“The Ethics of Abortion”
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THE ETHICS OF ABORTION

• One of the most lively/controversial issues within the ethics of human reproduction

• Necessarily discussed within legal, religious and socio-cultural parameters

• Three main positions: extreme anti-abortion, extreme pro-life, mid-way between the extremes
TOWARDS CONCEPTUAL CLARITY

• Ethics is a derivative or subset of morality;
• Laws, customs, ethos, taboos etc. are others
• Morality generally is concerned with good/bad, right/wrong in human actions or behaviour
• The main regulatory faculty/instrument for morality is reason or rationality – a defining attribute of human beings
• Its necessary conditions are sociality and freedom – also defining attributes of humans
ETHICS

- Ethics refers to the actively discussed aspects of morality and the set of principles that can be conceived to regulate and by reference to which such discussion is carried out.
- Ethics is a forensic science, whereas morality tends towards the latent.
- Moral discourse, articulate moral reasoning, argumentation/debate, belong in the domain of ethics.
- Morality is basically the same for all humans everywhere at all times; ethics is culture-tinted and coloured by both place and time.
ETHICS AND MORALITY

• Morality can be conceived *sub specie aeternitati*
• Ethics is necessarily subject to context, perspective, circumstance and constraining human limitations
• Hence: situation ethics, utilitarian ethics, deontological ethics, medical research ethics, feminist ethics, Nso’ ethics etc.
• Ethics, ethical principles and rules, need constantly to be discussed, debated, reviewed/reformulated, to rid them of purely spatio-temporal and contingent elements
• This is an unending task, because every human situation at all times and places has its own ego-centric predicaments

REPRODUCTION

- Reproduction is absolutely essential to the survival of all living forms
- Human beings are the apex of all biological life, bearing on themselves non-reciprocal moral responsibility for the rest of living species
- Human reproduction is therefore the centre-piece of bioethical concern
- Human responsibility justifies intervention in nature but not every intervention is justifiable
- Human intervention in the domain of reproduction therefore needs to be calculated, measured and justifiable

ABORTION

• One of the most controversial issues in the ethics of human reproduction
• Complicated by the existence of divergent ethical convictions, cultural practices, religious dogmas, economic motives and akrasia or backsliding
• At the centre of the bioethics of abortion is the question of the moral status of a human conceptus or embryo
• Developmental nomenclature: blastocyst>zygote>embryo>fetus>baby
ABORTION DEBATE

• What is abortion?
• Termination of a pregnancy either spontaneously/accidentally or by deliberate/purposeful intervention, before the embryo/foetus reaches ‘term’/viability
• Accidental abortion falls outside the realm of morality and is not ethically significant, because it is devoid of purposive intentionality and voluntariness
• It ‘happens’ rather than is ‘done’ and morality and ethics are not concerned with happenings but rather with purposive actions
• The happen/done dichotomy represents two realms: the ‘is’ requiring causal explanation, and the ‘ought’ requiring justification
DELIBERATE ABORTION

• When does a foetus attain term?
• 28 weeks after conception? 16 weeks after conception?
• Improvements in medical techniques and facilities are capable of continuously and indefinitely lowering the age of foetal survival outside of the womb
• Does viability status have anything to do with moral status?
DELIBERATE ABORTION

• May be therapeutic or non-therapeutic
• Therapeutic when performed in the interest of maternal life or health
• Most people would unhesitatingly support therapeutic abortion
• Some, however, oppose it as ‘foeticide’, co-terminus with murder

NON-THERAPEUTIC ABORTION

• Ethically highly controversial
• Three distinct positions:
  • (1) the foetus is part and parcel of the pregnant woman’s body over which she can exercise her autonomy and every woman has a right to abortion;
  • (2) the foetus possesses an absolute and inalienable right to life
  • (3) the foetus possesses a right to life but, under certain circumstances, non-therapeutic abortion is justifiable
CONCLUSION

• Rational reflection and deliberation are indispensable in facing ethical dilemmas, quandaries and perplexities and in reaching ethically justifiable decisions

• Categorization of humans using any criteria can have no bearing on moral status although it may have implications for moral responsibility

• A human being is a human being is a human being simply by being a human being
