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**A Personalist Approach to Abortion:
Valuing the Life and Personhood of Both Mothers and Children**

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Introduction

Abortion is a heavy topic, often filled with hurt and pain for everyone involved. It is viewed by some as a right, and by others as murder. Ultimately though, abortion is not just a topic or an issue, not something meant to divide one political party from another, abortion is about people. It is about people trying to make the best decisions they can, for themselves, their families, and the world. In this paper, I will argue that we move from a culture of things to persons on the subject of abortion by taking seriously the personhood of both mothers and their unborn children. Both are equally important and must not be turned against one another in a dichotomy.

This subject is important to me personally because early in our marriage, my wife experienced an ectopic pregnancy and we ended the pregnancy to protect her life and because there was no chance for the child to survive the pregnancy. So while we did end the life of our child when there was more life for them to live beyond the womb, we still did, by scientific terms, have an abortion. This experience has, over the years, opened my eyes to understanding this topic of abortion from different viewpoints and helped me to take into consideration the different experiences of those who are affected by abortion. In what follows I will first show how a trinitarian model of personhood should guide one in viewing the personhood of women and expectant mothers, as well as that of an unborn child, then I will address how a personalist ethic will affect decisions made regarding abortion, and finally, I will address how a personalist ethic should affect legislation and culture regarding the topic of abortion to see women and children as persons and not things to be used and discarded.

The Personhood of Women and Expectant Mothers

The rights of women and fair treatment of them within society has been a common issue throughout the world for centuries. This fact is a leading cause for people to side with women having the right to an abortion if they want or need it in order to maintain their health and autonomy. Joyce Arthur writes that, “With the advent of modern contraception and quality reproductive care, there’s no excuse for forcing women to bear children against their will, or failing to provide basic maternal care, or compelling women to seek out illegal, unsafe abortions.”¹ With the advent of new technology that allows a woman to have more control of her reproductive life, many who side with a woman’s right to abortion, value a woman’s autonomy and the right to have an equal role in society with men.

It is absolutely essential from a personalistic approach to ethics that one sees and values women and the role they play in society, both within the home and in the public sphere. Women bring incredible value to society in the public sphere. They bring a different perspective on the world and having diverse groups of people in the public sphere of society will lead to a flourishing society. However, just as we must not reduce women to the role they play in human reproduction or the role they play within families, we must also not reduce them to their role in the public sphere of society. Women, just as all other human beings, “...are mysterious and unique subjects with inherent worth and the right to self-determination in fostering vital community.”² These are aspects of personhood that are essential to our understanding of women, and all persons, as is, “...every person’s incommunicable and unrepeatable identity, inviolability,

¹Joyce Arthur, “Abortion Benefits Civilized Society,” in *Abortion*, eds. David Haugen, Susan Musser, and Lacy Lovelace, (Farmington Hills, MI: Greenhaven Press, 2010), 104.

²Paul Louis Metzger, *More Than Things: A Personalist Ethics for a Throwaway Culture*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2023), 4.

and dignity.”³ Women are made for more than individualistic autonomy, and they are made for more than bearing children, they are ends in themselves and must be seen and treated as such.

With that being said, we must recognize that when it comes to abortion, it is merely a symptom of an underlying problem. Whether that be horrible treatment of women in a society, a lack of meaningful relational connections and community, socio-economic disparities, or medical conditions that endanger the life of the mother. The Feminists for Life of America recognize this as well, stating, “Pro-life feminists recognize abortion as a symptom of, not a solution to, the continuing struggles we face in the workplace, at home and in society.”⁴ With that being said, it is deeply problematic and dehumanizing to focus just on the symptom as if it is the solution to the unfair treatment of women, because that misses the deep complexities within women as persons.

To better understand this symptom, it is important to understand the reasons why women choose to have abortions. While there are a wide variety of reasons why women choose to have an abortion, the most common theme is a lack of financial preparedness for a child.⁵ Not only that, but many of the other common themes in why women choose to have an abortion, such as “Not the right time for a baby,” “Interferes with future opportunities,” or “Want a better life for the baby than she could provide,” are themes that are likely strongly influenced by socio-economic factors as well.⁶ Again, the Feminists for Life of America hope for a better world, “...where no woman would feel forced into the personal tragedy of abortion.”⁷ This forcing of women into abortion comes, in many ways, from a very programmatic approach to

³Ibid.

⁴Feminists for Life of America, “Feminists for Life of America: Official Statement,” in *Abortion*, ed. Lloyd Steffen, (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1996), 355.

⁵M Antonia Biggs, Heather Gould and Diana Greene Foster, “Understanding Why Women Seek Abortions in the US,” *BMC Women’s Health*, 2013, 6.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Feminists for Life of America, “Feminists for Life of America: Official Statement,” 355.

caring for women. Women must be seen as persons and cared for personally by health care professionals and their community. Eugene Peterson writes that, “A program defines people in terms of what they do, not who they are,” which is, “...a violation of the inherent personal dignity of souls.”⁸ Society must address each woman and their pregnancy from a personal perspective, not trying to force one way of addressing a problem on anyone, but getting to know each individual personally and addressing issues from a personal perspective.

To lead to such a world, where women are not reduced to child-bearing machines nor are is their embodiment as women who can bear children devalued, we must push against the individualistic viewpoint that, “...reduces the obligations of other individuals or of the community to offer support during and after a burdensome pregnancy.”⁹ To take away the responsibility of both women, with their embodiment as people who can bear children, and men, who are equally responsible for pregnancy, as well as the community surrounding them, is to depersonalize and dehumanize all of them. As persons, our inherent worth and dignity requires that we have responsibility for the choices we make and actions we take, to diminish the responsibility on the community surrounding women, will result in the society where women do not feel responsible to carry children to term if it is an inconvenience.

One must also take into consideration instances where a pregnancy endangers the health or life of a woman. While the life of that child has incredible worth, so does the life of that mother. Both have rights, but, “Where those rights can conflict, neither can be absolute. The rights of both are limited, but still significant.”¹⁰ We must come to see that, “...their respective rights must be defined in relation to one another...”¹¹ This means that there is a sense in which

⁸Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir*, (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011), 255.

⁹Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Abortion, Autonomy, and Community,” in *Abortion*, ed. Lloyd Steffen, (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1996), 363.

¹⁰Ibid, 361.

¹¹Ibid.

the mother must not always be expected to be sacrificed for the child, nor should the child always be sacrificed for the mother. Both must be seen with the same respect as the other, and no situation will be the same. The decision of what is to be done, must not be made by some outside authority, but should come from the mother, with consideration of immediately involved family such as the father or other close relatives.

In the horrific cases of incest or rape, there must be extreme care and support for the mother. While to abort the child may not necessarily solve the trauma she has faced, she must be empowered to have some control in the situation, as the pregnancy was brought on her without her control, and to force her to do something against her will, whether that be to carry the pregnancy or to abort, will further traumatize her and degrade her. She must be empowered to have some decision of what will happen, to allow her space to heal properly. She must also be adequately informed and supported by others, and given the gravity of the situation.

The Personhood of Unborn Children

John M. Perkins writes that, “Dehumanizing values only and always produce destructive behavior.”¹² When the ones who are called to carry children are depersonalized, the children they carry will be dehumanized as well, thus, they are often referred to as a clump of cells. The reality is, that this “clump of cells” is the beginning of a human being, and must be seen as such.

Karl Barth writes that, “...the unborn child is from the very first a child. It is still developing and has no independent life. But it is a person and not a thing, nor a mere part of the mother’s body.”¹³ He goes on to describe the autonomy of the human embryo and show that while the unborn child is still dependent upon the mother, it does have some sense of autonomy

¹²John M. Perkins, *Let Justice Roll Down*, (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1976), 101.

¹³Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, part III, vol.4, trans. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2009), 89.

and is to be recognized as fully human.¹⁴ This is an important point for this discussion, as it is important to note that while an unborn child does have a very unique dependency upon their mother, it is not all that different from the dependency other humans have on one another. For instance, the elderly or those with debilitating health conditions often require tremendous care from other humans they could not provide on their own. It is essential that we see personhood as more than just autonomy or abilities, but that personhood applies even to those who are completely dependent upon another, for all are in some way or another dependent upon others.

Likewise, all life is important to protect, both the life of those who have been born and those not yet born. We must recognize that, “In the sight of God, there is no life that is not worth living; for life itself is valued by God.”¹⁵ Coming from a trinitarian understanding of personhood, we must see the value of life that is given to all and the dependent nature within which we all live, dependent upon one another and God. Likewise, all three persons of the Godhead also have a dependence upon one another. Martin Luther King Jr. writes that, “I can never be what I ought to be until you are who you ought to be, and you can never be who you ought to be until I am who I ought to be...”¹⁶ This means for humanity that one cannot discount the life of an unborn child simply because of their dependence upon their mother or because of their lack of autonomy, because these do not define one’s personhood. We must come to, “...view life in all its manifestations and domains as interconnected for the sake of the whole.”¹⁷

Unborn human children are human and thus are persons, for, “All humans are persons.”¹⁸ If therefore, they are persons, they must be seen not as inconveniences or infractions on one’s autonomy and freedom, but rather as ends in themselves, just as their mother.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Neville Horton Smith, (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1965), 163.

¹⁶Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” in *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson, (New York, NY: Warner Books, 1998), 189.

¹⁷Metzger, *More Than Things*, 385.

¹⁸Ibid, 4.

Abortion and a Personalist Ethic

As one considers the personhood of both mother and child, there is the difficulty of how to address the topic of abortion. It is a complex topic, because people are complex. When the personhood of mother and child are taken seriously, a tension arises in the context of abortion. No ethical situation is to be approached in a formulaic or programmatic manner, but with a deep humility and care for the complexities within each situation and person.

In the instances where a mother is concerned for her own future and how a child may affect her future plans for life, there must be serious consideration of the personhood of the child they are bearing. For while bearing that child takes a serious toll on her, she dehumanizes her own embodied self if she would merely dispose of this person for her own convenience. To do so would discount the value of her embodied personhood as one whose body can bear a child.

Likewise though, for someone to impose an abstract prohibition on abortion, "...is far too forbidding and sterile to promise any effective help."¹⁹ This topic requires a deep recognition of the complexities at play and that we cannot expect one to have a respect for life and personhood if their own life and personhood are not also respected. Bonhoeffer writes that, "The human body must never become a thing, any object, such as might fall under the unrestricted power of another man and be used by him solely as a means to his own ends. The living human body is always the man himself."²⁰ So while it is important for the mother to honor the personhood of their child as well as their own embodied personhood, society must learn to better support and value the personhood of the mother, promoting a culture that promotes human flourishing, where mothers want to bring children into the world, regardless of whether or not they planned for this child.

¹⁹Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 90.

²⁰Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 183.

Changing the Culture Around Abortion

When it comes to abortion, the point of the discussion is often what role the state plays in restricting or permitting abortion. While most arguing on this topic try to come to some conclusion of how the state should or should not impose on women and their “right” to abort or the illegality of abortion, a personalist approach does not emphasize the legislation of abortion, but focuses instead on the individuals within culture at large. However, there must be some consideration for how a government might offer legislation in regards to abortion.

For government legislation, it is important to consider the complexities at play in regards to abortion. Many countries with very few restrictions regarding abortion report rather low rates of abortion,²¹ which means one should consider the effectiveness of restrictive laws. Whatever laws are in place, they should promote human flourishing and should be created in collaboration with a diverse group of people who have real experience with abortion.

Beyond the legislation though, a personalist ethic will emphasize the importance of the culture surrounding women and children. Such a culture must accept responsibility for the way in which both women and unborn children have been dehumanized and undervalued by society for far too long. Going forward, it is imperative that the culture create more resources and support for pregnant women, and that everyone would come to a greater understanding of the complexities and difficulties women face with pregnancy, health issues, and raising children. By recognizing this, a culture of flourishing life will be developed in which fewer people desire to have an abortion and women are valued and given space to flourish in the society, while children are seen as whole persons as well, even from their earliest days in the womb, and are not viewed as the burden or slavery they are often seen as today.

²¹See Arthur, “Abortion Benefits Civilized Society”, in *Abortion*, 104-117.

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