

## Perspectives on Abortion: Pro-Choice, Pro-Life, and What Lies in between

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### Abstract

The debate over abortion rights is a recent one when compared to contraception practices and abortion itself. Ancient and medieval civilizations are known for utilizing and elaborating on preconception and post conception methods. Although the theme is rather archaic, pro-choice and pro-life partisans offer opinions that are not often based on research, but rather based on emotions. This article highlights (a) the historical perspectives on abortion; (b) pro-life perspectives; (c) moral relativism; (d) the unborn as moral subject; (e) philosophical considerations; (f) the church's views on abortion; (g) pro-choice perspectives; (h) abortion and its relationship with crime; (i) nonsensical pregnancy; (j) the politics of abortion; and (k) the moderate perspectives on abortion.

**Keywords:** Abortion, pro-life, pro-choice, moral, pregnancy, birth control, family planning

### Perspectives on Abortion

The control of fertility is a practice addressed by humans since ancient times. There are records related to preconception and post conception practices throughout ancient, medieval, and present times (McFarlane & Meier, 2001). In Egypt, archeologists found papyrus leaves with recipes instructing women to use certain herbs and natural substances to prevent contraception; even removal of the ovaries was already practiced by ancient Egyptians; however, this practice was restricted to rich and powerful men. Ancient Hebrews practiced the oldest known method of contraception defined as *coitus interruptus*. Around 500 A. D. ancient Jewish scholars were among the first group to question if the fetus was considered as having the same rights as a person. In this instance, it was decided that while the fetus was inside a woman, it was part of the woman, and as soon as the child was born, it had the same rights as any person (McFarlane & Meier, 2001).

The Greeks learned with the Egyptians how to manipulate plants that were used as contraceptive or abortifacients. Although the Greeks became famous for their pharmaceutical and contraceptive practices, scholars such as Aristotle and Plato debated the lack of participation of the state in limiting women to a certain number of children, and if they passed such a number, then an abortion should be performed as soon as possible (McFarlane & Meier, 2001). The use of herbs and plants as contraceptives was passed from the Greeks to the Romans. The Romans had the same beliefs as the ancient Jews; therefore, the child had all of a person's rights after birth, and no rights while inside the mother. Notwithstanding, Jews and Romans had dichotomous views towards abortion and

infanticide. Ancient Jews rarely used abortion or infanticide; whereas Romans practiced both, but more so infanticide.

During the A. D. 400s, St. Augustine condemned the use of contraception; however, it was unclear if such reprimand was valid only for people who did not want to have children, or also for people that already had children and wanted to limit the numbers of offspring.

Nevertheless, issues regarding contraceptives and abortion were dealt with according to location.

During medieval times, Western Europeans were undoubtedly efficacious with birth control accomplishments; nonetheless, Europe lost one third of its population during the plague, and the feudal nobles and the church needed laborers to work the land. It is possible that St. Augustine's condemnation of contraception might have spread strongly by the Catholic Church at this time, because the church owned most of Europe's soil (McFarlane & Meier, 2001). The use of condoms is historically and openly mentioned during the 1700s, where they used to be made of animal membranes and were commercialized in London. During the same time, Reverend Thomas Malthus published work about the indiscriminate population growth and its effects on poverty and food scarcity. Although Malthus was against birth control, his work became known worldwide and actually came to influence the use of contraception.

Pregnancy has a different significance depending on (a) a woman's age; (b) the locale where she lives; (c) her socioeconomic status; (d) cultural background; and (e) period in time (Solinger, 2005). For instance, a very young woman might decide she is not prepared to have a child; whereas, an older woman who has finished school and has a secure job and income might decide otherwise. Women from Western cultures are more focused on their careers before planning on raising a family; whereas, women from Eastern cultures are raised to be focused on their families. During the 1960s Western feminist waves opened doors for abortion rights. Wide access to contraceptive resources was highly publicized; and women represented about half of medical students (Martinelli-Fernandez, Baker-Sperry, & McIlvaine-Newsad, 2009).

In America, specifically, the ethical perspectives on abortion became highly publicized after the 1973 case of *Roe v. Wade*, where Jane Roe affirmed to have been raped by a gang and became pregnant. The state of Texas only accepted abortions to be performed if the woman's life is threatened by the pregnancy (Beckwith, 2007). According to Beckwith (2007), not only did Roe win her lawsuit against the state of Texas, but she also changed the current law of the United States; where only a few states obstruct a woman from obtaining an abortion whenever she feels necessary. About 20 states in the United States have rigorous homicide laws in regards to the fetuses as victims at any prenatal stage; whereas, the other 31 states either allow abortion up to a certain prenatal stage, or do not recognize fetuses as victims. New York is the only state with conflicting abortion laws (Alters, 2006).

According to 2001 statistics from the United States Abortion Surveillance, a governmentally sponsored agency, the demographics of the women seeking an abortion are as follows: the majority of the women seeking abortion (33.6%) are between twenty and twenty-four years old; 54.1% of the abortions were from White women, while 35.7% were African American women. Unmarried women comprised 81.6% of the women who had an abortion. Perhaps the most important piece of information, regards to the reasons why women had an abortion; first, the women stated that a baby would conflict with their school, work, or other obligations; second, was an issue of affordability; and third, the women stated having problems with the partner or not actually having a partner to give support (Alters, 2006).

## **Pro-Life Perspectives**

There are two main approaches to pro-life: one of moral perspectives and the second of religious perspectives; and although they sometimes intertwine, for this discussion, both views will be treated separately. The religious perspective has very little to be debated considering it embraces the belief in a

supernatural almighty entity; and there is, in fact, very little literature discussing the logics of religion. Nonetheless, there is abundant literature covering the moral and ethical rhetoric related to abortion. Pro-life authors often compare the views of its opposition as very individualistic and centered on personal preferences; comparing the choice of choosing vanilla ice cream or chocolate ice cream with having or not having an abortion (Beckwith, 2007).

Critics of abortion attack the fact that despite cultural background, abortion is wrong just as killing is wrong and stealing is wrong in any society, regardless of cultural values.

### **Moral Relativism**

Some scholars defend relativism, stating that the lack of moral norms is based on the fact that individuals have dichotomous perspectives of values. However, pro-life advocates reply by stating that, first, because people disagree on a matter, that does not mean a lack of truth to the matter; second, if the relativist agrees that there is no truth, than it invalidates itself (because there is no truth, than relativism cannot be correct; or valid); and finally, the overrating of disagreement, considering most people in the world have a common understanding of what appears agreeable or disagreeable (Beckwith, 2007).

### **The Unborn as Moral Subject**

There are heated debates among scholars whether the unborn entity should be given full rights and moral status; although both, pro-life and pro-choice agree that a fetus is a human being belonging to Homo Sapiens species, pro-choice supporters argue that the unborn is not intrinsically valuable because of a lack of ability to reason and self-awareness (Beckwith, 2007). It appears as a reasonable comparison that there are many cases of retardation in adults where a lack of self awareness or ability to reason is present as well; however, there is no such law favoring the termination of the mentally handicapped.

### **Philosophical Considerations**

The realm of the debate on abortion appears to be deeply rooted in a philosophical puzzle, and the puzzle consists of three basic sets of questions (Tooley, Wolf-Devine, Devine, & Jaggar, 2009):

1. Do embryos have a moral value? If they do, what is it? Are they entitled to human rights?
2. What makes abortion ethically permissible?
3. How should a society organize itself towards limiting, facilitating, or banning abortion?

It is reasonable to agree that if an unborn is a human, the unborn is entitled to rights; and if a human is entitled to rights, it must have moral values. This statement appears to make abortion unethical from the standpoint that the unborn entity is being deprived from the right of choosing to live, considering someone else is making that choice; and, therefore, society should ban the practice of abortion (Boonin, 2003).

### **Church's Views on Abortion**

Although the Catholic Church and the Christian church might have a few conflicting ideas, both are basically against abortion at any circumstance; however, the church has shifted from St. Augustine's self proclaimed disapproval of contraception, to a rather philosophical angle, focused on ethical belief, morality and values. The argumentation of the church nowadays is based on the fact that all life is sacred and abortion terminates life; therefore, this idea must be rejected.

## **Pro-Choice Perspectives**

To be an advocate of pro-choice initiatives raises serious ethical, moral, and philosophical questions. Since the beginning of time, women were given the title of caregivers and nurturers; entrusted with the welfare of the offspring and organization of the home. Nowadays, a trend has developed in Westernized countries especially; where women decide to do whatever they feel like instead of following the old housewife stereotype. Such sudden change in human behavior must have its consequences, considering the role animals have been playing since the first animals arrived. One of the most visible consequences of the impact of a new trend for women's behavior relates to the lack of attention to the children because their mothers are at work. In many occasions, the lack of attachment leads children to lack of self-esteem, lack of self-confidence, anger problems, and other attention deficit behavioral issues. Aside from mentally related issues, there are physical issues that could occur for the lack of maternal vigilance; such as child battery, child sexual molestation, verbal abuse, lack of awareness of dangerous situations and so forth. Notwithstanding, there are greater chances that children might not foresee a promising future because of a lack of parental interest or because of a lack of parental time with the child; or both. Pro-choice advocates tend to focus greater attention on parents who do not want to have a child considering the future implications of having an unwanted child.

## **Crime and Abortion Relationship**

During the 1960s, communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu from Romania decided that all children belonged to society and, therefore, abortions was forbidden unless the woman already had reached her quota of four children. The dictator's efforts in doubling the population were fruitful within one year of the abortion ban; and by the time Ceaușescu's regimen fell, the children were testing low in school, people were living miserably, and the youngsters had a great tendency to become criminals. As ironic as it may sound, the youth between 13 and 20 years of age were the ones to go out on the streets to protest against the dictator; this incident might have never happened if he had not banned abortion (Levitt & Dubner, 2005).

According to Levitt and Dubner (2005), there was a substantial drop in criminality in the United States during the 1990s, which was covered in a preposterous way by the media; and the reasoning of this rather bizarre event was played as a guessing game instead of been studied. Some suggested innovative police strategies were effective, other groups believed the prisons were more reliable; and some were sure that the stronger economy was of effect. Nonetheless, researchers realized that the result of 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court ruling triggered, in fact, the trend in low criminality, considering it gave women the choice of not having a child when they did not want the child.

## **Nonsensical Pregnancy**

Pro-life and pro-choice partisans agree, for obvious reasons, that women in certain situations should not conceive children; nonetheless, they do. It is easy to understand how certain kinds of situations would lead to a great chance of misfortune in the lives of children and, consequently, their mothers. In 1992, a study found 17% of pregnant teenagers tested positive for drug and alcohol use (Farber, 2003); another study from National Household Survey on Drug Abuse showed that 12% of pregnant women between 26 and 44 years of age smoked. Aside from the fact that drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes affect the unborn child's health; teenagers who engage in binge drinking and drug use are more likely to have unprotected sex and become pregnant. Often, these babies are born with physical deformation, mental problems, respiratory problems, HIV, among others. In addition to health-related issues, there are mental abuse issues (Jacob, 2006). When an adult, either a woman or a man, states that they are not ready or interested in having a child, it might have a disproportionate future implication. There are several cases of depression, drug and alcohol abuse, self-mutilation, psychosis, and finally suicide,

among people who know they were unwanted babies. Several parents even say that openly to their children, causing disproportional trauma and an eternal feeling of not belonging and poor self-esteem.

### **Philosophical Considerations**

The same questions utilized to debate pro-life's philosophical considerations will be utilized to debate pro-choice's philosophical considerations; seeing that ethical behavior is of the essence (Tooley, Wolf-Devine, Devine, & Jaggar, 2009):

1. Do embryos have a moral value? If they do, what is it? Are they entitled to human rights?
2. What makes abortion ethically permissible?
3. How should a society organize itself towards limiting, facilitating, or banning abortion?

To answer the first question in a pro-choice perspective is to say, without entering deep philosophical considerations proposed by Boonin (2003), that the fetus is not yet a person and does not have a moral value yet. Boonin proposed that if a fetus is considered a person, then a zygote or a woman's egg is a person as well; and therefore are entitled to human rights. According to the ideology of pro-choice followers, what makes abortion ethically permissible is the fact that (a) the mother does not want the child; (b) the father does not want the child; (c) the mother will possibly die from giving birth; (d) the pregnancy is the result of rape. The fact that the mother does not want the child could embrace several reasons: (a) the mother knows the child will be born with physical or mental abnormalities; (b) the mother is a drug or alcohol abuser; (c) the mother knows she is not financially fit to take care of the child; (d) the mother knows her relationship with the father of the child will not last, and she feels insecure; or (e) for no specific reason, she does not want the child. As far as facilitating, limiting, or regulating abortion, it does not appear that pro-choice followers defend an irresponsible and indiscriminate use of abortifacients; but rather, a more efficient use of reasoning by men and women generally speaking.

### **Politics of Abortion**

Abortion has deep political roots for rather obvious reasons; liberals are essentially in favor of pro-choice ideology, and conservatives are in favor of pro-life ideas. Nonetheless, there are tremendous implications from both parties to attract their opposition voters through abortion debate. Liberals are characterized by the belief that freedom should be exercised by the individual; whereas, conservatives believe freedom should be exercised by institutions, such as communities, church, businesses, and families (Saletan, 2003). According to this prescient, liberals appealed to voters by portraying "abortion restrictions as an encroachment by big government on tradition, family, and property" (Saletan, 2003, p.2). Conservatives, on the other hand, appeal to morality and to religion to distinguish two classes of people: the women who indulged in sex willingly and the women who favored family values.

Notwithstanding, certain political aspects related to abortion should be considered other than the right to be born. Even though the government of the United States offers a substantial amount of tax-payer welfare funding to women who cannot provide for their children, it is clear that there are a considerable number of families who take advantage of the situation to find financial comfort and avoid looking too hard for work. Such situation will not be found in Brazil, for instance, which such a financial comfort is not offered; nonetheless, the families find a way to raise their children. Additionally, pro-choice supporters agree that it is rather ethical to promote the honorable and honest truth that a parent is not able to provide decent quality of living to a human being and foster "exercising responsible choices in the interests of upholding the principles of responsible parenthood, citizenry, and political stewardship" (Johnstone, 2008, p. 21). Furthermore, poor women and minorities often procure illegal abortion clinics or try to induce abortion themselves, which many times cause their own death (Schoen, 2005).

## **Moderate Perspectives**

The supporters of a moderate perspective on abortion are not conservative nor liberals; and according to Card (2006), face the following questions: (a) how far within the pregnancy is abortion acceptable? (b) What are morally justifiable reasons for an abortion? The majority of moderate supporters believe that abortion is justifiable if the (a) pregnant woman was victim of rape or incest; (b) the pregnancy is life threatening to the woman; and (c) doctors concluded that severe and long-lasting physical damage will occur to the pregnant woman.

Some others suggest that most people have a tendency to be two-faced on matters related to abortion, simply because they fear to be judged and excluded from their groups (Cannold, 2000); in these cases, people who are part of church or pro-life oriented groups could have been faced with abortion issues within their families or could have had an abortion themselves. Others might have been close to someone who was an actual victim of rape or incest, or even known a woman who could have died giving birth. In any case, people seem to change their minds when a painful decision such as an abortion comes closer to home.

## **Birth Control, Sexual Counseling and Family Planning**

Although certain issues appear to be outdated, they continue to haunt human race in the form of taboos. The issues of pro-life and pro-choice argumentation appears to take more time and energy politically speaking, than actual concern of policy-makers in encouraging (a) the youth to use contraceptives, (b) sexual counseling for young women, (c) enforced sexual education at the schools since middle school until high school, (d) family planning at schools as part of sexual education, and (e) policies that encourage abortion as early as possible; before the unborn develop human traits (Peach, 2005).

## **Conclusions**

To conclude this paper requires going back to the beginning of times, when humans were already practicing contraception and even abortion: Does it show an inherent tendency for people to remain exercising such practices? It does appear that there is a tendency, in fact. While working on this paper, it was clearly easier to find literature in favor of abortion than otherwise; perhaps this is another way to show a clear tendency of how people prefer to use honesty and clarity in regards to what real life brings to most people around the world. I find it very difficult to believe that most adults do not know one single person that had a provoked abortion. Such occurrences make the issue closer to home and show a rather sympathetic perspective from people.

What is forgotten by extremist pro-life partisans is that once a person is born, there is conscience, and conscience could bring good and evil feelings. When a person is conscious of what a miserable life he or she lives, that feeling is poisonous to human mental health, and in extreme situations, could very well be harmful to a happy and mentally healthy human being; such harm could come in the form of rape, physical abuse, mental abuse, and even murder. To a conscientious human, it is painful to live in a world where the majority of the population lives under poverty line. According to [globalissues.org](http://globalissues.org), a website dedicated to informing the public on worldwide facts and issues, 80% of the world population lives on less than \$10 dollars a day. Considering the obvious fact that these people are poor, what should be pondered is: How are they supposed to support a family? I find it inhumane to place children in the world and torture them with lack of food, lack of respect, verbal abuse, and physical abuse. It is common for parents of poor families to become frustrated by not having the means to support a family and unleashing their frustration on the children.

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