

# Abortion

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The Christian tradition has always taken a generally negative view of abortion, but the moral basis and perceived implications of this negative view have varied greatly. In the early Church abortion and contraception were often seen as broadly equivalent, both involving interference with the natural reproductive process (and an association with sexual immorality which even led some to see contraception as the more sinful of the two). But the tendency to conflate abortion with contraception, and even on similar grounds with male masturbation, declined in the face of the biological discovery of the mother's role as more than just an incubator for the male "seed" – with the recognition of conception as a distinct and crucial event, abortion became generally seen as morally far more serious than contraception, potentially involving threat to an innocent life and therefore, arguably, equivalent to homicide. When seen as homicide, abortion has naturally been subject to an almost total prohibition, the only generally agreed exception being where it is necessary to save the mother's life. Within the Roman Catholic communion, moreover, even this exception has tended to be countenanced only when sanctioned by the doctrine of double effect – where the abortion is not directly intended, but is only a foreseen but unintended consequence of a surgical intervention whose primary intention is to save the mother's life (e.g. the removal of a cancerous uterus or of a fallopian tube containing an ectopic pregnancy).

The perception of abortion as homicide, however, depended also on the question of "ensoulment" – at what point in its development the fetus becomes animated with a rational human soul. For many centuries a distinction between "ensouled" and "unensouled" fetuses was widely accepted in the Western Church, based partly on Aristotelian theory (which maintained that the male fetus was "unformed" until around 40 days after conception, and the female until around 90 days) and partly on a mistranslation in the *Septuagint* of the one passage in the Old Testament which has a clear relevance to abortion, namely *Exodus 21:22-23* (see Dunstan 1988 for historical background, and Wilkinson 1988, pp.232 and 252-8 for a sober assessment of the various other biblical passages that have been thought relevant to the abortion debate). No doubt this sort of "developmental view", which takes the moral gravity of abortion to be at least partly a function of the fetus' stage of development, was also

motivated at least in part by the evident difference between an early and a late miscarriage: when abortion involves the death of a being that is visibly baby-like and of human form it is natural to see this as a matter of considerable gravity, and far removed from the loss of a tiny and unrecognisable embryo.

The Eastern Orthodox church followed Basil in rejecting any developmental view and hence in condemning abortion, even from conception, as involving the destruction of a being made in the image of God. Many Roman Catholics and Reformers took a similar view (Calvin, for example, saw the predestined soul as existing from conception), but in the West the identification of conception as the morally crucial point came to full prominence only in the 19th century, apparently influenced in part by the definition of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception by Pius IX (with the implication that Mary had a sinless soul from the moment of conception). Such an emphasis on conception implies a sharp moral distinction between abortion and contraception, and although the latter continues to be condemned by some (notably within the Roman Catholic tradition) as being contrary to nature, this now tends to be strongly tempered by a generally more positive attitude to sex as an important ingredient of the marital relationship independently of its reproductive role. Few now would claim in general that abortion and contraception are morally on a par, though controversy remains regarding methods of “contraception” (e.g. the intra-uterine device) whose effect is largely to impede implantation and development of the conceptus rather than to prevent conception altogether.

The modern debate on abortion, which has been conducted most freely outside the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic communions, has not surprisingly moved away from questions of biblical and patristic interpretation and theories of ensoulment. Changes in attitudes to sex and broader cultural changes, perhaps most notably the enhanced status of women, increased respect for personal autonomy in moral decisions, and the perceived “right” to reproductive freedom in particular, have also emphasised factors beyond the single issue of the individual fetus’ “moral status” which tended to dominate earlier discussions. Biological and medical discoveries have also played an increasingly important role here – knowledge of the early development of the fetus has made some traditional positions harder to maintain (e.g. in respect of soul individuation where twinning occurs), while the possibility of prenatal diagnosis of serious genetic and other abnormalities has added a new dimension to the debate by linking it strongly with the issue of euthanasia in cases where abortion might be thought to

be in the interests of the fetus itself. This link goes even deeper given the discovery that a high proportion of fertilised ova are spontaneously aborted in early pregnancy, often owing to chromosomal abnormalities. Such wastage seems in some tension with the view that the human soul is created at conception, but it also makes any absolutist prohibition on abortion crucially dependent on the controversial distinction between acts and omissions which has featured prominently in debates on euthanasia – without this distinction, anyone who places an absolute value on human life from conception seems committed to the saving of millions of prenatal lives whose maintenance would be prohibitively costly.

A less overt but probably more pervasive influence of modern biological knowledge has been that of the theory of evolution, implying a continuity within the created order which whilst raising significantly the perceived status of animals (both in Christian and secular thought), has at the same time tended to deflate that of the human fetus by raising questions regarding the traditionally assumed moral precedence of humanity as such. Indeed much of the modern philosophical debate on abortion can be seen as predicated on a desire to avoid pernicious “speciesism”, and accordingly to attribute a special status to the fetus (making its death more morally significant than that of an animal) only if, and when, its intrinsic qualities can justify such an attribution. A number of recent writers (such as Glover 1977, Tooley 1983, and Harris 1985) have accordingly developed theories of “personhood”, arguing that a being’s “moral status” depends not at all on its species but rather on its possession of such qualities as feelings and desires, rationality, self-consciousness, and capacities for action and for relationships. Since a fetus has few if any of these qualities, and none when first conceived, such writers typically see early abortion as morally entirely unproblematic, and late abortion as at worst comparable with the killing of an animal (some have even on similar grounds been prepared to countenance infanticide).

The standard response to such arguments, which though not confined to Christian writers accords well with Christian principles, has been to focus not on the human fetus’ *actual properties* but instead on its *potential properties*, in terms of which it can clearly be distinguished from an animal and correspondingly accorded far greater moral weight. The main difficulty with this response has been in maintaining a clear line between abortion and contraception, given that the human ovum and sperm, prior to conception, apparently already have a similar potential. Attempts to draw such a line have been made (e.g. by Johnstone 1982

and Stone 1987) by appealing to different senses of potentiality, for example on the basis that the conceptus has the potential to *become* a human, whereas the ovum and sperm have only the potential to *produce* one. The biological and metaphysical complexities involved here go well beyond the scope of this article – suffice it to say that despite these complexities the modern philosophical debate has tended to centre around this very traditional issue of whether abortion is morally similar to contraception or the killing of an animal on the one hand, or to the killing of a child or adult on the other. (For a more detailed analysis of this debate, and supporting argument for the suggestions advanced in the next paragraph, see Millican 1992.)

It may be that the only way beyond this extreme polarisation which has always characterised the abortion debate is to recognise that as a moral issue it is neither equivalent to contraception nor to homicide – it is unique, far less straightforward than commonly represented, and not best judged in the all-or-nothing terms implied by the usual language of “rights” and “moral status”. Nowhere else do we find the existence of a determinate living being currently lacking the familiar morally significant characteristics (sentience etc) but with a clear potential to acquire them, and in no other circumstance is one living being so totally dependent on another (its mother) and with so great an impact on her autonomy and life-plans. Viewed in this light, the traditional considerations advanced on both sides of the debate can perhaps be seen not as flatly opposing but as mutually complementary, leading back towards the more moderate developmental approach which characterised so much of the Church’s moral thought prior to the 19th century, but based now on moral considerations rather than on theories of soulhood. The anti-abortionists’ principle of potentiality, for example, naturally lends itself to a developmental rather than an absolutist interpretation, while on the other hand the pro-abortionists’ appeals to personhood by no means exclude other developmental moral considerations – including a typically Christian respect for human life and for the affections and perceptions of family and community – which can serve quite properly to distinguish abortion from the killing of an animal (even quite early in pregnancy) without objectionable “speciesism”. These considerations can make even early abortion seriously regrettable, sometimes tragic, without implying that it has the moral gravity of homicide. Very late abortion, on the other hand, might well on similar grounds appear hard to distinguish morally from the killing of a newborn baby. Most Christians, innocent of philosophical theory and ecclesiastical authority, would probably take such a developmental position, and it is difficult

to see how any reasonably broad consensus can be achieved except in this (admittedly complex and messy) middle ground.

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