



ETHICAL PROBLEMS: Ethical issues in abortion

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1. INTRODUCTION

Abortion is a very complex and morally pregnant topic. The constructs of morals and ethics render a clear cut answer virtually impossible.

Understanding that morals and ethics are complex philosophical topics is an integral part of understanding the complexity of the moral debate exploding over abortion.

Ethics, described as an exertion to formulate cyphers and doctrines of moral behaviour (The Oxford Companion to Philosophy, 1995:586), lends to the reader the actual complexity of the very scope of the word in its application to abortion.

The following essay, grounded in medical sociology, will be the writers opinion on the debate supported with relevant literature citations.

2. DEFINITION OF ABORTION

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2007) abortion is the (deliberate) termination of a pregnancy which is followed by the death of the embryo or foetus.

The essence here is that the pregnancy is terminated before natural birth of the foetus can occur.

3. ETHICS AND MORALS WITH RESPECT TO ABORTION

According to Harold & van Niekerk (2011:13-32), ethics and morals pertain to the unique way we conduct our lives and how we live life. This mantel is extended to our consideration of what is right or wrong in the way we conduct ourselves. Ethically, society may deem abortion wrong, yet morally an unmarried pregnant teenager may feel that an abortion is a justified behaviour. In essence, ethics is the value placed on our morals which in turn governs how we behave.

Morality is the obedience of rules which is necessary for the harmonious interaction between the inhabitants of a society. The foundation of morality is motivation called a sense of duty (Wiredu, 1998:306). Even though abortion is opposed in the Hindu religion, the practice of abortion in India is rife (BBC, 2014). This reinforces the complexity of enforcing morality to all persons living in a society. It also underlines the reality that morals are universal to almost all of human societies but that does not

make them universal to all of the inhabitants of such human societies (Wiredu, 1998:306).

Simply stated ethics are the very rules that tell us how to act in diverse situations which are obtained from external sources. These sources may include parents, religious leaders, peers and education. Morals are our personal principles regarding what is acceptable and what not. Although morals are inherent to each individual uniquely, they are none the less still dependant on socialisation and culture. (Jasuja, Sehgal, & Tilahun. 2016).

There are two main views of where norms originate from. Modernist and Postmodernist. To the modernist, reality is out there waiting to be found and therefore norms are objectively present in reality. The modernist would view abortion as wrong or right depending on the evidence presented. Where there is research to support the benefit of abortion (such as the potential harm to the mother if the foetus is born) the abortion would be condoned and equally so in the converse.

Postmodernist view reality as subjective and unique to each individual. This would mean that the right to have an abortion or decline one is subjective and purely the experience and reality of the mother of such foetus (Harold & van Niekerk, 2011:13-32).

This means that what we believe and how we behave can have its origins from two opposing aetiologies. It is in the aetiologies that we can argue the complexity of abortion.

Abortion is a topic which is plagued by controversy. There are two very strong poles from which the topic is approached and each of the poles feels justified in it's reasons and presented evidence for such reasons. There are the pro-life supporters (who maintain that life must be preserved at all costs) and the pro-choice supporters (who maintain that it is the mother's choice to keep or abort the foetus) (Anon, 2014).

The pro-life supporters maintain that abortion is an offence against God and his creation. They base this claim on what they deem the bible says about abortion. According to the pro-life supporters abortion according to the bible is murder. It should be avoided at all costs with no exceptions (TFP, 2009). However, Genesis 2:7 clearly indicates that life begins at first breath. This would mean that murder

would not apply to an unborn foetus as it has not yet taken that first breath (Lowery, 2012).



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The moment of conception.

But what does religion have to say about what is purported that it says. Catholics impose strict anti-abortion traditions although the Christian bible itself does not condemn abortion. These strict anti-abortion values seem to have emerged in 1930 with the encyclical reign of Pope Pius XI. Prior to that abortion was permissible within the first 3 months of pregnancy. A similar pattern is seen in Judaism. There is no mention of abortion as murder in their scriptures. Abortion is permitted for the sake of the mother and within 40 days of conception, although there are grounds for abortion at later stages of the pregnancy. Islam, although it generally condemns abortion, allows for abortion, provided it is with good reason and within the early stages of the pregnancy. Buddhism does not advocate abortion due to the belief in reincarnation, but they do allow it under certain conditions that are not selfish or hateful. Hindu texts very clearly condemn abortion as they believe that the foetus is infused with the divine spirit. Having said this, abortion is actively practiced in India today (Cline, 2016).

So, it becomes apparent that the no 1 religious argument for pro-life activists is in fact devoid of truth. In none of the religious scriptures does abortion get deemed murder. The value placed on abortion seems to be a man- made ethical prescription and somehow religion got encapsulated in that “fallacy” of a “truth”. The moral reality is evident in the exceptions for abortion and the reasons for such exceptions.



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Human foetus.

As humans we seek to find value in the world we live in. We do not value everything in the same way and this gives rise to a system of values which has distinctions based on our world view (Wilbur, 2011:32). When considering an abortion, the value system of the woman is put under scrutiny. What is the value she attaches to the foetus and eventually the baby? What is the value she attaches to her religious convictions and indoctrinations?

It is important for women to feel that they have freedom to participate equally in economic and social activities. But in order to do that, she needs to have reproductive choice and the right to decide what is happening to her body (Procon.org, 2016). Without the right of a woman to choose whether she wishes to continue with a pregnancy or not, she will be limited in her scope of economic activity as well as social activity. In South Africa, the constitution protects the rights to freedom of choice with regards the rights to choose abortion or not. Ethically, the woman may know that society does not condone abortion and that it is not

considered good behaviour, but morally, she may be left with no option other than to undergo abortion in order to maintain herself economically or socially.

According to the pro-life perspective, abortion is also called the unnoticed war (TFP, 2009). The premise with this point of view is that the bond between mother and child is the very glue that binds society. Once the right to abortion is proclaimed, the glue of society becomes undone. However, having said that the bond between mother and child is the glue of society, having an unwanted pregnancy increases the risks of the mother developing depression and higher risks of child abuse (Procon.org, 2016). In the opinion of the student, the true glue of society lies in the value a mother places on the baby. This includes the ethical behaviour expectations towards the baby such as ensuring that it is nurtured and cared for in a loving way and thereby ensuring that it grows up with sound moral and ethical foundations. The glue is not the termination of continuation of pregnancy.

It is stated that life begins at conception. This is a very strong standpoint held by the pro-life advocates (TPF, 2009). Conception being the exact point in time that a female egg and male sperm cell fuse to form a zygote (Agresti, 2014). According to Agresti (2014) this zygote is a living human organism and therefore the point at which life begins. This is also a scientifically accepted fact (Agresti, 2014). So for the pro-life advocates, fertilisation is the start of human life and therefore abortion is not right. However, what about the rights of the woman who is carrying this zygote. Does her right to choose what may happen to her body, or her career or how she can fend for this zygote and later baby become negated because of the pregnancy?

Studies have shown that by denying women the right to have an abortion, the likelihood that they fall into poverty within two years of having the baby is increased threefold. These same studies have found that 76% of the women who were turned away from abortion ended up at the unemployment office and/or were more likely to remain in abusive relationships (Procon.org, 2016). According to the student, the argument that life begins at conception and therefore abortion should not be allowed is very detrimental to the woman who is carrying that life inside her. It not only affects her biologically, but economically as well. The exchanging of the scientific point of life for the life of an already "birthed" life seems almost devoid of value for life in any part. It would seem that exchanging the life of the foetus for that of the mother

or the mother for that of the foetus is the choice it all boils down to. It is further the opinion of the student that where there is a polarity between two points of view of a phenomenon, there cannot be unanimous consensus and therefore each side needs to be addressed on its merits. No two societies are socialised in the same manner which means that norms, mores and values will differ according to the social realities and traditions of each society. That means that each person will attach value or devalue the practice of abortion differently based on their world view.

4. WHEN MAY ABORTION BE PRACTICED AND WHEN NOT

Acceptable reasons for the practice of abortion are cited as follows:

- Health risk to the mother.
- Poor quality of life for the baby once it is born as a result of defects of deformities.
- Conception as a result of rape.
- Conception as a result of incest.
- Abortion as a result of government imposed population control (Anon, 2014).

Reasons that are not morally acceptable to validate abortion are cited as follows:

- Birth control.
- Poverty of the mother.
- Inability of the mother to look after the child once it is born.
- Eugenics and gender selection.
- The mother is too young to cope with a child (Anon, 2014).



Human baby just born.

Various studies indicate an increased risk of breast cancer in women who have induced abortions (TFP, 2009). This means that even where abortion is permitted it may have negative side effects for the woman. Studies also show that using contraceptives increases the chances of breast cancer (Weiss, 2014). So whether the woman used prescribed birth control methods or abortion to terminate and unwanted pregnancy, the risk of cancer prevails.

Abortion is permitted where the mother's life is at risk (Anon, 2014). However, it is not condoned where her lifestyle and economic status are at risk (Procon.org, 2016). It is the opinion of the student that the focus should be on whether the life of the mother is affected and not how it will be affected. Whether she risks death and

disability of whether she risks poverty and unemployment, both instances warrant the termination of the pregnancy.

Pro-life advocates maintain that rape and incest are not plausible reasons for abortion. They maintain that abortion is just the perpetuation of the violence that was inflicted in the first place by the perpetrator. It is their opinion that the resulting pregnancy of a rape or incest should be handled with support for the pregnant woman and that the law should deal with the crime inflicted by the perpetrator (Reardon, 1994).

Psychological studies clearly show that victims of rape and incest display various behavioural symptoms which include cognitive and physical. They display anxiety, nightmares, withdrawal from their daily normal routines and activities and also inappropriate sexual behaviour (child victims). These victims may be hospitalized for psychiatric treatment. They often abuse alcohol and drugs and become suicidal (Anon, a.n.).

According to the student, the effects of a crime such as incest and rape more than warrant abortion. The stress of dealing with the aftermath of such a heinous crime is painful enough without having to be constantly reminded of the event through a resultant pregnancy. However, there is no difference between terminating a healthy pregnancy due to rape or incest and terminating it because of birth control reasons. In both instances the rights of the mother should be preserved and respected as she alone is the one physically dealing with the crisis at hand. That is not to say that all women who have been raped do not keep or raise those children. Their moral and ethical grounds remain unchanged. Equally so, mothers often risk their health to give birth such as stopping chemotherapy for the gestation period.

The same applies to abortion as a result of government imposed population control as opposed to the inability of the mother to look after the child or even gender and eugenics selection. The moral dilemma is who gets to decide which sex is to live and which sex is to be aborted.

The decision is still made by a human based on some value that human imposes on the eventual value of that foetus. Ultimately, abortion remains a personal preference

of the person requesting it or imposing it based on that person's world view and value system.

5. ABORTION AND FOETUS DEFORMITY

Pro-life activists argue that foetal deformities are not reason enough to terminate a pregnancy, and that physical limitations do not devalue the humanness of the disabled person. However, there are instances where the foetus will be born dead irrespective, as a result of certain deformities such as anencephaly (Procon.org, 2016).

According to the student, the quality of life of such foetus, should it be carried to term, needs consideration. Will the born child be able to fend for itself in terms of walking, eating, talking or even conducting general social actions. If not, what is the financial burden that will be implied to the mother/parents. The parents/mother may not be in a position to afford specialised care for the disabled child. This means that the family is placed in jeopardy as the financial implications may be catastrophic.

Ethics dictate how we should behave, and where abortion is concerned we should not terminate life. Morals dictate what is right and what is wrong in terms of how we behave. Morally, to allow for a lifetime of suffering of the baby born with deformity is cruel and selfish.

6. METHODS OF ABORTION

- The abortion pill – This is a form of medication that is administered orally or via IV. The first treatment prohibits the hormone needed to get the fertilised egg to stick to the womb lining. The second treatment, which is normally administered after 48 hours causes bleeding and contraction of the womb and that causes the expulsion of the foetus.
- The morning after pill – this is one of the most popular birth control methods. An overdose of the female hormone is ingested within 72 hours of unprotected sex. It then prevents the egg from attaching itself to the womb.
- Surgical methods include suction which sucks the foetus out of the womb.

- Partial birth abortion - this is a very cruel method of abortion. The foetus is brought into the birth canal and then the head is sucked out via suction which destroys the foetus (Anon, 2014).

In the opinion of the student, if ethics are rules that govern our behaviour and morals the conscience of whether that behaviour is right or wrong and the reality of how abortion is actually administered is considered, then abortion is in its entirety a travesty of both ethics and morals regardless of the circumstances or reason of the behaviour. The mere fact that the foetus gets partially born and then sucked out in a manner that destroys the head and hence the living organism, seems beyond the boundaries of ethics and morals. The process would entail extreme pain for the mother (labour to get the foetus into the birthing canal) and then inhumane treatment of the foetus as it is destroyed via suctioning.

It is further the opinion of the student that where abortion is condoned and it is actioned in such a barbaric fashion that an argument of morals and ethics seems devoid of all value.

CONCLUSION

When considering the staggering amount of polarity in the abortion debate the full extent of diversity based on personal values, culture and experience becomes apparent. The very impossible task of ever being able to apply universal norms, values and ethics across time and space to the abortion debate becomes alarming, real and tangible.

During the course of a woman's socialisation process in society, she may acquire preconceived ideas about abortion and internalise this as her moral point of view. Due to the very complex nature of ethics and morals, and the fact that behaviour in such matters cannot be predicted, she may well change her values on abortion when faced with an unplanned pregnancy or a foetus that has deformities (Department of Health, 2014).

Abortion comes with many ethical and moral issues which can be argued from both aetiologies. The most important ethical consideration should always be the beliefs and values of the woman who is considering abortion.

Pregnancy can be viewed as an extension of the woman's body (in which case she has the right to decide on an abortion or not) and it can also be viewed as an independent life (in which case the woman's body is but a vessel and the life of the foetus takes priority and therefore abortion is unacceptable). Each view is based on its own ontology and epistemology.

The ethical arguments formulated by religious anti-abortion activists centres on the notion that abortion is murder. However – as stated in Genesis, life starts at first breath of air. This would rule out murder as a consequence of abortion as the foetus has not breathed air. So this leaves the religious claims to validate anti-abortion values as wasted. The religious claims seem to be more of an emotional, ethical perspective shrouded in the auspices of religion.

Where morals and ethics dictate that no harm or violence should be advocated and then one considers the manner in which abortions can take place, the very principles of morals and ethics are voided. The inhumane ways approved for abortion, such as half birthing then suctioning the foetus out in order to squash its brain is barbaric. The polarities existing between do no harm to the foetus and ultimate cruelty of the abortion process when society deems it ethically permissible to abort is staggering and complex.

In my opinion, abortion is a very private and personal matter and should be respected as the ultimate decision of the pregnant mother. Her values and norms will guide her to the decision that needs to be sanctioned with regards the pregnancy and any dilemmas surrounding the pregnancy such as deformity, conception outside of mutual consent or harm to the mother herself.

I do not agree with the double standards taken by agencies such as religion with regards abortion. If one is to state that abortion is not permissible – then the rule should apply consistently. It should not be adjusted to suit a certain point of view – no matter how justifiable that point of view might seem. If the agency wishes to have options and instances where abortion is permitted then it should not advocate a no abortion policy. It should advocate a policy that is open to consideration of each case as it emerges.

Personally I find any form of deformity a validated reason for pregnancy termination due to the fact that the baby and eventual adult or young child will have a very poor quality of life in its deformed state. Termination is in my opinion the ethical and humane thing to do and spare the child or adult the extended and prolonged misery of a difficult life.

I however, do not condone the use of abortion as a contraceptive. In order to engage in copulation, it is assumed that you have understood the implications of such actions. To risk unwanted pregnancy is not only brazen but morally incorrect too. Ultimately, contraception exists that does not warrant the termination of a living organism.

Abortion should remain the unique decision of each woman who is considering her options. It should not be plagued by double standards of religion or activists. In each of the polarities between the pro-life activists and the pro-choice activist there are negative consequences. The ethics, morals and mores of the woman will guide her as to what her decision should be.

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