

A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ON THE MORALITY OF ABORTION

Chibuzor Franklin Alo*

Abstract

The issue of abortion has over the years confronted mankind as a perennial moral burden. Indeed, it has become one of the most perplexing moral issues for mankind irrespective of culture or race. This is so because it borders on human individual private lives, hence it attracts the attention of most people. And it is therefore an issue people passionately hold to their views and usually handle it their own way irrespective of any orientations that appeal to one. Recently however, abortion question has assumed a new dimension as most people often pay lip service to the morality of abortion and this has led to the enormous cases of abortion worldwide. People's attitude and approach to abortion usually turn out rather to a matter of "conviction". In this case, however, the paper adopts prescriptive method in the examination of the issues and facts that led to these individual convictions on abortion. It is on this note that the paper posits that when one thinks of an abortion as an option or a remedy, there must be some profound reasons underlying it and one may perhaps not have chosen it out of mere pleasure.

Keywords-Abortion, Epistemic, Relativism, Discourse, Morality.

Introduction

It is an incontrovertible fact that of all the moral issues, the most pressing issue that often needs urgent, and persistent attention is abortion. This is because it involves the taking away of life. And since it involves life, a lot of pertinent questions are raised, either to reasonably justify abortion as morally right or to reject it as morally impermissible act. According to Samuel Waje, "in the fifty-four mainly western countries where abortions are legal, there were between 26 and 31 million legal abortions in 1987. In the 97 countries where abortion is illegal, there were between 10 and 22 million abortions" (330). He further observed that in Africa, only Cape Verde, South Africa and Tunisia allow legal abortions. However, it is estimated that in Africa alone more than 4 million women and girls undergo unsafe abortions annually with 34,000 of them dying as a result. In fact, 44 per cent of all the world's deaths from unsafe abortions occur in Africa. (330). This unarguably quickly draws the attention of most people to the discourses, issues and the facts surrounding abortion in our society.

In this work, however, we shall not be discussing issues of legalizing abortion or the unsafe abortions but we will be concentrating on the ethical questions and the facts as it relates to abortion.

Brief Definition of Abortion

Abortion could be seen as the deliberate removal of the unborn (zygote, foetus or a baby) from the womb and thereby causing it to die (Ocheng 61). In other words, "abortion is the termination of the non-viable foetus from a mother's womb by intentional human intervention. This could be done by destroying the foetus in the womb or causing the death of the foetus outside the womb (Ben Okwu 22).

Broadly speaking, it is an intentional removal of a foetus or a potential baby based sometimes on the need and circumstances of the person. The perennial ethical question is whether carrying out abortion could be morally wrong or whether there are exceptional cases when abortion can be reasonably and morally justified. Generally, there are three major

contrasting but relevant views about abortion namely; the conservative view, the liberal view and the feminist view.

Feminist View

According to some feminist, women have the absolute right over their bodies; and as such, they have the right to use their bodies in any way they want hence, they should not be dictated to what they want to do with their bodies by anyone else. So, if a woman for instance, finds herself pregnant and decided that she is not willing to have a baby, she should be free to abort it without any legal or perhaps moral restrictions. For morality according to them is culturally imposed. The pro-abortionist who often designates themselves as pro-choice” or pro-life, places serious emphasis on the right of the mother to decide whether she wants to have a baby or not. This reveals the belief of some feminist that the right to privacy is of course paramount. It is however their strong belief that unwanted baby should never be born. In any case, no woman should be forced to have a child against her will. These pro-choice advocates of abortion often argue that since the zygote’s genes are activated by the mother, it does not have an independent existence of its own. For in the initial stages of the cell division, it does not rely upon its own genes, but rather upon the messenger ribonucleic acid (MRNA) from the mother’s ovum, and that is what directs the cell through its development from the four cell to eight-cell-stage. Hence it is argued that the mother should be able to choose if she would like the zygote in existence or not. (Norman 133).

Furthermore, another strong reason often given by these groups of feminist is that the foetus or the baby is indeed, an extension of the mother’s body, and of course, the mother has the right to control her own body, likewise her reproductive system. However, since the baby is considered as circumstantial intruder” on the mother’s physical body, she therefore has the right to abort it. For instance, a person has a right to evacuate or evict an intruder or unwanted guest from taking over one’s home. Again, these sets of feminist usually maintained that woman’s consent to sex is not therefore a consent to pregnancy. According to Norman, “just as the rape should be stopped immediately in order not to violate the rights and liberty of the individual, so, should the pregnancy be stopped immediately in order not to violate the rights and liberty of the woman who has been forced into pregnancy against her will” (135.) It is true that a mother has the right to control her own body under normal circumstances. But when she is carrying another human being within her body there is a conflict of two rights. The baby’s right to live conflicting with the mother’s right to control her own body. In this case, the right to life takes precedent over the right to control one’s body.

But then, granted that you have right to decide what happens in and to your body, but a person’s right to life outweighs your rights to decide what happens to your body. But at the centre of this, is the very but relevant question of “personhood”. For instance, at what stage does a foetus becomes a person, from ovulation to conception or at adulthood? Does the foetus or the unborn baby possess the necessary qualities of rationality, adaptability and communication to be classified as a person? Or better still, does the foetus possess the traits of self-consciousness, memory, self-capacity and self-awareness or rationality? This suggests that since foetus does not possess these traits, it is therefore not a person and since only the person have a right to life, the foetus does not logically have a moral right to life. But those who may perhaps support this view will conceptualize a foetus as a mere branch of cells or a bit of tissue.

However, pro-life agrees that foetus has already become a person well before birth. “In its life, it begins to acquire characteristics, and by the tenth week, for example, it already has a face, arms and legs, fingers and toes, it has integral organs, and brain activity detectable” (Jarvis 241). For the opponents of abortion, they obviously conclude that abortion is morally

impermissible. But the proponents of the pro-choice, often point out that, although foetal development is a continuous process, the bare genetic bases present at conception is not enough to constitute a person at that point. In this early stage, the cells are “totipotent” – the type of cell that is found in human body which has the potential to develop into any other cells found in the human body. It may therefore, for example, become skin cells, or heart cells or many other types of cells. “There is no structure or differentiation at this point, nothing that resembles a person at this initial form. There is not even an individual there” (Barbara 101).

The Conservative View

This view holds that irrespective of any circumstances, abortion is morally wrong. It specifically holds that human being exists right from the moment of conception. They hinged their arguments on the ground that it is wrong to kill an innocent human being, and a human foetus is such a being, it follows therefore that it is wrong to abort, given that to abort is to kill a foetus which is a potential person. This view suggests to saying that the zygote is a living substance and a unified being which has within itself the capacity to be acted upon and is directed toward its final cause. The conservatives believe that all individual human beings rely on the genetic structure of other beings for sustenance, even when they consume food, which is one of the necessities of life. The foetus begins as a potential human being and gradually becomes fully human being. Yet even as a potential human being, the foetus has more value than mere things or even animals.

This view is closely related to the Aristotle’s potentiality to actuality. According to Omeregbe, “these are two elements inherent in all things. Potentiality is the inherent possibility to change, to develop, while actuality is what a thing becomes at the end of the process of change or development. For example an embryo in the womb has the potentiality to change and develop into a foetus, a baby, a child and adolescent, and eventually an adult. Since it has within itself the potentiality to become an adult, it can be said to be a potential adult, or adult in potency” (142). The conservative point of view may be regarded as an arcane explanation which occurs when an argument proposes an explanation that appeals to casual mechanisms that are not currently or generally accepted (Uduma 282). It could perhaps be seen as the fallacy of black and white thinking which arises when a statement leaps from the falsity of one position to the truth of its contrary, without considering qualifications, middle ground, compromises or alternative positions.

The Liberal View

The cardinal point of the liberal view is their quest to unfold what actually constitutes a human being. To be human, they argued is simply to be alive. It does not matter whether the human being has existed for a quite number of donkey years or not. Being a person, simply means possessing self-consciousness, have a minimum degree of reasonableness, have self-motivated activity, and have the capacity to communicate and the presence of self-concepts and self-awareness. So, “Since a zygote or foetus does not possess these traits, it is not a person, and since only person has the right to life, the foetus does not therefore have a moral right to life” (Ocheng 62). This view may also be challenged by the case where aphasia has erased adult memory; more fundamentally, the foetus ought to be treated as an uninformed human being that has the potentiality of being conscious and rational.

The Legal View

The legal perspective on abortion is also viewed considering its strategic importance in the abortion debate, for instance, should abortion be legal under any circumstance, legal only

under certain and exceptional circumstances or illegal in all circumstances? In this case, opinion still varies among the legal luminaries. However, the U.S supreme court seems to have shown little guide especially in the case between Roe and Wade in 1973. Prior to Roe Vs Wade judgment in USA, About 30 states prohibited abortion without exception while 16 states banned abortion except in certain special circumstances, for instance, rape, incest, health threat to mother. In January 22, 1973, the Supreme Court in a landmark judgment between Roe and Wade ruled that the issue of abortion and abortion rights falls under the right to privacy. The court found that a mother had a right to abortion until viability, a point to be determined by the abortion doctor. After viability a woman can only obtain an abortion for health reasons, which the court defined broadly to include psychological well-being.

The central issue in the case was whether human life or personhood begins at conception, birth or even in between. The court declined to make an attempt at resolving this issue nothing that we need not resolve the difficult question of when life begins. When those trained in the respective disciplines of medicine, philosophy, and theology are unable to arrive at any consensus, the judiciary at this point in the development of man's knowledge, is not in a position to speculate as to the answer". Instead, it points out that historically, under English and America common law, The unborn have never been recognized as person in the whole sense" and thus, the foetuses are not legally entitled to the protection afforded by the right to life, specifically enumerated in the fourth amendment.

Abortion Risks

- In the course of carrying out an abortion there may be damages in the reproductive organ of a would-be-mother, and such may ruin her chances of getting children in life and this may leave her to be depressed throughout her life time.
- There is a high risk of bacterial infections from the cervix which may enter uterus and cause Infection in the pelvic region.
- Blood clots that often produce severe cramping can also occur.
- Abortion can lead to abnormal, absent or painful menstruation cycles and this may lead to future miscarriage and infertility.
- Abortion usually induces emotional reaction such as feeling of grief, anger, and preoccupation with guilty of thought of ever getting babies again, nightmares, sexual dysfunction, and termination of relationship, emotional coldness, increased alcohol consumption and drug abuse.
- Abortion may also lead to virginal bleeding especially during early pregnancy and other complications such as retained placenta after delivery.
- Abortion may equally lead to haemorrhage-heavy bleeding hence this might lead to untimely death.

Claimed Benefits of Abortion

- Promising research has shown that tissues from aborted foetuses might be used to relieve the symptoms of some persons suffering from Parkinson disease – incurable neurological condition.

- Recent development in cloning technology have shown possibility from taking stem cells from the embryo at the blastocyst Stage and programming them to produce organ such as kidney transplant (Barbara 98.)
- Abortion prevents child abuse and neglect, for example, unwanted pregnancies leads to unwanted children, hence unwanted children become abused children.
- Abortion though socially frowned at, saves unmarried mother from shame, damage to her reputation, and depression which often leads to silent and untimely death
- Abortion may serve as a means of population control especially now that the world population is growing at an alarming rate. Hence, abortion may enhance high per capital income which in turn encourages long life span.

The Epistemic Relativism of Morality of Abortion

The oxford dictionary of philosophy conceived “epistemic relativism as the thesis that what may be a proper claim to know something when made by one group or culture may be otherwise when made by a different group or culture. In other cases, it can be highly contentions, as when there are claims made for specific cultural ways of knowing things”(118). But then, “there is no objectivity in what constitutes our cognitive inquiries. For instance, what are the basic criteria to determine knowledge? How can we have certain knowledge? These questions have caused division among philosophers. Some philosophers hold that knowledge acquisition is impossible, that all we have are opinions of how things appear to us and what we think them to be. Yet, some others argue that some form of knowledge is possible, and that we can indeed have certain knowledge about reality”. (Ozumba 16)

So, the morality of Abortion is closely related to this epistemic thesis. Abortion like other ethical relativism denies that there is a single moral standard which is applicable to all human beings at all times. In other words, relativism denies the universal application of moral principles. It is their claims that there is not merely one moral laws, codes and standards, but rather, there are multiplicities of moral laws, codes, and standards. Hence, it is better for all, human beings to develop mature conscience which would guide them properly and adequately in moral decision making such as abortion.

The corollary of this view is that the individual is the parameter for knowing the right and wrong. The rightness and Wrongness of abortion are dependent on the feeling, thinking, situation and the state of mind of the agent. For example, if the agent approves abortion as right, then it is right. If on the other hands he deprecates it, it is wrong. Here, there is no universal rule that should apply in the case of abortion, only individual rule based on his situation should be advocated. This is because abortion often confronts people at the limit points in their lives, that is, at a cross-road where they would not know whether to go right or to the left. Such limit situations show how difficult moral decision making is. So, the agent should determine what is true and good for such situation. This view is against any imposition of truth, rationality, or any set of absolutes. This means that epistemic relativism is against moral universals, and the arbitrary imposition of any singular systematic point of view. After all, it is man that determines what is true and good for himself.

Philosophical Evaluation

We should note that feminism is such a western ideology, however, History abounds that certain western ideologies were hurriedly accepted in error as paradigm. The euphoria of western liberal feminist agenda openly overturns the whole ontological balance. But nature unarguably laid the rubrics and drew the distinctions. But then, we should also note that all things are in the state of constant flux and this change of reality allows for a newer interpretations, hence the argument of the feminist still stands. It is a fact that brain activity can be detected between the sixth and eight weeks of fetal development. And since we usually use the cessation of brain function as a determinant of death, why should we not use the initial formation or beginning of brain functions as the beginning of human life? One may quickly point out that brain activity develops gradually and we cannot single out anyone in the course of its development as unique. It is therefore difficult to determine the type of brain function or perhaps as observes by Barbra “At sixth to eight weeks the brain is quite simple, only much later do those parts develop that are the basis of conscious function. At earlier stages, the brain is arguable not that different from other animal brains both in structure and function” (101).

Quickening refers to the kicks or the movements of the foetus in the womb. Usually, the pregnant woman feels the kicks within the fourth month of fetal development. At this stage, it is reasonable to consider this stage as the beginning of new person’s life because it would now be moving about on its own. But critics might raise a fundamental issue here namely that other animals and even plants normally move on their own, and this does not in any way give them special moral status or right to life. On a look at the Biblical views, one would argue that there are several reasons for not subscribing to breath as the point of the life or the beginning of human life. The Bible is very clear in maintaining the fact that human life continue to exist in another realm even after one stops breathing (Phi. 1:23, 2Cor. 5:6-8, and Rev. 6:9). The conservatives, however, needs not to condemn abortion totally. It could allow the removal of cancerous womb and ruptured ectopic pregnancy since there is usually the need to save the life of the mother. In this case, the foetus itself has a little time of survival unless abortion is performed.

The arguments on the both sides of abortion are weighty and cannot be dismissed by wave of hand. For instance, do we have the moral right to terminate an entity’s future especially when the future in question has the potentiality of attaining” personhood “in near future? This is a strong question that cannot easily be over looked, but then “how important’ is this “potential” taking into cognizance the cases of anencephaly – that is, without a developed upper brain and thus no chance of consciousness or thought, in fact, such an infant does not usually live for long. Or the cases of womb cancer, or a case where woman is believed to be pregnant only to deliver different thing entirely or a permanent vegetative state or perhaps Duchene muscular dystrophy – an inheritance that causes muscular weakness and mental retardation and the infant with the disease dies within first 24months of birth through respiratory failure.

Conclusion

Though, abortion is subjectively considered as unjust killing but then, no person is morally compelled to make a huge sacrifice to sustain the life of another who has no right to even demand for such right. In any case, abortion is morally permissible and impermissible depending on the circumstances, hence, the extreme view that regard abortion as impermissible even to save the life of the mother should be discouraged. When one’s life seems threatened as in the case of the mother, she has the right to preserve it on self-defence basis. After all, abortion is a case that involves two people, the one whose life is threatened and one who threatens it and both are innocent. For this reason, however, I think the third party cannot intervene but the

person been threatened. Moreover, law should not also be used to reinforce morality, because any attempt to use law to reinforce morality often leads to uncontrollable disastrous consequences and hardly reduces the wrong doing.

***Franklin Chibuzor Alo**

Department Of Philosophy

Federal University Wukari

Taraba State

Email: chibuzorfrank208@gmail.com

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