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When is Abortion Permissible?
An analysis of morally justified abortion according to traditional Christian values

By Selina Wang

Background

Is an abortion always a morally unjustifiable act of evil, or are there situations that make some abortions more justifiable than others? What are the effects of extenuating circumstances, and to what extent does the environment impact the morality of decisions related to abortion? In examining these questions based on literature published by traditional bioethicists such as Charles Camosy and others, research demonstrates that the Catholic Church provides no clear answer. In some situations, the pregnancy could be due to negligence, whereas in other situations, the pregnancy resulted from rape. Perhaps the most compelling cases are those involving the life or death of the mother. Even if the termination of a fetus is justifiable, some abortive measures involve the direct objective of killing the fetus, while other measures involve indirect killing. Due to the wide range of possibilities, it is no wonder that Christian Bioethicists find it difficult to come up with a definite answer for exactly when abortion is morally justifiable.

Christian Bioethical Analysis

Catholic bioethicists would have different responses to the situations posed:

1) In cases of rape, a mother's natural duty to the fetus comes under question because the pregnancy was imposed by force. Christian bioethicists have yet to come to a distinct answer, so many default to stating that they believe in addressing such issues on a case-by-case basis.
2) Because the mother's life is in danger, this situation is an example of vital conflicts. The vitality of the mother is in direct conflict with the vitality of the fetus. Camosy argues that the fetus, though still formally innocent, poses as a material threat to the mother, and so therefore an abortion is justifiable.
3) Clearly, the embryo poses a mortal threat to the mother, making this a case of vital conflict. Although it may be morally justifiable to pursue an abortion, the methodology is under question. With the partial removal of the fallopian tube, the direct object is not aborting the baby; with taking methotrexate, the moral object is. Therefore, for some Christian bioethicists, the 1st method, though more harmful to the mother, is more morally justifiable.

Hypothetical Situations

Consider the following examples:

1) A woman goes to a club to celebrate her friend's engagement. Unbeknownst to her, a man slips a drug into a woman's drink, causing her to lose consciousness. During this time, he sexually assaults her. The woman ends up becoming pregnant with an unwanted child. Is it morally justifiable for her to abort the child?
2) A woman is four months into her pregnancy when she finds out that she has a cancerous uterus. Her doctor recommends that she seek treatment immediately or else her life would be in danger. However, the only way to treat her disease is to surgically remove the uterus, and therefore the fetus as well. Should the woman seek treatment and inevitably abort her child?
3) If a woman must terminate a pregnancy because the embryo has implanted in the fallopian tube, thus posing a grave danger to the mother, there are different methods for aborting the embryo. A surgeon could indirectly remove the embryo by surgically removing a segment of the fallopian tube, or the woman could directly abort the embryo by taking a drug like methotrexate?

Conclusion

Under traditional Christian values, from the point of conception, human embryos become full persons. Therefore, an unborn fetus possesses the irreducible human rights and human dignities as anyone else. However, as illustrated by the research above, situations arise where an abortion may become morally justifiable, especially when the mother's health is under question and the fetus poses as a material harm. It is within the grey areas of direct versus indirect abortion and the moral responsibility of rape victims to unwanted embryos where debate continues to thrive.

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