

# When Life Begins

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The sanctity of life is the core of our moral consciousness. But 'life' has fuzzy edges. It is no easy matter to define precisely where life, in the moral rather than biological sense, begins and ends. For Buddhism this fuzziness is normal, for we are accustomed to view the world in terms of interrelated processes rather than independent entities. Yet our need for clarity in deciding delicate moral questions is no less. In this essay I will analyze some strands of the debate on the inception of life and the ethics of abortion. I will suggest that a Buddhist approach provides us with useful tools that can steer away from moral extremism and focus on a compassionate response to the real issues. For the sake of brevity I will limit my discussion to the ethics of abortion. However we should recognize that many other procedures, such as IVF, cloning, genetic engineering, and stem-cell technology also involve the destruction of embryos.

Discussion of the ethics of abortion has generally, I believe, been dominated by two extremist positions. These are identified by the slogans 'Life' and 'Choice'. In Buddhist thought these ideas are called 'eternalism' and 'annihilationism'. The word 'eternalism' refers to the belief that the self exists eternally. The word 'annihilationism' refers to the belief that the self will perish, usually at death. In this essay I will focus on some influential streams of thought within Christianity and scientific materialism as prominent contemporary examples of these two extremes.

## THE ETERNAL SOUL AND THE SANCTITY OF LIFE

Christians typically believe that each human possesses a 'soul'. This is a spiritual entity, a spark of the life of God, which distinguishes humans from all other beings, and grants humans a unique ethical value. It is because humans possess a soul that the deliberate killing of a human being, usually called 'murder', is such a terrible crime. This soul enters the embryo at the moment of conception. From that point on, the embryo is in the moral sense a fully-fledged human being, deserving of the same moral consideration as you and I. To kill such a being is murder.

Labeling abortion as 'murder' is a highly emotive strategy, and has led to ugly scenes where women who wished to have abortions were harassed and abused. The use of the label stems from the simple definition of 'murder' as 'the intentional killing of a human being'. If an embryo is a human being, to kill it must be murder. However the concept of 'murder' is not

so cut and dried. There are many instances of 'intentional killing of a human being' that we do not call 'murder'. When one soldier kills another in wartime we just call it 'killing', not murder. When a state kills a criminal we call it 'execution'. When a person kills themselves we call it 'suicide'. So labeling abortion as 'murder' is absolutist and simplistic. It begs the question as to whether abortion is intentional killing of a human being in the relevant sense. The assertion that abortion is murder rests on a metaphysical theory, and as such is inherently unprovable. The acceptance of this theory is dependent on faith in revealed dogmas as defined within a particular religious community, and has no relevance outside that community.

## THE EMERGENCE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

As we all know, recent years have seen most societies move rapidly away from eternalist viewpoints such as Christianity towards the annihilationist perspective of scientific materialism. It has become the new orthodoxy. While the eternalists derive our moral value from the possession of a soul, the materialists typically relate moral value to consciousness. We deserve ethical consideration because we are conscious beings. So the question then becomes, when does consciousness arise?

Materialists believe that the primary substance that makes up the world is matter. In the right conditions, matter can evolve into the complex organisms that we call 'life'. At a certain level of complexity consciousness emerges. Consciousness is thus regarded as an 'epiphenomenon' of matter. Many materialists believe that this consciousness arises in the embryo in the third or fourth month of pregnancy. Since our moral worth derives from this consciousness, it is believed that for the first three months the embryo is merely a piece of meat deserving of no moral consideration.

This process can be compared with the picture on the screen of a television set. The individual parts do not contain even a little bit of the picture. Rather, the picture appears in total when the parts are put together. It's a compelling metaphor – but a misleading one. In the case of a television set, the parts are made separately and then put together. But in the case of a living being our different parts unfold from the genetic information contained in the DNA. Each cell includes the total genetic information for the body. So it would seem more natural to speak of a gradual unfolding of the inherent potential of consciousness. Moreover, in the case of a television set the causality is one-way. The television set causes the picture but the picture doesn't cause the television set. Again the analogy falls flat, because in all ordinary states of consciousness the body and the mind co-exist in a complex two-way relationship. The effectiveness of the analogy stems from the underlying assumption that there is a linear, one-way causality from the brain to the mind. But that is the very question we are asking.

When we ask why the materialists believe that consciousness is an emergent property of matter, we can see that this conclusion follows from the assumptions of scientific methodology itself. Scientists will generally only accept evidence if it can be 'objectively' proven and tested. But there can be no such thing as 'objective' proof, for the acceptance or rejection of a proof are mental acts, and mental events are necessarily subjective. In practice we settle for an 'intersubjective acquiescence'; that is, when there is sufficient evidence,

observable through the five external senses, to convince a certain scientific community. Scientific method is thus unable, at present, to directly investigate the mind. All it can do is examine externally observable phenomena, such as behavior and brain activity, and then infer correlations with the mental realm. So it comes as no surprise to find that the scientific theory of consciousness also starts with the physical realm and sees consciousness emerging from that. This theory is embodied in the assumptions of scientific method and therefore cannot be tested by that method. It is not an empirically falsifiable conclusion, and hence is unscientific. It is a metaphysical speculation, an unwarranted inference derived from the assumption that scientific method is the sole and sufficient means of uncovering truth.

#### AVOIDING THE EXTREMES

These two paradigms for approaching the question of the moral status of the embryo are extremes. The eternalists hold that abortion is murder; the most heinous of crimes, while the annihilationists hold that it is of no moral consequence whatsoever. We can see that the two extremes each offer a simple, clear framework for understanding the ethics of abortion. This is why they remain powerful and attractive ideas. We can also see that the conclusions are counter-intuitive. Many of us feel that an embryo is deserving of moral consideration, yet we would hesitate to equate abortion with murder. This is an example of how absolutist philosophical positions generate moral extremism. In practice, we typically settle for an uneasy compromise between the two. This is no true 'middle way' but is a political expedient driven by social necessity. Unfortunately, the debate is usually conducted on the level of moral convictions and scientific evidence without addressing the underlying metaphysical assumptions. Too often we balk at subjecting our most deeply cherished beliefs, whether scientific or religious, to a searching inquiry.

What can Buddhism offer us in this regard? Since Buddhism is a historical religion, we should begin by asking what the earliest records of the Buddha's teachings have to say. This is one way of grounding our discussion in deeper strata of our moral consciousness, not allowing ourselves to be swept away by the tides of contemporary opinion. Of course, we must still be prepared to subject the traditional understanding to scrutiny in the light of modern evidence.

The Pali canon contains several passages dealing with the process of conception in the womb and the advent of consciousness. The Maha Tanhasankhaya Sutta states that conception is dependent on the coming together of three things: the mother and father come together; the mother is fertile; and the being to be reborn is ready. The term 'coming together' means 'same place, same time'. Thus this passage implies that consciousness appears at the time of conception. The Maha Nidana Sutta is even clearer. It states that if consciousness does not enter the mother's womb, mentality & physical form cannot 'coagulate' inside the womb. In yet another passage, conception is said to depend on the 'six elements', including consciousness. All of these statements occur in discussions of the key doctrine of dependent origination and thus carry great authority. In the monastic Vinaya, too, the appearance of the embryo is equated with the arising of the 'first mind, the first consciousness' in the mother's womb. Thus all of these contexts treat conception as involving a combination of mental and physical factors, with the mental factors primary.

This of course reflects the basic philosophy of Buddhism that mind is the forerunner of all things.

So the texts state that consciousness is present from the inception of life. A being who is conscious can feel pain, and therefore deserves moral consideration. It goes without saying, however, that the ability of a newly conceived embryo to feel pain is very rudimentary, perhaps comparable to someone in a deep coma or under a deep anaesthetic. According to Buddhism these are states of consciousness, but too dim to be noticed when compared with the glare of waking consciousness. The texts frequently speak of the 'growth, increase, and maturing' of the newly reborn consciousness. In accordance with the findings of science, the texts speak of the gradual development of the embryo's sense faculties. But unlike the scientists, they do not assume that consciousness does not appear until the senses develop. So while the embryo certainly deserves moral consideration, its limited capacity to feel pain means that killing an embryo falls short of 'murder'.

There is clear support for this conclusion in the Vinaya. This states that a monk or nun should never, for the whole of their life, intentionally kill a human being, 'even to the extent of causing an abortion'. Similarly, they should not have sexual intercourse 'even to the depth of a sesame seed'. They should not steal 'even as much as a blade of grass'. They should not lay claim to spiritual attainments 'even by saying "I delight in an empty dwelling"'. So abortion is clearly regarded as intentional killing of a human being; yet it is the least serious act of this kind.

So the Buddhist texts pertaining to abortion provide a classic model for a 'middle way', which accepts some of the propositions of the extreme views, while avoiding their absolutist and simplistic conclusions. Together with the eternalists we believe that an embryo from the time of conception is endowed with a non-physical property that entitles them to moral consideration. However we do not accept that this principle is a spiritual entity, a spark of God's glory; nor do we accept that this supposed 'soul' is a unique distinguishing feature of humanity. We believe that it is a conditioned stream of consciousness, ever changing and evolving as it passes from life to life. Together with the annihilationists we believe that the weight of moral consideration due to an embryo is not static, but gradually increases with the development of the embryo's mind towards full awareness. However we do not accept that it can be proved that the inception of consciousness takes place only after three or four months. This is an ethically arbitrary date which simply marks the present day limits of scientific knowledge, but tells us nothing about the moral status of the embryo.

#### WHY BELIEVE IN REBIRTH?

So much for the textual and theoretical side. These considerations, of course, are only of direct relevance to the Buddhist community. Is there any way of empirically checking these ideas? According to Buddhism there two means – through direct observation of the process of rebirth, and through inferential understanding of the conditioned evolution of consciousness in time. Direct observation is the psychic power to recollect past lives, or else to perceive where beings are reborn. It seems that these abilities, which are normally said to be the fruit of deep meditation, can in some people occur spontaneously. Children below the age of seven seem to often be able to recollect details of their past life and death. Obviously

these abilities are not generally accepted in the scientific community. But there would seem to be no theoretical obstacle to scientific tests of such claims. For example, a number of different people who professed such powers could be asked some questions, and the answers could be checked against each other. Or else historical data could be extracted which could be checked against known records. There have already been a number of positive experiments along these lines, although I do not know if they have any direct bearing on the question of the inception of consciousness. In any case, if accurate and testable information can be obtained through such psychic powers, it would seem reasonable to grant them a degree of credibility.

According to Buddhism, the second way of confirming rebirth is through understanding the conditioned origination of consciousness. We repeatedly contemplate the arising and passing of consciousness in the present moment. We see how selfish desires give rise to mental proliferation, and how letting go leads to peace. We extend this principle to the past and the future, and infer that our consciousness in this life arose because of craving in the past, and that as long as we do not completely let go, we will continue to generate consciousness in the future. This kind of understanding says nothing of the specific details of past lives, so cannot be tested by any simple empirical means. But we can ask whether dependent origination offers a meaningful and useful framework for dealing with the kinds of psychological issues we face today. If the answer is yes, then again we should grant this teaching a degree of credibility.

For Buddhists, however, such proofs remain secondary. Most Buddhists believe in rebirth because it is an intrinsic strand in the fabric of their world. They accept the world-view of Buddhism because they believe it is beneficial for themselves and their society. The teachings form a coherent and rational whole. So when they see the more basic ethical teachings confirmed in their own lives, they are willing to take the more abstract tenets on trust. They would no more think of empirically testing such tenets than you or I would think of empirically testing the Theory of Relativity. We accept the Theory of Relativity – insofar as we understand it at all – because of our faith in science. These days there are many people all over the world, Buddhists and non-Buddhists, who believe in rebirth. It is likely that their numbers will increase as Buddhism becomes recognized as offering a meaningful and satisfying way of living and dying.

## THE SOCIAL DIMENSION

The primary concern of this essay has been to investigate the philosophical basis for a Buddhist ethic of abortion. However I may perhaps be forgiven for venturing out of my sphere of competence so far as to offer some thoughts regarding the social dimension of this ethic. It is apparent that in many countries abortion has been technically illegal, yet unofficially sanctioned and widespread. We should understand that Buddhists do not generally accept that if something is wrong it must necessarily be made illegal. Such matters must be considered in their social context. Making abortion illegal makes criminals out of women who may often be going through a traumatic experience. And it leaves the market wide-open to unscrupulous practitioners

I would suggest that a more humane approach would be to make abortion and other such technologies legal, but very closely monitored. We must ensure that we, and our sons and daughters, are provided with all the information, guidance, and support we need to enable us to make such life and death decisions responsibly. Children should be given explicit and thorough education at school in the relevant biological, sexual, ethical, and religious issues. When a woman seeks an abortion, she and the father should be provided with detailed information and personal counseling before making the final decision. Our society must accept that addressing the issue of abortion involves not just making moral judgements and providing medical services, but also education in contraception and in responsible relationships. We must offer women a meaningful alternative through adequate child support and social services.

One implication of the gradualist approach to this question is that the moral gravity and kammic consequences of carrying out an abortion will increase each day as the pregnancy continues. Thus it is imperative that we read, discuss, and think about the issues before an unwanted pregnancy occurs. This will hopefully help us to act more responsibly, to consider the issues with a clearer mind, and to make a mature, reasoned decision without undue delay.

Even those who believe that abortion is merely a surgical procedure must acknowledge that on the emotional level abortion is quite different from other medical procedures. Many women feel that a child has come to them, that a special being has chosen their body to grow into new life, and they have thrust it away. If the mother decides to have an abortion, there should be close support and monitoring of her emotional health after the operation. To help heal any emotional wounds we can encourage the mother to ask forgiveness from the being who chose to be her child, to spread loving kindness, and to undertake some positive, healing acts of generosity and helping others.

I would very much like to see a study of the effects of abortion on the emotional landscapes of women, and a comparison between women who decided to have an abortion and women who had unwanted pregnancies but decided to bear a child. How do they feel afterwards? Five years later? Ten years later? How many mothers would, when their child had grown up, say that they wished they had had an abortion?

#### LIVING WISDOM, CHOOSING COMPASSION

So in this essay I have attempted to sketch an outline of a Buddhist approach to abortion. I examined some of the prevailing arguments and concluded that the polarization of positions into 'Life' and 'Choice' can be traced back to incompatible philosophical paradigms, such as the eternalist viewpoint of the Christians and the annihilationism of the scientific materialists. Buddhism offers a middle way that treasures the sanctity of the life in the mother's womb from the time of conception, yet recognizes a gradual growth in the moral gravity of the act of killing. On the practical side, we must employ the twin virtues of compassion and wisdom, providing care and support for mothers and children, and ensuring the parents are provided with the information and advice they need to make a mature decision. I would like to finish with a verse from the Mangala Sutta.

Service to mother and father

Cherishing of spouse and child  
Ways of work without conflict  
This is the highest blessing