence of this misleading assumption by imaging this donor-parent to be a father.

There are many ways in which a father's choice to donate an organ is like childbearing. Like pregnancy, organ donation is clearly a form of bodily life-support. While pregnancy can be associated with some maternal health benefits, pregnancy always involves some costs to maternal health and like organ donation, may indeed be quite risky.

The comparison of pregnancy with organ donation is especially generative for the abortion debate for four reasons. First, donor fathers are usually recognised as full persons, whose lives include but are not reducible to parenthood. Fathers are not usually viewed as life-support machines. Second, the child-recipient of an organ is recognised as extremely vulnerable and dependent, yet the serious and significant costs to the father's health and life are also illumined.

Third, the relationship between the donor-

father and the child-recipient is understood to be a gift-relationship. To give a kidney, even to one's own child, is to go beyond the call of parental duty. No country legally requires that fathers give one of their kidneys or a lobe of their liver to their own child, even when it is known that this child will die from renal failure or advanced liver disease without it. At no point is donation mandatory; health care professionals routinely (re)confirm the donor's full, voluntary and informed consent to the process.

Communities may want to raise up people capable of such gift-giving, and may even want to establish public policies that help sustain such choices, but these goals are quite different from making organ donation obligatory.

In contrast, the continuation of pregnancy has been treated as obligatory in many places, whether through legislation, social demands or religious pronouncements. I contend that any such requirement on women violates the true character of the bodily life-support that pregnancy entails. From this point of view, pregnancy – like organ donation – should be seen as a gift-relationship.

In many countries it is recognised that dependent children have a legal right to a reasonable portion of their parent's property and wealth, as evidenced in child-support payment requirements. But such rights have not been (and I would contend ought not to be) extended to a parent's body. This is so because, as society recognises, bodies are not mere possessions. They are primordially personal. We do not have our bodies; we are our bodies. Sadly, this has been more widely recognised as true of men's bodies than women's. Because women's bodies are more frequently objectified, we fail to notice that anti-abortion legislation and pronouncements depersonalise pregnant women. By dictating what women can and cannot do with their bodies, claims are made by others to possession of women's bodies.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ABORTION DEBATE**

If we reconceive of pregnancy and think of the carrying of a pregnancy to term as a gift, analogous to organ-donation, what are the implications for the abortion debate? Two are worth highlighting. First, that the decision to

bear a child to term, like that to donate an organ, is a complex decision through which the gift-giver attempts to serve and balance a number of competing values.

It is helpful to illumine the complex nature of the decision to bear a child because frequently individuals on both sides of the abortion debate portray such decision-making as simple, that is, as based on an obligation to serve a single value, whether that be fetal life or maternal well-being. This is misleading and does not take women's experience of pregnancy seriously.

A brief rehearsal of five of these competing responsibilities, shared by both mothers and donor-fathers, may be helpful:

- an obligation to sustain their own physical, mental and emotional health – both for their own sake as intrinsically valuable persons and for the sake of others.
- obligations to other family members, especially to other dependents.
- communal and vocation-related responsibilities and obligations.
- a responsibility to support their child's life.
- an obligation to serve their child's best interest. To be born is not self-evidently in the best interest of every fetus, just as organ transplantation is not self-evidently in the best interest of every potential recipient.

Obviously there is considerable room for conflict among these obligations and it is not always possible to balance them. In some circumstances the obligations may be mutually exclusive. Indeed pregnancy becomes morally problematic precisely when no way of balancing these responsibilities can be found.

A second implication for the abortion debate follows because the heart of the moral problem changes. The key question is no longer: What moral status should we ascribe to fetal life? Instead, the key moral questions become: Whether and under what circumstances should women decide to give life? And when should society encourage or discourage such giving?

This alternative way of thinking about pregnancy has not so much solved the abortion problem, as it has redefined it. A full exploration of the ethics of giving is in order. Since in the case of problematic pregnancies, giving life may result in the sacrifice of other values, a full exploration of sacrifice – particularly any ethos

that calls for the habitual sacrifice of women – is necessary. The choice to give life obviously requires a physical symbiosis during gestation, but it almost always entails a commitment to childrearing, with its many concomitant sacrifices. Hence, it is necessary to explore giving in close relation to sacrifice, especially in relation to the multiple ways in which mothers are expected to make sacrifices.

In conclusion, it is important to name and briefly comment on one objection to and weakness in this alternative way of imaging pregnancy. It is not at all self-evident that prenatal life, especially in its early stages, is equivalent in value to that of an organ-needing child or any other child. This is an important and hotly debated question. The purpose of my paper has not been to foreclose that discussion, which needs to continue. My purpose has been to illustrate that much can be gained by exploring other, frequently overlooked issues which profoundly affect our understanding of child-bearing and women's experience. Only in this way might we be able to move out of the moral impasse surrounding abortion.

#### Note

*A shorter version of this paper was presented at the First International Congress on Medical Ethics, 14-16 July 1993, in Teheran, Iran. For a more detailed version of this argument, including a review of the literature, see my paper 'Abortion and Organ-Donation: A Christian Reflection on Bodily Life-Support,' Journal of Religious Ethics 1988; 16(2):273-305.*