
The Phenomenology of Abortion Decisions

Lani Roberts

Oregon State University
laniroberts@outlook.com

ABSTRACT: The philosophical treatment of abortion has rarely placed actual women at the center of the discussion. This essay argues that moral decisions are made by actual persons and a woman, as a person, is more than a breeder of humans. Drawing on an analogy with the treatment of light in quantum physics, it also argues that the status of a fertilized ovum is indeterminate, often dependent on the context of the woman's life.

THERE IS A PUZZLING PHENOMENON INVOLVED in the abortion debate which has been little discussed. It involves the experiences of women who are confronted with an unplanned pregnancy and the variety of ways in which they respond to this fact. Why it is that some women can have an abortion and suffer no guilt, remorse or shame, while for others, abortion is an unthinkable sin, not an option for consideration in any sense. Other women believe abortion is wrong and still proceed, often afflicted with sometimes debilitating guilt and shame. Most puzzling are the women who at one particular point in their lives opt for an abortion without resultant guilt or regret and at yet another time, do not consider abortion an option at all. What explains the diversity of women's responses to the relationship between unplanned pregnancy and abortion?

One explanation offered for this disparity in women's choices and their subsequent introspective self-evaluations is that the woman who has an abortion and feels no guilt is somehow morally inadequate, undeveloped and ethically immature or self-centered to the degree that she is willing to sacrifice the life of her baby for convenience sake. This woman is contrasted with an ethically mature, morally righteous woman who could never consider abortion under any circumstances. Others assert that every woman who has an abortion does in fact feel guilt and remorse but

some are at least minimally successful at suppressing these feelings because to face squarely what they have done would be too painful or difficult.

I think these explanations may be correct in a few cases but not most. I deny that every woman who has an abortion feels guilt and remorse. Support for this claim comes directly from women I know intimately who have had abortions after careful consideration and do not feel they have done wrong. I also deny that such a woman is immoral or amoral, that she is disregarding the reality of her situation for convenience sake.

I am not saying that abortion is a free and easy decision in any case. The women I know who have opted for an abortion have, in fact, squarely faced the issue of potential life. Such women know that when abortion is chosen, the particular potentiality involved will never become an actuality. I know of no women who have lightly disregarded the potential of life. I am not saying that this kind of woman does not exist; it is simply that I do not know of one personally.

This juncture is as good as any to remind ourselves that potential is not actual. Although this point is a familiar one in discussion of abortion, I want to emphasize that this distinction is an ordinary one we often make in our daily lives without a second thought. When I have a piece of pecan pie, all the potential pecan trees that are precluded from becoming actual never cross my mind. A squirrel gathering acorns is not storing oak trees for winter food. A person admitted to Ph.D. candidacy does not have a doctorate, but the potential of obtaining one. The pecans in my pie have the same genetic makeup as those that sprout to form trees. However, we clearly recognize that the nuts in the pie are distinguishable from the pecan trees they might have become. Genetic makeup, then, seems an insufficient criterion for us to collapse distinctions we make as part of our everyday life. Potentiality is deserving of respect. However, it is distinct from realization of the actual. Women I know, and probably most all women, in considering an abortion, face the potentiality of the fertilized ovum. The burden of thoughtfully chosen abortion is the awareness of the potentiality and the surety that, without interference, it will become actual in most cases.

The variety of ways in which women respond to the potentiality of a fertilized ovum, of a conceptus, is what interests me here. I have chosen to use "fertilized ovum" and "conceptus" because they seem to be normatively neutral, at least as neutral as is possible in this controversy. By these terms, fertilized ovum and conceptus, I mean the biological fact of a sperm having entered the shell of an ovum, free of presuppositions as to the moral status of the product of the fertilization. This move in itself is critical to what I have to say and is linguistically and philosophically legitimate. However, I understand fully that there are parties to the abortion controversy who do not and cannot grant that a fertilized ovum can be morally neutral, a simple unadorned biological fact. For the purposes of this discussion however, I want to suggest that we, at least hypothetically, grant the conceptus ontologically neutrality and normative ambiguity. For this reason, I purposefully avoid the use of the word "fetus," preferred by many, because it seems to entail a presupposition that the conceptus is not just a potential baby, but an actual one. I also choose not to employ the phrase "mass of cells," also preferred by some, because it seems to carry

with it the idea that the conceptus is somehow on the same level as a cancerous tumor or some other such biological fact, denying the potentiality of life.

It may seem strange initially to assert that the fertilized ovum can have such a neutral status. But what I want to suggest is that this is in fact the case. This assertion in regards to the fertilized ovum can be understood as analogous to the discovery in quantum mechanics that we cannot determine the underlying structure of the universe without taking into account our theories, methods of observation and means of measurement. For example, physicists now generally accept that light is wave and particle, however not both at the same time under the same circumstances. And, it must be understood as both wave and particle in order to understand what light is. Although this does not permit a "tidy" theory, it matches more closely the empirical observations, hypotheses, and personal experiences. For most of us, life is not black and white. Physicists found that wave-particle duality brought an end to the "either-or" way of looking at the world. They have proven that light is both wave and particle. Although the two characteristics are mutually exclusive, which one is definitive at any given time depends on how we look at it, and for which sort of related purposes or objectives we study light in the first place. Light, then, has the tendency to be wave-like even if it never occurs as such while being measured and observed as a particle. Werner Heisenberg, a famous physicist, noted that this tendency to have a certain characteristic is a version of Aristotle's "potentia" (Metaphysics 1048b).

Neils Bohr, another founder of non-Newtonian physics, subsequently developed the idea of complementarity to explain the wave-particle duality of light. Wave-like characteristics and particle-like characteristics are mutually exclusive, or complementary aspects of light. Although one of them always excludes the other, they are both necessary to our understanding of light. How is it possible that mutually exclusive characteristics can both be properties of a single thing? Bohr says they are both properties of our *interaction with* light, rather than *characteristics of* light itself. In other words, which characteristic excludes the other depends on how we look at it. Quantum mechanics claims that the wave-particle duality is characteristic of everything. I want to apply this by analogy to the question of the relationship of a pregnant woman to the conceptus.

We can see the parallel in that light has two characteristics, wave and particle. Each excludes the other but both possibilities exist and which characteristic is decisive depends upon the theory and type of measurement used. If we apply this model to the brute fact of pregnancy, the conceptus has the complementary characteristics of being a fetus and a group of cells. Which characteristic is definitive by exclusion of the other depends on the assessment a woman makes of her circumstances and the moral orientation that informs her life. The duality of fetus and cell group are not characteristics of the conceptus itself, but of the woman's interaction with the brute fact of her pregnancy. This analogy provides a framework that makes sense of the differences in women's relationships to the possibility of abortion. This proposal is speculative and, I hope, provocative. Its strength is that it does explain the very real differences among women without denying the legitimacy of any woman's decision. I do not claim that my thinking is philosophically

unassailable. Rather, I am hoping to suggest an alternative understanding of women's relationships to the option of abortion and prompt a new line of thinking.

One thing is clear and that is that the metaphysical and moral status of the conceptus is ambiguous, at least on a social level. Individual people have concluded a variety of things. For some, the fertilized ovum is a baby and that is all there is to the question. For others, the fertilized ovum is a group of cells with the same status as other kinds of cells. Many other people have not decided. Thus, in actuality, my interest in the wide differences in women's experiences comes down to a discussion of the status of the conceptus.

I am proposing that the conceptus has an indeterminate status in that it is both ontologically neutral and morally ambiguous. Thus, it is the woman, *as a full person*, not solely *as a pregnant female of the species*, who determines whether the conceptus is a baby or whether it is a group of cells to be shed. By *woman-as-full-person* I mean one whose biological status as a breeding female is only one aspect of her being. A woman is far more complex than the biology of her condition. The woman, a person, decides the status of the conceptus, probably not in any conscious or deliberate sense, based on the full circumstances of her life at the point in time of any given pregnancy. If the woman concludes that the conceptus is a baby, then an abortion may be ruled out as an option. However, abortion may still be chosen in these circumstances and some guilt and remorse may follow. If, on the other hand, the conceptus is determined to be a group of cells and just that, then an abortion could be chosen with a clear conscience.

As a person, every woman's existential condition is highly complex, perhaps infinitely so. It includes all of what has gone before, her joys as well as fears, her hopes and dreams for the future. Her resources, energy and commitment to herself and others are most certainly limited in a way similar to all other persons. Her circumstances also include the facts of her life as well as her relationship to them. Her personal assessment and evaluation of those facts is significant. We should also include her introspective evaluation of her circumstances. A person's situation importantly entails a religious or ethical framework which provides the lens through which she views her life and its possibilities. In other words, an unplanned pregnancy and consideration of an abortion do not take place in a vacuum. A woman's decision about pregnancy takes place in a very specific and unique context - her entire life.

For example, we can consider a woman who is a Christian and who sees her life as attaining meaning in great measure from her identity as a wife and mother. She has faith in the belief that the fertilized ovum is a baby. This woman will either never consider an abortion or, if she does, her consideration will be fraught with moral and religious qualms. If she proceeds to have an abortion, she will be overriding the moral framework of her life. This kind of woman interacts with the conceptus as a baby and this, in turn, determines her experience in regards to abortion. It is probable she will suffer guilt and remorse.

By contrast, we can contemplate a woman who does not have a specific religious framework to her life but considers herself a spiritual and moral person nonetheless. Perhaps she already has a young child and is in the process of divorce. When she finds herself confronted with an unplanned and unwanted pregnancy, she will perhaps

consider whether she can do a good job as a single mother, providing for two young children. She weighs the alternatives and opts for an abortion in order that she may be a good mother to the child she already has. For her, the product of conception has an ambiguous status. She relates to the conceptus as a dispensable group of cells and chooses an abortion. This woman will probably not feel guilt since, as far as she is concerned, she has not murdered a baby.

There are as many stories about abortion as there are women who have contemplated or had them, every one unique. The existential condition of each woman's life and her interaction with the fact of her pregnancy is distinct from every other woman faced with the brute fact of pregnancy. What she chooses when she considers her options depends on circumstances unique to her, guided in large part by her present obligations and the moral framework of her life.

One of the main problems with most theories regarding options in regards to abortion is that they depend upon something that simply does not exist in reality - the generic pregnant female. There is no such thing. If we grant that a pregnant woman is a person and as such, a highly complex and unique being, a whole greater than the sum of her parts, a Buberian Thou, then to reduce her to the biological fact of pregnant female of the species is to deny her personhood. She becomes an It, rather than a Thou (Buber, 8-9). And the contradiction involved therein is profound.

If we ask a woman to make a moral choice in an unplanned pregnancy, we must ask her to make it as a person. Biological facts do not have ethical capacities; persons do. In suggesting that a woman disregard the complexities of her life and carry to actuality every potentiality, we have asked her to override her personhood and act as the generic female breeder, rather than as a moral person.

Works Cited

Buber, Martin. 1958. *I and Thou*. Charles Scribner's Sons. New York, New York.