

PHILOSOPHICAL APPRAISAL OF CONSERVATIVE THEORY OF ABORTION

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Abstract

This work analyses the philosophical appraisal of the conservative theory of abortion. Abortion is a recurring problem which centres on the issue of personhood of the embryo or fetus. Many philosophical schools or theories have emanated to tackle this problem. The extreme liberal and moderate theories conceive that human life begins at later time. Contrary to this view, the extreme conservative theory proposes that human life begins at conception when the sperm fertilizes the ovum. This work makes use of analytic method to analyze the philosophical postulations of these theories. The extreme or conservative theory seems to promote the dignity of human person by protecting the value of human life. Thus, it conceives that abortion has both negative physical and psychological implications on women. Abortion posits a threat to women's life. People who commit abortion suffer from emotional agony of depression. This work recommends that moral deliberation of abortion ought to consider the interest of the mother and child.

Key words: abortion, personhood, fetus, liberal, moderate, conservative, dignity, and life

1.0 Introduction

Abortion is a serious moral problem down through the ages. The moral deliberation of abortion revolves around the mother and child. Maduabuchi (2016) observed that women commit abortion for so many reasons such as "the career of the mother, the

reputation of the family, shame, “safety of the mother” lack of adequate maintenance of the mother and the child”, social grounds like, “rape”, “incest”, “sexual harassment”, “tribal discrimination and so on (p. 59). The moral issue in the consideration of abortion is based on the idea of “when life begins”. Several theories of abortion emanates to address this issue like: the extreme liberal theory, the extreme conservative theory and the moderate theory (Gordon, J. S., nd).

The proponents of extreme liberal theory are pro-abortionists, feminist and pro-choice philosophers or scholars who support abortion. They believe that abortion is morally permissible because the fetus or embryo is not a human being. Even though they believe that life begins at a later time, they uphold that human life for them starts after birth. On the other hand, the extreme conservative theory is the view of pro-lifers particularly the moral philosophers from the Catholic Church. They conceive that human life starts at fertilization. Abortion for them is condemned at any stage of the pregnancy because it is the murder of the innocent unborn child.

The moderate theory reconciles the two extreme positions of the extreme liberal theory and the extreme conservative theory. They uphold that abortion can be carried out at the later stage of the pregnancy after “ensoulment” or “animation” when the spiritual soul is infused into the body. Peter Singer is one the proponents of this school of thought. They conceive that abortion can be performed before the first three months of the pregnancy. It implies that abortion is banned after the first three month of the pregnancy. Some countries in the advanced economies of Europe and America that legalize abortion permit abortion before the three months of the pregnancy. The reason they hold this view is because abortion at the later stage is usually complicated when the delicate organs of the body have been formed.

Looking at these three theories, the position of the pro-lifers in the extreme conservative theory seems to respect the dignity of human person by conceiving that abortion is the murder of innocent unborn child. Contrary to the views of extreme liberal and the moderate theories of abortion, they uphold that the fetus or embryo in the womb is a human person right from the moment of conception. Thus, this work tends to appraise the conservative theory of abortion.

1.1 Conceptual Clarification of Basic Terms

The basic concept that is associated with this study is abortion. Abortion is the termination of pregnancy before birth. According to Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica (2025), abortion is “the expulsion of the fetus from the uterus before it has reached the stage of viability (in human beings, abortion usually the 20th weeks of the pregnancy). An abortion may occur spontaneously, in which case, it is called a miscarriage, or it may be brought on purposely, in which case it is often called an induced abortion”.

This work identifies the two types of abortion as spontaneous or induced abortion. Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica(2025) further expressed that the spontaneous abortion which it classifies as miscarriage can be cause by so many factors like “disease, trauma, genetic defects, or biological incompatibility of the mother and fetus”. But, pontaneous abortion is not a moral issue because it is not a deliberate act. The subject matter of ethics is human action which is a very deliberate act which is performed by human will and deliberation.

On the other hand, induced abortion is a moral issue because it is a free deliberate act. So, this work is based only on induced abortion which can be considered for many reasons thus:

To preserve the life or physical or mental well-being of the mother; to prevent the completion of a pregnancy that has resulted from rape or incest; to prevent the birth of a child with serious deformity, mental deficiency, or genetic abnormality; or to prevent a birth for social or economic reasons (such as the extreme youth of the pregnant female or the solely resources of the family unit (Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2025).

These reasons that are proffered for induced abortion will be analyzed within the context of different theories of abortion.

2.0 The Conservative Theory of Abortion

The conservative theory of abortion condemns abortion as morally bad. Hence, they see abortion as killing of the unborn. Pope Paul VI (1968) considered the dignity of human person by condemning abortion. In his view, abortion and contraception should not be applied as a means of family planning because they promote immorality. He admonishes the governments in all the countries of the world to make laws that are in line with natural law in order to uphold human life.

In addition, Pope John Paul II (1995) conceived that human life is the highest value of human existence. For him, people should protect life given to them by God to take care of. Hence, he re-echoes the words of the Second Vatican Council as follows:

Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, or Willful self-destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torment inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as

subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where people are treated as mere instrument of gain rather than as free and responsible person... They do more harm to those who practice them than those who suffer from the injury (Pope JohnPaul 11, 1995).

He appeals to the Church to perform a special duty in protecting lives of the unborn that society has treaded on. Thus, he criticizes the roles of contraception, prenatal screen and different forms of artificial reproductive technology in promoting abortion. The Catholic Church's idea that the embryo or fetus is human person at the moment of conception creates enormous impact on some philosophers like John Noonan, and Patrick Lee and Robert George. They uphold the personhood of the embryo or fetus at the moment of conception.

3.0 The Conservative Theory vis-à-vis Other Theories of abortion

The conservative theory of abortion opposes the moderate and the extreme liberal theories of abortion. The conservative theory of abortion that is advanced by the pro-lifers does not allude to the philosophical synthesis propagated by the moderate theorists since they advocate for early abortion. For them, abortion is abortion whether it is committed at the early or later stage of the pregnancy. Thus, they see the philosophical postulation of moderate theory as the same with the extreme liberal theory.

The extreme liberal theory of abortion is proposed by pro-abortionist, pro-choice, and feminist philosophers who share a common ground that the pregnant mother or women in general have the right to decide when to have a baby or not. They conceive

that soul enters into the body of embryo or fetus three months after conception. So, abortion is morally permissible since the embryo or fetus is a fraction of the female body. But, the pro-lifers envisage that soul enters the body at the period of fertilization. Abortion for them is human cruelty on the unborn. One of the fundamental human rights is the right to life. Every human being has the right to live.

On the other hand, the extreme liberal philosophers expresses that abortion is important to avoid the birth of abnormal children. The pro-lifers criticize this idea as playing a double standard. In their own view, since it is illegal to kill the deformed or abnormal children or people in the society, why are the extreme liberal philosophers advocating to kill them in the womb? (Maduabuchi, 2016: p. 62).

Moreover, Maduabuchi (2016) further expressed that the extreme liberal philosophers argue that abortion is good to stop the pregnancy that emanated from rape or incest. But, the pro-lifers advise that they should carry the pregnancy and give the baby for adoption or motherless babies or charitable organization who will look after the baby.

Finally, the extreme liberal philosophers support abortion for social or economic reasons. On the other hand, the pro-lifers uphold that people should take responsible for their action. Jean-Paul Sartre conceives that attempt to dodge one's responsibility is bad faith. This is inauthentic living.

4.0 Evaluation

Subjecting the both views to critical reflection connotes that the extreme conservative philosophers i.e. the pro-lifers tend to promote the life of unborn babies. On the other hand, the extreme liberal philosophers consider the interest of the pregnant mother or women in general. There is the need to strike a balance between

them. This work provides the rationale to protect both the life of the mother and the child. Natural law demands that both the mother and the child have to be protected (Maduabuchi, R. O., Obidinnu, V. A., and Uke, I. A. 2023:p.773).

Maduabuchi (2016) stated that practical moral reasoning supports the position of the pro-lifers. Abortion has negative psychological effects on women. Women who have committed abortion in the past suffer from psychological trauma. Susan Stanford-Rue conceives that it is difficult for women to deal with the psychological trauma or emotional agony that is felt or associated with abortion. In attempt to deal this problem, she expresses that some of them have become “workaholic” or drug addicts or drunkards especially at night while others see clinical psychologists for help. But, those who could not cope with this challenge have resorted to suicide or attempted suicide (Standford-Rue, S., 1986).

Again, abortion may not be the solution to the unwanted pregnancy because abortion is very dangerous. Many women have lost their lives within course of abortion. For instance, there was an incidence during our primary school where a pregnant woman with twins within the course of undergoing abortion; the Doctor used the surgical blade to puncture her bladder mistakenly that it could no longer hold urine. The pungent odor in her body made people to pity her and the woman later died. Maduabuchi (2016) envisages that in some occasions, women may sustain serious injuries in the womb which could lead to cancer of the womb or even prevent them from giving birth in the future.¹⁴ Some women whose body is allergic to abortion pills may bleed to death. The use of anesthetic drug may have some negative reactions which may lead to death of the mother.

On the other hand, the conservative philosophers or pro-lifers view that abortion can only be permissible under the principle of double effect when the life of the mother is in danger is plausible because abortion serves as a means of saving the mother. For instance, pregnant woman with cancerous womb or ectopic pregnancy cannot go on with the pregnancy because it posits a threat to her life. In this case, abortion is not directly willed rather it is merely permitted as a way of saving the mother.

5.0 Conclusion

This work has carried out the philosophical appraisal of the pro-lifers or conservative theory of abortion which affirms the human personhood of the embryo or fetus right from the moment of conception. The modern scientific experimentation has confirmed this fact by postulating that it is at fertilization the zygote or human embryo gets its genetic traits from their parents. Hence, the conservative theory of abortion tends to promote the dignity of human life. The dignity of human life implies that human life is sacred which is different from the lives of other lower animals. The existentialist philosophers conceive that life is the ultimate value of human existence. One of the basic fundamental human rights is self-preservation. If people continue to tamper or meddle with life of the unborn, it will come to a time human species will go into extinction. It is important to protect the lives of the mother and child. Thus, any moral deliberation on abortion ought to consider the interests of both the mother and child.

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