

On Abortion

Much of the debate surrounding the ethics of abortion centers on the question of whether or not a fetus is a human life. The thinking goes, if a fetus is a human life, then killing it or allowing it to die through the act of abortion is immoral, akin to murdering a baby; if the fetus is not a human life then abortion is simply a necessary and amoral medical practice. Indeed, we see this reflected in the rhetoric of the abortion debate. "Pro-Lifers" are named such because they see the fetus as a life (which they are for), and much of their messaging focuses on humanizing unborn fetuses. They argue a fetus has a heartbeat, a face, fingers, etc., with the implication being these outward signs of a human body indicate human life. "Pro-Choicers" argue from the perspective that life does not begin at conception, and therefore state-mandated pregnancies are cruel and not morally justified.

I am uncomfortable with centering this discussion around the question of whether or not a fetus is a human life. I think the question of what makes a human life a human life is impossible to answer. As long as we understand the debate through these terms, the question of whether or not abortion is moral will remain impossible to answer too. I fear it is dangerous to base our moral understanding of things on whether or not someone or something has a human soul. Historically, so-called "race-scientists" argued that black people were animals and not full human beings and therefore their enslavement and inhumane treatment was morally acceptable. We cannot prove one way or another whether or not a person has a soul. It is dangerous to base a moral debate on this question.

Perhaps controversially, I don't think my pro-choice stance would change if tomorrow scientists could objectively prove a fetus is a human life. In fact, I am actually quite convinced that a fetus is a kind of life, one that we can attribute many human-like qualities to, and I still think abortion is morally acceptable.

To me the relationship between a fetus and its mother is mischaracterized. We talk about them like they are two separate entities whose decision making is wholly independent of each other. Pro-Lifers argue on behalf of the unborn child, whose needs and rights are presumably otherwise unrepresented. Pro-choicers point to a small cluster of cells inside the pregnant womb and argue the fetus is not yet developed or complex enough to have thoughts or feelings, needs or desires. A clump of cells is too small to feel pain.

But this isn't what the union between a pregnant woman and fetus is. It's not like if I swallowed a tape-worm, it's needs, feelings and desires unknown and unknowable to me, two separate beings, one housing the other. A fetus and its mother share far more than a body. They share needs, thoughts, and desires. They are neither two bodies and minds, nor one. They are some hybrid of the two. Both simultaneously.

When a woman is pregnant she will often get food cravings. We understand that this is for the benefit of the unborn child, but it's not as if the fetus speaks its needs in utero. He does not write little notes to be passed on to the mother, or communicate using a system of kicking. The mother knows what food her unborn child craves the same way I know what I'm hungry for. It's an internal experience.

Pregnant women often talk of being able to intuit the thoughts and feelings of their to-be child. They feel they are familiar with aspects of their children's character and personality before they are born.

It is a profound synchronization of two beings. To be a fetus in utero is to have all your needs and wants and feelings understood without having to communicate them. It is to be taken care of and to be protected without knowing what it would mean not to be. A fetus may truly be a life, but it is not like a human's because the nature of the world a fetus lives in is profoundly different than that of mine or yours. I believe being brought to term is just as world-shattering and life-ending to a fetus as being aborted is. In a way I think the two are equally tragic, but in birth, the loss of the mother-fetus-union is often overshadowed by the joy of introducing the child into the world.

I do not think abortion is anymore a murder than child-birth.

As people, we often make the arrogant assumption that what's best for us is best for everyone. But this is demonstrably untrue. Modern medicine has enabled us to, in some cases, give hearing to the deaf and, in very rare cases, give sight to the blind. Miraculous. However, it is common for people who were born without hearing or sight to find the experience of being given a new sense overwhelming and unpleasant, often preferring the way they were before.

It would be inarguably cruel and violating to forcibly make someone blind or deaf. I have never met a hearing or seeing person who wishes to lose those things, but just because something is precious to those of us that have it, doesn't mean those without would appreciate getting it.

I think being born is like that. I'm grateful to be alive, as most healthy people are, but I think it is an improper leap of logic to assume that all fetuses would prefer or benefit from being born. I don't think denying a fetus a chance at life outside the womb is unloving, unkind, or cruel, and I don't think it has to deny the fetus a life or reverence. Perhaps bringing a fetus into its loving, warm, protective, and understanding world and allowing it to exit without going through the pain and trauma of life outside the womb would be very kind indeed.

The best thing to do would be to allow the fetus to be involved in the decision making process. To be, or not to be? Pro-lifers argue from the perspective that a fetus's thoughts on the matter are fundamentally unknowable, and that all would prefer birth. This is arrogant, and ignores the profound connection between a pregnant woman and fetus. The needs and cravings of an unborn child during pregnancy become those of the mother. The mother knows what the fetus wants and she acts on behalf of both.

The decision to end a pregnancy is not an easy one, and there are bound to be conflicting feelings. Pregnancy is a profound time, and decisions made during and about the pregnancy have tremendous and reverberating impact. No one knows this better or more intimately than those directly involved.

I do not think the decision to have an abortion or not is a moral one, despite its power and importance. It is a decision that should be left up to the mother and fetus, and we should assume that whatever a pregnant woman chooses to do, she is acting in the interest and on behalf of both.