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Fetus as Human Being: Where is the Cut-off Point?

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Abstract

Abortion is one of the controversial issues discussed in medical ethics. We can formulate the argument which is put forward by the opponents of abortion as follows: 1) fetus has to be regarded as human being; 2) killing an innocent human being is morally wrong; 3) aborting is an example of killing and terminating a human being's life. So, being engaged in aborting is morally wrong.

In this paper, I am going to argue that the proponents' argument with regard to the implausibility of categorizing fetus as human being is unjustified and wanting. In other words, the way in which the proponents of abortion talk about the idea of personhood is, inadequate and vague, semantically speaking. The outline of the argument is as follows. The proponents of abortion are confronted with a dilemma. According to the first horn of the dilemma, the proponents have to subscribe to infanticide which is morally wrong, intuitively speaking. According to the second horn of the dilemma, there is a semantic story which needs to be expressed by the proponents with regard to the cut-off point of the concept 'personhood'. Otherwise, the first premise will not be convincing if raised in favour of the plausibility of committing abortion.

Keywords
Abortion, Fetus, human

Introduction

Abortion is one of the controversial issues discussed in medical ethics (1). According to the proponents of abortion, committing abortion is morally justified. In fact, one is permitted to abort the fetus during the pregnancy period whenever she wants. However, the opponents of abortion do believe that committing abortion is morally wrong. We can formulate the argument which is put forward by the opponents as follows: 1) fetus has to be regarded as an example of human being; 2) killing an innocent human being is morally wrong; 3) aborting is an example of killing and terminating a human being's life. So, committing abortion is morally wrong (2-4). It can be seen that the second premise deals with the idea of killing and harming others. Moreover, categorically speaking, some of the proponents do not believe that harming others is wrong. It follows from this that we are permitted to kill human beings in several contexts, with some reservations. In other words, in accordance with

their position, committing abortion which is an example of killing human beings is permissible in some ethical contexts. Moreover, there are some ethicists who believe that, taking into account the pregnant woman's rights, we are allowed to abort the fetus whenever she intends during pregnancy period. According to them, fetus is part of the pregnant's body. If this is the case, the way she treats her body is generally justified (5). These lines of arguments deal with the second and the third premises: whether or not one finds committing abortion permissible.

In this paper, I am going to discuss about the first premise and show that the proponent's argument with regard to the implausibility of categorizing fetus as human being is unjustified and wanting. In other words, the way in which the proponents talk about the idea of personhood is semantically inadequate and vague. Moreover, it does not follow from this that the proponents' position with regard to the plausibility of abortion is categorically unjustified. Rather, it just shows that resorting to the first premise in order to make an argument in favour of permissibility of committing abortion is unjustified.

The Proponents' dilemma

In order to see how the argument works, let us categorize, at this stage, the proponents' semantic position with regard to the idea of personhood. According to the proponents, we are not authorized to refer to 4 weeks embryo as human being, as it is just a complex of cellular elements. Ontologically speaking, nothing can be added to this complex, this metaphysical position is associated with semantic point, according to which, we are not allowed to regard the fetus as something else, the way we consider human being. Moreover, we are not authorized, semantically, to regard 20 weeks fetus as human being either. In fact, no substantive ontological change has happened within these 4 months. Just the complex of cellular elements has become bigger and more complicated. That is it. This semantic position leads to the point that we are not authorized to categorize 30 weeks fetus as human being either. The same semantic position can be taken with regard to 36 weeks fetus. However, it seems that the story changes whenever we are confronted with a newborn, intuitively speaking. In fact, the newborn is categorized as human being by both the proponents and the opponents. Now, if this is the case, then the opponents are confronted with a dilemma. According to the first horn of the dilemma, they could go ahead according to their semantic position and state that a newborn cannot be regarded as human being. It follows from this that infanticide is morally permissible and justified. In other words, we are authorized to kill the newborn with some reservations in different contexts. However, it seems that infanticide is, intuitively speaking, immoral. According to the second horn of the dilemma, the opponents owe us a semantic story with regard to the cut-off point of the concept 'personhood'. In fact, if they believe that infanticide is immoral and we are not allowed to kill a newborn, then they have to explain us the difference between the fetus and the newborn, which makes a room for the semantic difference we are in search of. As we have seen, there is a significant connection between the metaphysical and the semantic aspects of the issue of abortion. If we are, semantically speaking, allowed to refer to a newborn as human being, the proponents have to tell an ontological story based on it; then we are authorized to regard the newborn as human being. We know that the fetus's environment is, ontologically speaking, different from the newborns one: fetus cannot breathe the same as newborn does; the way the fetus in nourished is different from the way the newborn is nourished, etc. Moreover, fetus entirely depends on its mother, while newborn is not entirely dependent, as he/she is separated from his/her mother and can grow up independently. However, it seems that these ontological differences are not adequate for the semantic story needed. In fact, the constitutive and fundamental features of the fetus and the newborn are, more or less, the same. There is a significant difference which is to be noted in the first place. Based upon that, we are, semantically speaking, authorized to regard the newborn as human being.

During the pregnancy period, fetus takes different shapes in several steps. For instance, when fetus is 12 weeks, its shape is different from the fetus which is 20 weeks. But, according to the opponents, these differences do not entail us to refer to different complexes with several names (even though in medicine the organism in the first 8 weeks of gestation is called embryo). For instance, we regard the entity which is 9 weeks as fetus. Also, we refer to the entity which is 20 weeks as fetus as well, etc. In fact, we utilize only the same name for different steps (with the exception of the first 8 weeks, as mentioned above) during the pregnancy period. Moreover, when 36 weeks fetus is born, it seems that its shape is more or less the same as the shape of a fetus. Now, if this is the case, there is a metaphysical story to be told in order to make the proponents' semantic position intelligible.

In short, the opponent is confronted with a dilemma. According to the first horn of the dilemma which is a slippery slope argument, the opponents have to subscribe to infanticide at the end of the day which is morally impermissible, intuitively speaking. According to the second horn of the dilemma, there is a semantic story to be told

by the opponents with regard to the cut-off point of the concept 'personhood'. Therefore, the opponents have to give us a metaphysical account in order to substantiate the constitutive difference between fetus and newborn. Otherwise, the first premise is not convincing to be utilized in favour of abortion.

Furthermore, in order to make the above-mentioned argument more watertight, let us add two more points at this stage. First, although it seems that the proponents are unable to give us a metaphysical account, based on which the cut-off point of the concept 'personhood' is clarified; it does not follow from this that the opponents can give us a semantic story, according to which the distinction between fetus and newborn is, semantically speaking, clear. Rather, the opponents are unable to give us a semantic story required in this respect as well. In fact, it seems that both the proponents and the opponents are incapable of presenting a metaphysical story, based upon which the distinction between fetus and human being is, semantically speaking, valid. In other words, both the proponents and the opponents are on a par in this respect. Moreover, if this is the case, it would be better to make an agreement in order to elucidate what we mean by utilizing the concepts 'fetus', 'human being' and 'personhood' in different contexts. For instance, we can regard the fetus which is 20 weeks or more as a person. Alternatively, we can refer to a fetus of 12 weeks or more as human being. The crucial point to be considered here is that both the proponents and the opponents have an equal semantic position here. It follows from this that the proponent is not authorized to utilize this semantic position in order to formulate his argument in favour of the permissibility of committing abortion. Second, the way in which I articulate the argument is, generally speaking, based upon the referential theory of meaning (6). Alternatively, the proponents might utilize other theories of meaning such as: usage theory of meaning, etc. On the face of it, it seems that usage theory of meaning cuts no ice in this respect. As we know, the slogan of this perspective is: meaning is use. The more the language-user is engaged in utilizing the word in different contexts, the more he arrives at its meaning. This is how Wittgenstein gives his philosophical account with regard to the emergence of the meanings of the concept 'game', for instance, in Philosophical Investigations. The whole idea of 'family resemblance' is supposed to make a room for the concept 'practice' and 'being engaged in practice' which has a fundamental role in his semantic story (7,8). However, as the plurality and diversity of using a word in different contexts is crucial in order to arrive at its meaning in this story, it seems that appealing to this semantic story cannot give us the cut-off point which we are in search of (9-11). In fact, in this Wittgensteinian story, the concepts 'fetus' and 'human being' do not have sharp boundaries. To the extent that they are utilized in several contexts by different language-users, they acquire their meaning. For instance, in a religious community, unlike a non-religious community, language-users do believe in the idea of 'ensoulment'. According to them, the fetus which is 16 weeks can be regarded as human being because of ensoulment. It follows from this that one is authorized to refer to fetus which is 16 weeks or more as human being. So, the way in which the concepts 'fetus' and 'human being' acquire their meaning entirely depends on the contexts in which these concepts are utilized by different language-users. It follows from this that usage theory of meaning cannot offer the semantic story we are in search of. Moreover, if the proponents believe that there is a theory of meaning which can be utilized in order to arriving at the cut-off point we are looking for, it is their task to offer the relevant theory to be applied. Otherwise, we are authorized to say that as there is no plausible semantic story with regard to the cut-off point of the concept 'personhood', the first premise is unjustified and wanting to be utilized in favour of the permissibility of committing abortion.

Conclusion

Finally, having seen the dilemma with which the proponent is confronted, I am inclined to conclude that the proponent is not authorized to resort to the first premise in order to formulate an argument in favour of the permissibility of committing abortion. But, it does not follow from this that committing abortion is implausible, categorically speaking. Rather, it just shows that the first premise is wanting and imperfect to be utilized in this relation.

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