

The Moral Case for Abortion

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palgrave
macmillan

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ISBN 978-1-137-41118-1 ISBN 978-1-137-41119-8 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-41119-8

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016944837

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Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Macmillan Publishers Ltd. London

*In memory of Dr Wilbur Larch,
a moral standard bearer
for doctors everywhere who believe a pregnant woman
should be able to make her own choice.
The finest abortionist and obstetrician who never lived except in
the pages of John Irving's The Cider House Rules.*

*For my mother and her mother, two women of strong opinions, who taught
me "not to judge a woman unless you have walked a mile in her shoes."
And, as regards pregnancy... "A man can always put his hat on
and walk away."*

Preface and Acknowledgements

This short book has had a long gestation and I have been privileged to receive the support and encouragement of some very special people.

Professor Frank Furedi, author of many books on which I have drawn, has been an intellectual inspiration and rock and provided much advice, constructive criticism and encouragement. His work and conversation over many years has guided my own thinking. Being my husband, he has been subjected to my incoherent musings, obsessive preoccupations and random lines of thinking that went nowhere. As has my adult son, Jacob Furedi, who has played more of a role in this project than he appreciates.

My concern that women should be able to choose abortion was, in the first interest, triggered by compassion. When I was in my early twenties, I met a woman of a similar age who, pregnant in her early teens, was sent from her home in the Republic of Ireland to England for the duration of her confinement. Her father died when her pregnancy was well advanced, and she returned to his funeral unable to express her own grief. Being so concerned to show no sign of her pregnant belly, she was unable to accept the embraces of her relatives for fear they felt the swelling. After thirty years, I still think often of the barbaric emotional isolation of this girl who, following birth, would have her child adopted.

But compassion is not enough to justify abortion, and it is a feeble rebuttal to the challenges of those who claim abortion is murder and counter compassion for a woman with compassion for an unborn baby.

This was brought home to me when my above-mentioned son was about 10 years old. One evening, he turned his attention from the TV news on which we had watched an item on late abortion and, asked me: “Is that what you do ... kill babies? Because that’s horrible.” At home, we had always discussed my job running the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS), but the images of late gestation fetuses used in the programme had clearly hit home. I explained how I thought abortion was necessary even though it might seem a bit horrible. But although it was a convenient and simple explanation—drawing on some of what I explain in Chap. 2, even while I was talking—my mind went back to a question the same boy has asked many years earlier.

We were passing a field of sheep on the way to the nursery when a question floated from the backseat of the car, “Mum, do sheep *know*?” We then had as rich a conversation as one can have with a four year old about what amounts to the difference between human beings and animals. The boy was concerned that sheep might dread becoming lamb chops if they knew they were intended to be someone’s lunch.

The question of what a living entity knows has preoccupied me a lot over the years. How can sheep dread their future if they have no understanding of “lunch” or “meat” or “life” or “death” or “future”? Not all lives are the same and not all minds are the same. Whatever thought processes a sheep has, it cannot know and fear in the way we do. And it is human *knowing*, about situations and ourselves, that shapes our thoughts and feelings and fears—and makes us the persons we are. The connection of this to the morality of abortion may seem eccentric, but bear with me. When you reach Chap. 5, you will see where I have gone with this.

Deepest thanks are also especially due to Jon O’Brien, president of Catholics for Choice, a long-time friend and partner in many projects, who has taught me much about faith and the individual conscience and tolerated much impolite interrogation about Catholicism. In 2012, O’Brien and I convened an international meeting (supported by Catholics for Choice and the BPAS) of abortion providers, advocates and interested academics to discuss what it means to be “prochoice.” The meeting helped to frame many of the ideas discussed here, and a Declaration of Prochoice Principles that arose from that meeting follows my Concluding Thoughts.

Dr Jennie Bristow and Dr Ellie Lee, both influential writers, university teachers and founders of the Centre for Parenting Culture based at the University of Kent, have challenged and shaped my thinking greatly, especially as regards ways that contemporary motherhood is seen and how that impacts on the abortion debate.

David Paintin FRCOG, Dilys Cossey, Diane Munday and Madeleine Simms (now deceased) campaigned for legal abortion in the 1960s and their support for me has encouraged me more than they can know. David was the first abortion doctor I ever met, and he is still the most morally principled man I have ever known.

I owe a huge debt of gratitude to colleagues at the BPAS, who have provided intellectual and practical support. No one on earth has more insight into what women need from abortion than the leadership of the BPAS (Dr Patricia Lohr, Amanda Myers, Simon Marsh, Chris Plummer, Clare Murphy and Janet Kitchen) Special thanks to Clare Murphy's team (Abigail Fitzgibbon, Katherine O'Brien, Bethan Phillips, Donagh Stenson and Shaheen Hashmat) who, have sourced answers to the strangest questions from me and, led by Clare's example, provide a buzz of daily intellectual challenges for me to meet. I would also like to acknowledge the support of the Board of Trustees at the BPAS, who provided some time and much encouragement for me to complete this project. Special thanks are due to Professor Sally Sheldon for her advice to "never, ever open emails before you start writing." Without this instruction, I would never have completed the project.

This book has been far harder to write than I expected. It brings together empirical, sociological and philosophical reflections as interpreted by someone who has spent more years in abortion clinics than at university. It will be too academic for some and insufficiently academic for others. Intellectuals may find it too shallow; activists may find it too exploratory. But, it is what it is. It is my explanation of why women's choice must be set at the heart of abortion politics and abortion provision, and why those of us who strive to offer women choice do "good."

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