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## Abortion and the Failure to Conceive

It sometimes appears that the quality of our thought on a topic is inversely proportional to the intensity of our emotions concerning that topic. The abortion debate seems to me to be a case in point. Those who are profoundly committed, one way or the other, on the question of the morality of abortion sometimes defend their view with blatantly irrational arguments. So, for example, some advocates of freedom of choice may assert that "a woman has a right to do whatever she wants with her own body." If we sit down in a cool moment to reflect dispassionately on this slogan, it will take about four-tenths of a second to realize that it is obviously false. Consider a fat woman who is annoyed by the whimpering of her neighbor's baby. She could use her body to smother and kill that infant. Surely, except perhaps under the most bizarre of circumstances, she has no right (legal or moral) to do this with her body.

On the other side, those who abhor abortion sometimes say that where life and death are concerned, it is always wrong to "play God." Presumably, they are suggesting a general principle from which it would follow that it is always wrong to act in such a way as to alter God's plans for the size and composition of the population. Presumably, they think that aborting a fetus would in this way thwart God's will. Yet many such people are fertile and married. Each night, when they go to bed, they must either attempt to conceive a child or not. Whatever they do, their behavior will affect the size and composition of the population. Suppose they conceive a child one night. Then they have acted in such a way as to bring a child into existence—a child who would not have existed

if they had refrained on that occasion from intercourse. Are they then "playing God"? Suppose they don't conceive a child. Surely then they are "playing God," since, as a result of their decision, some child who would have existed in fact does not exist.

Someone might say that God decides when the couple will conceive a child, and so they are merely doing His will. Of course, it is then open to the advocate of abortion to say that God decides when a fetus shall be aborted, and so abortionists are also only doing God's will.

In order to gain any insight here, we must reject all such slogan-mongering and appeals to emotion. My aim in this chapter is not to affect legislation, or to rally supporters, or to rouse the reader to political action. Rather, it is to attempt to lay out the rationale behind what I take to be a fairly reasonable position about the morality of abortion.

$\frac{1}{2}$  Two features of the literature about the morality of abortion surprise me. One is this: writers often write in such a way as to suggest that abortions are morally homogeneous—that is, they seem to assume that every abortion has the same moral normative status as every other abortion. Thus, some say that every abortion is morally wrong; others say that every abortion is morally indifferent. But it seems to me that it would be far more reasonable to start without any such assumption. Surely we ought at least to consider the possibility that some abortions are morally permissible, whereas others are morally wrong. (Of course, it might be best to have laws that would give all abortions the same *legal* status. That is another question entirely, and one about which I shall have very little to say.)

$\frac{2}{2}$  The second surprising feature of much of the literature on abortion is this: a great deal of it is divorced from reflection on morality in general. Thus, some writers argue vigorously for some view about the morality of abortion, without considering the more general moral principles from which these particular principles would follow. This seems to me almost as pointless as advocating a moral principle concerning how to behave on Tuesdays. Surely, if the principle is to have rational backing, it must be derived from something more general, something that has independent intuitive appeal.

In Chapter 11, I presented and defended a moral principle about killing. According to that principle, killing is all-in morally wrong (when it is wrong) primarily because it makes the world worse;