

Helen Watt
*The Ethics of Pregnancy, Abortion and Childbirth:
Exploring Moral Choices in Childbearing,*
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Helen Watt's monograph, although relatively short, covers an extremely wide range of topics concerning human pregnancy and its moral understanding. Beyond the traditional debate about abortion, which however retains its role in the discussion, the author addresses the moral questions raised by pregnancy in terms of rights and duties, risks and advantages for both the mother and the foetus. This approach seriously takes the bodily significance of pregnancy, understood as an intimate relation between two distinct human beings. Childbearing is here presented as the archetypal bond which initiates our existence through the relationship between mother and child, thus being a highly valuable and enriching process, whatever the meaning may the expectant woman confer it.

The first chapter is presented as a necessary premise in order to explore the moral demands of the maternal-foetal pair, as it discusses the foetus' moral status. Watt believes that "the appearance at fertilization of a new living individual candidate for objective gain or loss" represents "a marker of moral discontinuity" (p. 28). The child-to-be is then a legitimate candidate for personhood since conception and has objective interests to its own welfare, survival and other long-term goods. Traditional arguments, such as twinning and potentiality, receive less consideration or are not discussed at all. It seems instead that Watt develops her own line of thought, arguing that the "moral subject is the human organism" (p. 16). The relevant question then is not when a human being does become a *person*, but when the human organism does begin to exist, i.e. to have an orientation to rationality. According to this perspective the foetus' personhood cannot depend upon its mother's feelings, since she can only recognise but not create its moral status.

Taken for granted that childbearing involves not just one, but two different persons, the second chapter deals with the very nature of the pregnant woman's relationship to the foetus, with special regard to her negative obligations not to harm it. Since the mother has a parental role and should neither be con-

sidered as a sub-personal ‘incubator’ nor merely ‘neighbour’ to her offspring, what kind of support does she owe it? Watt shortly recalls Thomson’s violinist’s argument and claims that while one can unplug himself from the violinist, abortion is not morally justified. The argumentation hints at the traditional distinction between killing and letting die, which is however not examined in depth. On the contrary, Watt explicitly recognises the moral relevance of intentionality: no matter the consequences, the intention to harm the foetus’ body, whether by act or omission, is always wrong. Therefore while the positive obligation to support others is role-related, our duty to refrain from bodily invasion of innocent persons (the so-called non aggressors) seems absolute. This applies *a fortiori* to parents who may also have a duty of bodily support towards their own children and must therefore always withhold abortion.

Moreover, while it is acknowledged that the human body is biologically oriented towards activities which are somehow relevant to our moral choices, some passages in the text can actually be interpreted as misleading. There author seems to overlap at times the sheer existence of the woman’s reproductive system with her “psychophysical ‘openness’ [...] to becoming a mother” every time she has a sexual intercourse (p. 113). In Watt’s view doctors must consider us “bodily beings with objective health interests, not just clients with choices uncoupled from our bodies’ good functioning” (p. 45). If pregnancy is not a pathological condition, then abortion cannot be considered a treatment: it is instead a harmful, “counter-functional” request of reproductive failure and thus morally wrong. In this perspective the right to control one’s body seems severely limited, while the right to bodily autonomy is not even considered. By drawing such considerations about people’s objective interest, which leave less space to subjective interest and desires, Watt clearly shares some ethical positions with Catholic scholars. Nonetheless, her argumentation does not rely on religious beliefs and maintains a genuine argumentative value.

The third chapter investigates several issues, among which the maternal side of pregnancy, father’s responsibilities, not least serious health problems, which can result in vital conflicts in the maternal-foetal couple. Does being pregnant make one a mother or is motherhood acquired by choice instead? According to Watt being pregnant is a sufficient condition to confer upon the woman some maternal rights, such as continuing pregnancy and raising the child after birth. Such rights should be ascribed to surrogate mothers as well in virtue of their gestational status. The maternal role, like most family ones, is not a matter of contingent choice: men and women who conceive non-voluntarily (for example, in case of rape or sperm-napping), still acquire parental responsibilities which cannot be waived, at least till childbirth. The pregnant woman as a mother is then the first custodian and guardian of her

child. Although Watt never conceives the possibility of a female partner of the pregnant woman, she properly recognises the father's role in parenthood. It is him who should support the woman during her gestation, especially if it is a particularly difficult one. Some topics of this chapter are quite controversial, such as the strong denial of abortion even for comatose women and the comparison between surrogacy and prostitution. Both situations imply treating the woman's body as a "sub-personal instrument" (p. 60). Difficulties arise also in the discussion of the societal interest in pregnancy, where Watt apparently shifts from a moral perspective into a political one. Even though she admits that some women might be prevented from taking responsibility for their pregnancy due to health care policy, which is mainly concerned with foetus' well-being, she seems to suggest that society should prohibit abortions, even if consensual (p. 68). This view appears to pertain public policy rather than mere morality and should as a consequence be further justified.

Much attention in Watt's book is also devoted to more or less serious health problems which can lead to conflicts between the pregnant woman and the foetus, from prenatal tests to ectopic pregnancy and maternal-foetal surgery. On the basis of a general principle of bodily respect and according to the traditional double-effect reasoning, Watt argues that not only the intention to kill or harm somebody, but also that to invade the victim's body – along with certain foreseen harms – is morally conclusive. As result, the foetus can never be targeted even if pregnancy endangers the woman's life, nor can an already dying woman request an intervention to save her viable foetus' life if the bodily invasion is harmful or lethal for her.

The fourth and final chapter looks at the different ways in which a pregnancy can begin and what its influence on parenting is. Are some pregnancies better than others according to the parental acceptance they guarantee the newborn? Watt compares gestations due to sexual conception to those achieved by IVF (in vitro fertilization) or similar ARTs (assisted reproductive technologies), where the latter are harshly criticized as perfect examples of the consumerist attitude typical of our contemporary society. On the contrary, only a deeply interpersonal act such as sex between partners, better if spouses, is here thought to be an adequate process to bring into being a new person. In other words, conception should always be a matter of unconditional receiving and not of deliberate creating, even if every life, no matter how conceived, is equally valuable. Pregnancies 'technically' achieved via gamete donation or, even more, via donor embryos, are morally wrong also because they fragment parenthood's richness, separating the child from its biological parents. As a matter of fact, IVF pregnancies fail in giving an unambiguous information on parentage as a form of public commitment of the couple, the latter being

a guarantee for the child's interests. Since fertility too is regarded as a gift to welcome, contraception itself is considered as problematic. This controversial view may be difficult for some readers to share.

Watt successfully gives a positive account of 'natural' pregnancies, especially those involving heterosexual married parents. However, it would be highly interesting to know something more about her approach to challenging situations which require to deal with the burden of infertility. Moreover, despite some brief hints, it remains deeply unclear to what extent Watt's conservative positions influence her view about public policies concerning pregnancy and childcare.

This book, published as the sixteenth volume of the *Routledge Annals of Bioethics* series, can be read at different levels. On the one hand the argumentations' lines can be easily followed by a non-expert reader who may be keen on reading a well-written introduction to pregnancy's issues. On the other hand the richness of themes and the massive use of footnotes, in which opinions much distant from Watt's ones are difficult to be found, do not allow a heated confrontation with the current philosophical debate. The result is an original work whose ideas, though not always easy to share, provide many captivating grounds for reflection.

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