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## Self-Experience of Birth: Abortion Debate Revisited

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In this essay, I propose to make the purview of the debate on abortion—which in its expansionistic splurge made assumptions, logical, epistemological, and even metaphysical,<sup>1</sup> which it could not steadily carry along with it—thinner by arguing how, for epistemological reason, we cannot even draw strong moral conclusion, either for or against, about abortion, if morality is understood as a discipline of approving and disapproving.

Following a brief discussion on the logical impossibility of not having self-experience of birth, the essay shows how we cannot draw strong moral conclusions about abortion, either for or against, hence the need to accept the moderate position, which in my case is not accepted 'out of frustration' but for epistem-

ological reasons. The essay concludes by defending the moderate position from the menace of relativism.

### SELF-EXPERIENCE OF BIRTH:

Birth and death are two important aspects surrounding abortion as it is the possibility of birth that is sought to be terminated. Moral judgments on abortion are different from and are more serious than other moral judgments such as right, obligation, freedom, liberty, etc. One of the distinguishing factors is that abortion concerns the very beginning of human existence, whereas the other moral issues are add-ons to human beings. While it may be true that foetus is not yet a person hence can be terminated, however, the fact

remains that foetus is the necessary requirement from which the person develops. However, not all who are born become persons, but a person comes into existence only because of his or her birth. Further, there is no other source outside foetus for human existence.

This constitutive, though not complete relation between foetus and person has to be recognized by the pro-choice group, who mostly see their relation to be discrete rather than continuous.<sup>2</sup> The pro-life, on the other hand, indulges in over determination when they argue that foetus is already a person. They superimpose a potentiality or a possibility, namely personhood, on foetus, thus freezing and neutralizing time, thereby a future possibility is treated as already actualized.<sup>3</sup> I reject

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the pro-choice for committing the error of reductionism and pro-life for indulging in over determination. Instead, given the constitutive nature of foetus to person, I would treat foetus to be necessary though not sufficient condition for becoming a person.

Notwithstanding, the important aspects surrounding birth, the fact remains that we do not have self-experience about birth and death. We have either first-person-objective-experience of someone's birth or death, or inferential knowledge about our own birth and death. We hear from others about our own birth and imagine from others' death, our death. In both the cases, there is no possibility of self-experience. Here let me further clarify that I treat the question "Can we have self-experience about birth?" not as a routine one as its answer is routine "No," but as fundamental and serious one as it has implications to setting limits to self-experience, which in turn has implications to abortion. To elucidate the notion of self-experience let me discuss different types of experiences.

1. I have experience of objects.
2. I have experience of other human beings, which is 'first-person-objective-experience.' Others have experience about me.
3. I have third-person knowledge about 'x' through 'y'. And 'y' has first-person-experience of 'x'. My third-person-experience is ultimately dependent on 'y's' first-person-objective-experience.
4. I have self-experience/knowledge about my feelings and beliefs.

However, there is an instance, where,

5. I have a first-person-objective-experience about 'r's' birth, whereas 'r' does not have self-experience about her birth.

If I have to reconstruct my experience about my own birth then it is possible: (i) after seeing the birth of someone else, which is first-person-objective-experience; or, (ii) through 's', who has seen my birth, and later reported it to me, which is testimony. In both cases (i) and (ii) there is no self-experience. From my point of view, (i) is no different from my experience of other objects. I see an object and I see someone's birth, both are outside my self-experience. What distinguishes objects from human beings both from the point of view of myself and the other is that objects cannot have self-experience but human beings can have. However, this is exactly what is not possible about our own birth, we cannot have self-experience about our own birth, yet we have to maintain the difference between objects and human beings.<sup>4</sup>

Here let me indicate that the distinction that I am making here between self-experience and first-person-objective-experience is similar to Descartes. Descartes clearly maintains this distinction when he restricts his epistemology to the adult domain and demarcates it from pre-adult childhood domain. For him, self-experience is the basis of certainty. Further, for him, experience of children is not reliable for drawing firm conclusions. Pointing out the unreliability of inferential knowledge and our appetites, surrounding our childhood experiences, Descartes says and I quote:

So, too, I reflected that we were all children before being men and had to be governed for some time by our appetites and our teachers, which were often opposed to each other and neither

of which, perhaps always gave us the best advice; hence I thought it virtually impossible that our judgements should be as unclouded and firm as they would have been if we had had the full use of our reason from the moment of our birth, and if we had always been guided by it alone. (Descartes 1985: 117)

In this interesting passage, Descartes (i) concedes that we were children before we became adults; (ii) and as children, we are governed by 'appetites' and advise by 'our teacher,' which are not reliable; (iii) this, namely, (ii) could have been avoided if reason is available from the moment of our birth; (iv) however, reason is not available from the moment of our birth. Therefore, 'appetite' and 'advice from teachers' govern our childhood behavior and not reason which comes later in one's life. Though Descartes in the above is making a case for reason and does not directly use self-experience, we can safely extend what he says about reason to self-experience, without committing the 'hermeneutics of violence.' Further, first-person certainty advocated by Descartes requires self-experience, as self for Descartes is a fundamental ontological category. He is against testimony and self-experience is the minimum requirement for certainty. These two have to be taken together as constituting the Cartesian project.

Thus, there is a first-person-perspective, which consists of self-experience, not first-person-objective-experience and the person here is an adult and not a child,<sup>5</sup> and only adulthood can be the proper basis for certainty. For Descartes, there are individuals and their pre-adult experiences are not rational, hence, do not become the proper basis for certainty. So there are two possibilities, individual as a child and

as an adult. Reason is available for the adult and only adult experience can be certain. Extending Descartes argument, the domain before and during the birth of an individual cannot be the reliable domain either. The paradox is, experience of birth is not accessible to child, as the agency is not clearly formulated at this stage. Subsequently, when the agency is clearly formulated at the adult stage, this experience of birth eludes it since knowledge of it is acquired only through inference or through first-person-objective-experience. This does not meet the Cartesian first-person-self-experience requirement for certainty.

Cartesian requirement for certainty is first-person-self-experience and not first-person-objective-experience of others about your birth. The same analysis is true of death. In the case of birth and death we have only first-person-objective-experience of birth and death of others and not self-experience, hence self-experience of birth and death falls outside the purview of any human being. For Descartes, since we do not have self-experience, we must demarcate the child domain and not take it seriously. Here let me point out that I accept Descartes observation that we cannot have reason in childhood domain. However, unlike Descartes, I would not like to demarcate this domain from the adult domain thereby treating it as less important. Instead I would see that even if it is not possible to justify the child domain as it is bereft of reason, there are greater continuities between child and the adult, and the former constitutes the latter. Here I accept Descartes' reasons for distinguishing child domain from adult domain but do not accept the clear and sharp

demarcation he proposes.

In fact, this Cartesian position of the adult is the underlying assumption of the notion of person used in bio-ethical discussions. Elucidating the definition of persons in bio-ethics H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr., says:

Persons are central to the very idea and undertaking of morality. Only persons have moral problems and moral obligations. Persons sustain the very world of morality. The problem is that not all humans are persons. At least, they are not persons in the strict sense of being moral agents. Infants are not persons. The severely senile and the very severely or profoundly mentally retarded are not persons in this very important and central way. (1986: 202)

Thus defined, the definition of a person denies moral status to the 'non' or 'pre'-rational human being. In this sense, foetus is not given the status of a moral agent and is outside the domain of moral obligation.

Following Descartes, if the first person account is the necessary condition for certainty, then we cannot have certain knowledge about our own birth and even about our death. If 'x's' existence consists of T1, T2, to Tn, then if T1 is about his birth and from T2 is about the later life, then the knowledge about T1 is necessarily inferred from another speakers, say, 'y' account of 'x's' birth from T2 onwards. Further, if 'x's' existence consists of T1, T2, to Tn and Tn is about his death, then 'x' can never have the self-experience, not about the process prior to death, but that particular moment of death. That is why Wittgenstein said that death is not an event. Others who have only an inferential third person account of someone's death only witness that particular moment. It is another

matter that like in the case of birth, the person will not be there to be told by others about his or her own death. So epistemologically, it is not possible for anyone of us to have self-experience or knowledge about our own birth and death. Further, this, namely, having self-experience or knowledge about our own birth and death, is ruled out even logically.<sup>6</sup> We cannot overcome this logical predicament even in future through either technology or anything else, as it will not be, for instance, possible to have self-experience or knowledge at the time of once own birth. This is as logically impossible as squaring the circle. In fact, we arrive at the knowledge about our own birth from the inferential knowledge, or have only first-person-objective-experience. Nor will it be possible for someone to have self-knowledge about once own death.

In addition to Cartesian views, my account has two similarities to Kant: (i) Birth is like Kantian self. Like Kantian self, which is the precondition for knowledge, but it, itself is not known, similarly birth is the precondition for person but is not accessible for self-experience. It is a necessity of thought but is not accessible for self-experience; there is also another similarity to Kant, namely, (ii) there are limits to self-knowledge or empirical knowledge. However, unlike Kantian neumena, birth for me is immanent and not transcendent.

While accepting the importance of self-experience (and along with it rationality and certainty), I would however maintain unlike Descartes, the experience of birth and childhood domain to be very important. It is a pre-condition eluding self-experience.

Further, self-experience is the

necessary requirement for moral autonomy and certainty. So to talk about personhood either for or against is not called for. If foetus is already a person but it does not have self-experience. If it is not a person then it is not a moral agent. I shall in the following, discuss the moral dimension.

#### SELF-EXPERIENCE, MORAL AUTONOMY AND RESPONSIBILITY

Self-Experience is the minimum requirement for moral autonomy. As already pointed out, we have experience about persons and object, which I have called 'first-person-objective-experience'. In addition, we also have self-experience. The former can be about objects and other human beings. The experience of objects may be quite different from the experience of human beings, as objects of our experience cannot have experience about us, whereas other human beings of our experience can have experience of us. However, this difference is from outside point of view and from the point of view of the experience the difference is notional. In our enthusiasm to maintain the distinction between objects and other human beings, we forget that there are some similarities between them. For instance, both are external to the self. Further, the first-person-objective-experience is qualitatively different from the self-experience. Here without taking a strict Cartesian first-person position regarding certainty excluding the experience of the outer world, I would however, maintain that self-experience is the necessary requirement for moral autonomy. We might extend self-experience following GE Moore's proof of an

external world, to the 'first-person-objective-experience'. Self-experience which by extension includes first-person-objective-experience, is the minimum requirement for moral autonomy. I am not arguing that morality cannot be based on first-person-objective-experience. I am only saying that if we do this, it would be pure empiricism without taking self-experience into consideration. Here let me relate our discussion to the recent work on moral responsibility.

The Aristotelian conditions on moral responsibility require that an agent must meet certain 'epistemic' and 'freedom-relevant' conditions. Put negatively, says John Martin Fisher while reviewing the recent works on moral responsibility that, "the agent must not be ignorant of certain crucial features or consequences of his behaviour, and he must not be 'forced' to behave as he does. Both the epistemic and freedom-relevant conditions are important..." (1999: 98). Explaining the relation between autonomy and moral responsibility, Fisher says: "I believe that autonomy entails moral responsibility, but it is not the case that moral responsibility entails autonomy." (1997: 98). This minimum requirement is also accepted by Marina Oshana who maintains that, "when we say a person is morally responsible for something, we are essentially saying that the person did or caused some act (or exhibited some trait of character) for which it is fitting that she give an account." (In Fisher 1997: 77) On Oshana's approach, being morally responsible for something entails being accountable for it, and "x is accountable for y' can be unpacked as 'It is appropriate that x explains her intentions in doing (or

being) y'" (in Fisher 1997: 56). In addition, the 'self-disclosure' view of Watson on responsibility asserts that an agent is morally responsible insofar as the agent has the capacity to make choice freely and conduct his activity in accordance with such choices.

All these views accept that the minimum condition for holding someone responsible is the necessity of moral autonomy which as already pointed out is facilitated and fostered not only by 'freedom-relevant' conditions but also by 'epistemic relevant' conditions. Agreeing with this I further want to add that one of the necessary elements of this 'epistemic condition, is self-experience, without which it might relapse into crude empiricism. In other words, I argue that we can genuinely call someone autonomous when he or she has self-experience, (or other experience which can eventually be traced to self-experience.) be in his or her epistemology. However, there are certain things, such as birth and death about which there can never be any self-experience, but either first-person-objective-experience or only the third person account. This limit to self-knowledge, in turn imposes limit to morality, for instance, this does not allow drawing strong moral conclusions. Therefore, the necessary, though not sufficient requirement for basing morality is the self-experience and knowledge. Further, morality cannot be based on third person account without trespassing the liberal framework. To say that adults should look after children with responsibility is not only to breach liberal thrust but also to echo authoritarianism advocated by Plato and others who proposed that the

rulers should look after their subjects with responsibility. While we cannot equate the relation between Plato's guardians and the subjects to be same as parents and children, at the same time we cannot carelessly suppose that there are differences and be silent about the issue.

Therefore, self-experience or knowledge is the basic requirement to arrive at moral principles, as morality 'engages our responsibility in a way non-moral matters do not', 'moral knowledge is supposed to be *practical* knowledge' and requires 'autonomy'. (Karen Jones 1999: 57-58). Self-experience is the basis for morality and can fulfil autonomy requirement. Even in the case where I act on the basis of 'x', if I am rewarded or punished for that act, it is because I have chosen to believe 'x' not because it is 'x's' perception.

Both the pro-life and pro-choice seem to be basing their assertion on the premise that they know about birth and death, when actually what we know is only an inferential or objective knowledge. We may even know when life begins and when it ends, but we do not and cannot have self-experience about our own birth and death. The pro-choice group asserts in favour of abortion, when they have no, and even in future cannot have, self-experience about birth. Similarly, the pro-life asserts against abortion when they have no self-experience about birth. Even the idea of life as sacred, held by pro-life activists is ill founded given the lack of self-experience about birth. The underlying assumption amongst these contrary positions is one of the degrees of assertion, i.e., they draw final conclusions where they can only draw tentative conclusions. Any assertion about birth would remain tentative and hypothetical and can

never be certain. As we cannot have self-knowledge about birth we cannot have strong morality, hence the moderate position.

If you accept Descartes, then you can draw consistent morality, as pre-adult domain cannot be the moral domain, but if you trespass into the pre-adult domain, then you can have a realistic but not consistent morality. From this logical inevitability of not having first person knowledge about birth and death, I am not suggesting that we should not make any decisions about abortion. Unlike Descartes and others who demarcate the child realm from the adult realm and fail to raise and answer the question, where does the adult come from?<sup>7</sup> I would overcome this problem by introducing a distinction between *strong* and *weak* morality. We can have tentative weak moral conclusion and should avoid drawing strong moral conclusions, either for or against abortion, as we cannot have self-experience about birth, like the pro-choice and the pro-life groups. We can at most tentatively make context dependent limited conclusions, hence moderate position. Here my acceptance of moderate view is not out of 'frustration' and 'indecision' like others. (Davis 1993: 524-525).<sup>8,9</sup> Further, like the adult comes from the pre-adult and similarly the strong morality of the adult domain comes from the weak morality of the pre-adult, thus I see the weak morality as the basis for the strong morality. Though strong morality arises out of weak morality, it need not always be restricted by it. It can outgrow or even import from outside later, if these help the individuals better. Thus postulated, the notion of individual here is closely related to the child domain. This way, we can

relate the aggressive rationality of modernity with the non-rational aspects.

#### MODERATE POSITION AND THE MENACE OF RELATIVISM

Here let me also point out that there may be some who might accept either pro-life or pro-choice not because they are convinced about these positions but they wanted to avoid the nihilistic implications associated with relativism and moderate position on abortion is an instance of relativism. Elucidating this implication Hilary Putnam says:

If you and I are not the first-person relativist in question, then the truth about me and about you and about the friends and the spouse of the first-person relativist is, for the first person relativist, simply a function of his or her own dispositions to believe. This is why first-person relativism sounds like thinly disguised solipsism. But it is hard to see why cultural relativism is any better off in this respect. Is solipsism with a 'we' any better than solipsism with an 'I'? (1992-76)

Here Putnam's first preference is not objectivism, he is objectivist because of the consequences of relativism. To save my account of moderate position, which is a version of relativism from these nihilistic implications, I offer the following explanation.

Having made the case for moderate position let me clarify its vulnerability to relativism. I accept 'p' and 'not p', in our context pro-choice and pro-life, which look logically opposed to one another because self-knowledge of both birth and death are not possible. Here let me contrast this instance of accepting both 'p' and 'not p' with Donald Davidson's refutation of

relativism and show how this instance while accepting his criticism of relativism, however, works out an instance where there is no inconsistency in accepting both 'p' and 'not p'. According to Davidson:

The dominant metaphor of conceptual relativism that of differing points of view, seems to betray an underlying paradox. Different points of view make sense, but only if there is a common co-ordinate system on which to plot them; yet the existence of a common system belies the claim of dramatic incompatibility. (1984: 184)

While agreeing with Davidson that accepting both would be crossing the 'absurd', because it makes no sense to say that both 'p' and 'not p' are true, as we know that one of them has to be true. However, suppose we accept both 'p and not p' not because we know what 'p' is but because we do not have the knowledge, in our case the self-knowledge about the reality about which 'p' and 'not p' is claimed to be the conceptual schemes. For instance,<sup>10</sup> I know John and someone says that 'John is good man,' and other says, 'John is wicked.' I can agree with both of them, as Davidson rightly pointed out, only if there is a common co-ordinate system on which I can plot these two different points of views, and yet the common system denies claims of incompatibility. Here I accept Davidson's criticism on relativism. However, let me point out that his position is dependent on truth and the knowledge about truth. Let me discuss an instance, which falls outside the parameters of truth and knowledge about truth. Take for instance, a situation where I do not know about John and someone says that he is good and other says that he is wicked. Imagine a threshold where I confronted these incompatibility positions.

If I can cross the threshold and can verify John then one of it is false and another true, but suppose I cannot cross the threshold and logically cannot have the knowledge about John. And I agree with both of them, not because I know John but because I do not know him and cannot know him as there is no chance of meeting him. I do not think we would be committing any logical mistake if we say that both 'p' and 'not p' are accepted, because we have no knowledge about the reality to which 'p' and 'not p' are the attributes. Thus, the instance where the disagreements in the form of 'p' and 'not p' are not 'dependent . . . on a foundation—some foundation—in agreement', (1984: 196-197) as we have no first person knowledge about these foundations but have only an inferential knowledge. This instance of relativism resolves the incompatibility not at the level of 'p' and 'not p' but at the level of the foundations on which both 'p' and 'not p' are based. This instance, I am sure would be acceptable to Davidson. In fact, this instance falls outside the purview of his discussion, namely his assumption of truth, whereas I am evoking an instance outside truth. Further, there is another difference with reference to morality. One can draw strong moral implications from the assertions of truth but can only arrive at tentative and weak morality from ignorance. Thus, I think that the major reason lurking behind the dead ends or foreclosing of any possibility of arriving at a reasonable solution on the abortion is the logical inevitability of not having the certain knowledge about birth and death.

Thus, we can have only inferential or first-person-objective-experience and not self-experience about one's

own birth and death. From this I am not concluding that we should either endorse or reject abortion. I have only suggested that given the logical predicament it may not be possible to derive final moral conclusion, either for or against abortion. In conclusion, I have pointed out that the modest thing to do in dealing with issues such as abortion (and even euthanasia) is to suspend absolute conclusions and accept a moderate position. However, this acceptance is not because we have knowledge about birth and death but because we have no such certain self-knowledge and logically can never have any such knowledge. So in this essay my argument is that at least in some cases like abortion and possibly euthanasia, it is not possible to come up with one line arguments either in favour or against, but the final decision in each case has to have several reasons for and considerable number of exceptions, all of which should enter into the making of the final decision, which need not always be true. The domain encompassing this is what I call *weak morality*. The weakness is because of non-availability of self-experience of birth. Unless this logical and epistemological predicament surrounding abortion is accepted, we will continue to proliferate arguments thus making the debate on abortion more and more tedious and onerous. Accepting these epistemological limitations as pointed out in this essay might bring more clarity to the debate on abortion.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am extremely grateful to PR Bhatt and AV Afonso for their helpful comments on the recent draft of this article.

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3. For more on this see Tamar Schapiro's essay entitled, "What is a child?" (1999).

4. There are also other instances like: (i) arriving at first-hand experience from the second-hand experience discussed by Karen Jones (1999, pp. 75-76)

5. Kant also accepts this Enlightenment morality, which encompasses the adults and discards childhood, he too bases morality on reason, which is an adult realm and discards emotion or the non-rational features thus endorsing the Cartesian moral framework. Further, for morals are inculcated into human beings by tutors and not parents. The moral education in the childhood is not important for Kant. For him non-rational aspects such as emotions, pathological love, etc., which cannot become the basis for morality, surround childhood.

6. The inferential knowledge can, however, be classified according to intensity and range. For instance, mother has the closer inferential knowledge about the birth of the child.

7. The gender implication of this demarcation has been explicated by Susan M. Okin (1989).

8. The dead-ends within the theoretical domain has set Faye Ginsberg (1989), an anthropologists, to move 'closer to' society and look at the practice of abortion at the community level, and survey how abortion was received and perceived by the women in a community. Her attempt made it possible to take into consideration the actual practices, displaying in the process openness to diverse opinions from actual societies on this issue. My reasons for accepting the moderate position unlike Ginsberg are due to epistemological and logical limitation.

9. However, even these Moderate positions are alleged to have been not arrived at 'through careful examination' and 'arguments' but are the result 'out of frustration or indecision,' hence cannot 'provide ground for' the 'adoption of Moderate social policies and laws'. (Davis 1993, pp. 524-525).

10. This example has to be taken figuratively not literally.

NOTES

1. Earl Conee, in his essay tried to sever an assumed relation between metaphysics and moral conclusion about abortion, thus making the debate on abortion thinner. He argues how "metaphysical [study of persons] seem quite generally to be incapable of providing any support for a moral conclusion about abortion." (1999, p. 621)
2. The pro-choice group inherited the Cartesian and Kantian adult paradigm. Descartes and Kant offer important distinctions in order to justify their assumption. For instance, Kant introduced the distinction in his *Doctrine of Right* between 'passive citizens' (children) and 'active citizens,' (adults), to explain his assumption about their adult paradigm which is the site of rationality.

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