

Values, Philosophy and Religious Studies

Dialogue *Australasia*

Issue Twenty Seven | May 2012



Abortion: Approaching the Unapproachable

Abortion is one of the most divisive, controversial and emotive of all ethical issues, raising fundamental questions about human existence. When *does* human life begin? When does an embryo or a foetus acquire rights, and do these rights override a woman's right to reject unwilling pregnancy?

Ever since the Egyptian, Babylonian and Chinese civilizations thousands of years ago, abortions have been commonplace, with lawmakers, philosophers and priests long reflecting on the subject. Two and a half thousand years ago, the Stoics of Ancient Greece regarded the foetus as human only after it first breathed air at birth, while the philosopher Aristotle saw abortion as a possible form of population control:

For the purpose of keeping down numbers, the proper thing to do is to limit family size, and if a child is conceived in excess of the limit set, to induce an abortion before it develops sensation and life...whether abortion is right or not will depend on whether sensation and life have begun.

Aristotle, Philosopher, 384 – 322 BCE

Aristotle's statement presupposes a question that lies at the very heart of the abortion debate, a question still being asked today – *when does human life begin?*

Abortion is a subject nobody wants to talk about... abortion is ignored, marginalised, stigmatised, and yet it is absolutely central to the health of women worldwide.

Dr Richard Horton, *The Lancet*, 2012¹

This article discusses ways of exploring the issue of abortion in the classroom using examples from the *EthicsOnline Teacher's Notes* (DAN acts as the sole distributor for these resources in Australasia). The suggested ideas form the basis of an introductory approach to the topic, and need to be supplemented in the classroom with examination of further philosophical and moral arguments, which can be found in the *Teacher's Notes*.



Scientific & Historical Perspectives

What are the primary ethical debates of our day? How do we productively engage with them, and how do we actively encourage young people to express their own views and learn how to do so – challenging and being challenged – without anger and violence? How can we encourage a sense of *the mystery of 'not-knowing,'* and acknowledge that some questions touch realities more profound than mere conclusions? Indeed, as human beings it could be said that this ability is a key barometer of our intelligence.

The most urgent debate of our time is often cited as environmental degradation and climate change, looking set as they are to affect every one of our lives and the very future of life on Earth. The most emotive debate of our time, however, giving rise to passionate argument and political and cultural polarisation, is the topic of abortion.

We are all aware of ill-informed opinion and argument, often fuelled by those with self-interest, whether political, scientific, religious or commercial. This of itself feeds the need for less emotional, better-informed debate. In

the case of the environment, scientific data is constantly being generated by research and brought into the public arena. It is the primary informant, along with historical perspectives. The debate on abortion, however, largely rests on core religious and existential beliefs.

As film-makers, we seek to present a balanced portrayal of ethical issues, including abortion. Encompassing both ancient *and* modern, the historical elements undoubtedly help lend a wider perspective and assist in a more measured classroom exploration. We suggest, therefore, that a historical perspective on abortion is an essential component, and a prerequisite for any exploration for debate on this issue. Alongside medical statistics, it is a vital informant to bring a wider perspective

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into the discussion alongside our individual beliefs.

The topic engages us too, not only with science and biology, but with the mysteries of life and death. From the ethical and educational points of view it could be argued that nothing is of more interest, while from the empirical point of view, current research touches important social and global issues:

The number of unsafe abortions is on the rise while the global abortion rate has stalled after a lengthy period of decline. The deeply disturbing findings, from a study by the World Health Organisation, have prompted calls for better family planning and the liberalisation of abortion laws around the world.²

What this, and the historical perspective tell us, is that abortion will not 'go away'. Whatever the laws dictate or the religious leaders say, the fact of abortion will remain, whether legal or illegal, sanctioned or not. So what is our aim in discussing it? What is the aim of ethical debate?

If we are to encourage young people to engage with such issues, we must help them discover their own living truths and assist them in accepting that sometimes they might have to embrace the difficulty of the grey, between black and white, while others' views may sometimes enlighten and sometimes shock, and indeed this might always be the case.

For discussion

"You're not going to get answers from biologists, philosophers or holy texts. These are matters of human concern and conflicting values. Taken in isolation each of these values is legitimate. Choice is legitimate, preserving life is legitimate."

Noam Chomsky

Disinformation & Information

In a world of unprecedented free access to information, difficult issues cannot be ignored. We are bombarded with news and views, some of which may be useful and informative, some of which could be termed propaganda or disinformation. For example, the UK

Guardian revealed earlier this year that: 'Anti-abortion campaigners in Britain are making controversial claims that abortions are linked to an increased risk of breast cancer, in a presentation to children in schools,' while a study coordinated by Cancer Research UK and published in *The Lancet* showed that abortion does not increase the risk of breast cancer.³ Despite a school's best efforts to convey a balanced argument in the case of such an emotive issue, disinformation is often unavoidable.

Anti-abortionists too often use graphic and visceral images to support their arguments. In any subject dealing with issues like abortion, war, or the environment, how far should teachers and resource providers go in terms of impact when presenting material? Some argue that high impact images are more likely to illicit response. Also, given the mass dissemination of shocking images in modern media, to what extent, if any, have young people become desensitised?

When dealing with 'life and the right to kill,' we inevitably move into associated issues such as the Just War debate, and the question of whether killing can ever be justified. In the case of the abortion debate, this has recently been extended to beyond the moment of birth: 'Abortion outrage: Mums should be allowed to terminate new-borns say Australian academics' (news.com.au)⁴

The accompanying article referring to the work of two Australian Doctors of Philosophy, claims that one third of infants with Down's Syndrome are not diagnosed in the womb, and so mothers of children with severe disabilities should be given the opportunity to end the child's life after, as well as before, birth:

A serious philosophical problem arises when the same conditions that would have justified an abortion become known after birth. In such cases we need to assess the facts in order to decide

ACTIVITY:

Below are ten statements. Choose a statement you consider to be the most interesting or the most controversial. After you've made your choice, compare, contrast and share your chosen statement with two other people in your class. Be prepared to support your choice, with reasons. Are there statements your friends have chosen that are different from yours? Argue the case for why your choice is more important than theirs.

1. The adventure of a human life begins right from fertilization.
2. Life begins sometime after conception.
3. 'Thou too knowest me right well. My frame was not hidden from thee when I was being made in secret.' (Psalm 139)
4. Life on earth is a sacred reality entrusted to us, to be preserved with a sense of responsibility.
5. By teaching that a human soul is conjoined at 40 days for a male and 90 days for a female, the early Church was sexist.
6. Abortion is against the precept of God and the law of nature: Thou shalt not kill.
7. In circumstances such as rape or where continuation of the pregnancy threatens a woman's life, termination is morally justifiable.
8. The problems raised by abortion can only be resolved by understanding the nature of human sexuality.
9. Abortion isn't an alternative to contraception or birth control and shouldn't be available on demand.
10. For just as morally conscientious soldiers fighting in a war are convinced that life can be taken 'justly' but also 'mournfully', abortion too, under certain circumstances, can also be undertaken justly yet mournfully.

whether the same arguments that apply to killing a human foetus can also be consistently applied to killing a new-born human.

As with other arguments, this could be seen as fuel for either the defence or opposition of abortion, as is often the nature of ethical debate. However, in this case the reactions were extremely hostile: 'These people are evil... pure evil,' with the article resulting in death threats to the authors, reflecting just how high feelings can run on such issues. Here we have expressions of anger, if not hatred, of those with a different opinion. How do we avoid this and keep a sense of balance in any discussion?

A key component of practical ethics education is *balance*, and as teachers we need to be open and sincere with ourselves in, as far as possible, telling the whole story from all angles so that pupils themselves are free to remain open to the issues and the mysteries, at their own levels of understanding.

Many young people brought up within either liberal or conservative religious traditions might be alienated by views seemingly diametrically opposed to theirs, and teachers, whatever their personal positions, must be sensitive in challenging any fast-held beliefs. On the other hand, in order to explore ethical questions, it is also necessary to embrace them:

Good questions work on us, we don't work on them. They are not a project to be completed but a doorway opening into greater depth of understanding, and actions that will take us into being more fully alive.

Peter Block, Author

So, while the class is brought back to the key question: *when does human life begin*, it is also brought back to a sense of the *mystery of not knowing*:

The following question may be very carefully inquired into and discussed by learned men, though I do not know whether it is in man's power to resolve it: at what time does the infant begin to live in the womb?

St Augustine

Alongside an awareness of this mystery, there is also a need to acknowledge that disagreement abides about the beginning of human life even within the scientific and medical community:

For reflection

Resources on abortion must aim to reflect the most rational and challenging comments possible. Some examples might include:

As soon as life begins in the womb a woman shouldn't have the right to do with her body as she sees fit. It isn't just her body anymore. The reality is there'd be far fewer abortions if wombs had windows.

I've never become pregnant from incest or rape, nor has pregnancy ever threatened my life. To make a woman bear a child against her will represents the sacrifice of a real human being to a piece of protoplasm which has no life in the human sense of the word.

At the moment after conception the genetic blueprint is complete. At seven weeks a nervous system and a face is forming. At twelve weeks this growing being, unique in history, fits at ease in a nut-shell with his head, heart, hands and legs in place.

Criminalizing abortion amounts to compulsory maternity and a form of rape by the State, for our bodies are our own.

If the right to life isn't protected, then no right can be guaranteed. Or to put it more bluntly: murder is murder, no matter how small the victim.

No woman wants an abortion as she wants a chocolate ice cream or a holiday... She wants an abortion as an animal, caught in a trap, wants to gnaw off its own leg.

It doesn't matter whether she's 4 days old or 14 days old, a human embryo is a human being. That's just what human beings look like at that age.

Dr. C. Ben Mitchell,
Biomedical Consultant

Before 14 days of development the embryo doesn't have human form or genetic uniqueness. It's a culture of a growing collection of cells. It's unable to survive outside of the womb, doesn't have any organ structures including even a primitive brain, and has no degree of cognitive development.

Dr. Mark Hughes, Professor of
Molecular & Human Genetics

Conclusion

When it comes to ethical debate about abortion, those of different culture, sex, age, class and ethnicity all have a perspective to offer, and, with thoughtful and sensitive resources, this issue can enable and empower teachers and pupils to discover and engage with some of the most passionate personal, ethical and spiritual questions facing us today:

The problems raised by abortion can only be resolved by understanding the nature of human sexuality. In an imperfect world, where both individuals and society will often fail, abortion may mitigate the results of these failures but it doesn't remove the urgent need to seek remedies for the causes of these failures.

Methodist Church Statement, 2011

We are called to a fullness of life which far exceeds the dimensions of our earthly existence, because it consists in sharing the very life of God. The loftiness of this vocation reveals the greatness and the inestimable value of human life even in its temporal phase. After all, life on earth is a sacred reality entrusted to us, to be preserved with a sense of responsibility and brought to perfection in love and in the gift of ourselves to God and to our brothers and sisters.

Pope John Paul II

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Endnotes

- 1 *The Lancet*, January 19th, 2012.
- 2 *ibid*
- 3 'Revealed: what children are being told about abortion', *The Guardian*, 23 March 2012.
- 4 'After Birth Abortion: Why should the baby live?' Francesca Minerva, University of Melbourne & Alberto Giubilini of Monash University, *The British Medical Journal: Journal of Medical Ethics*, 2 March 2012.

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