

CONCEIVING SELVES

What Pregnancy Can Teach Us about Ethics and Piety

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ABSTRACT

Many ethics instructors turn to peculiar examples and cases to highlight ethical concerns about autonomy and collective goods. While these efforts are respectable, they lamentably reinforce the valorization of independence and the opposition of individuality to collectivity that are too prevalent in ethics today. Attending to the event of pregnancy would help overcome these troubles. By concentrating on pregnancy, we can better appreciate the dependence that is integral to the human experience, the discrete value of each individual, the possible noncompetition between individual and society, and the importance of appreciating the sources of our existence. Religious ethicists would do well to think more about pregnancy, a condition which is *sui generis* and yet also illustrative of the fundamental interdependence of human beings.

KEYWORDS: *motherhood, pregnancy, autonomy, dependence, ethics of care, piety*

Where does one start when she wants to teach ethics? A survey of syllabi and introductory course notes reveal the usual suspects. Students are encouraged to consider whether one might be justified in telling lies to Nazis, or whether one ought to pull the lever that would send a runaway trolley on an alternative track.¹ Many courses draw on Bernard Williams's (1973) portrayal of "Jim and the Indians"—a parable that has not aged well. Some even discuss the loathsome case of "dwarf-tossing."² As an educator, I appreciate the value of striking hypotheticals that are less likely to activate students' precommitments. Yet it would be even more methodologically valuable in our teaching and scholarship to think with examples that are more commonplace.

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¹ So-called "trolley problems" were first introduced by Philippa Foot (1967). In such cases, one must consider whether she would divert a runaway trolley onto a track to save lives, but only by deliberately condemning those on the second track to death.

² Introductory courses in ethics teach the latter case as a sterilized alternative to debates about prostitution and pornography. Gerald Dworkin (2005) and Michael Sandel (2018) have used it as a paradigm for thinking about conflict between liberty and dignity.

In what follows, I commend to ethicists, and religious ethicists in particular, the event of pregnancy as a useful paradigm for ethical reflection. While the event of pregnancy deserves more attention in academic ethics in general, I argue that attending to the phenomenon of pregnancy can also yield a great deal of metaethical insights. The unique—and yet, in many ways, commonplace—circumstance of pregnancy reveals a great deal about human dependence and individuality.³ It also raises important challenges to some accepted wisdom about agency and autonomy, which can helpfully unsettle unjust assumptions. In order to avoid debates about abortion, I generally limit the scope of inquiry here to the period of pregnancy after about twenty-four weeks, the point when the fetus reaches viability, but continues to benefit from sustained gestation by its mother.⁴ As such, I will have little to say about a woman's right to have an abortion, though I do suspect that some of what we might learn from the discussion I offer here might helpfully inform ongoing debate about the matter.⁵ I thus recommend here that ethicists suspend, even if only provisionally, attention to debates about whether and when it is appropriate for women to terminate a pregnancy, and consider the relation between childbearer and the fetus inside her in late pregnancy.

In doing so, we will be induced to reconsider those prevailing assumptions about human dependence and individuality that are rightly complicated by the unique and commonplace event we call pregnancy. The corrections I advance include: appreciating our human dependence, instead of valorizing independence; respecting the discreteness of bodies, rather than allowing collective interests to override individual integrity; overcoming the tired juxtaposition between the individual and the collective of which she is a member; and recovering the ancient virtue of piety.

Before I turn to these four recommendations, it is appropriate that I offer one critical note about language. I use the term “mother” in an attenuated fashion: many mothers have never themselves been pregnant, and many pregnant women do not conceive of themselves as mothers. However, I nevertheless use the folk sense of the term to avoid burdensome language. I will often use the feminine pronoun, and also the word “woman,” to talk about those who are pregnant. I do not thereby at all mean to discount the experience and contribution of those innumerable trans-men who have carried and delivered babies. For this reason, I use the term gender-neutral term “childbearer” when possible. However, I also think it is imperative—as a matter of piety—that we recognize the fact the capacity to bear

³ It goes without saying that the experience of pregnancy is unique. Yet it is not uncommon. Between 80–90% of American women will have had children during their lives. The majority of those mothers will do so multiple times. See Miller (2018) and Livingston (2018).

⁴ A woman's right to have an abortion is protected by *Roe v. Wade* only to the point of fetal viability. After fetal viability, restrictions on abortions are determined by state law, though almost all states merely differ here only about the exceptions to those restrictions. That frontier is difficult to draw, however.

⁵ Contrary to the suggestions of the expression, “late-term” abortions are usually those that are performed between twenty and twenty-four weeks, more than three months before the mother's due date and before the fetus is viable. They are also exceedingly rare.

children is not evenly distributed: only half of the human population is capable of doing this essential work. Finally, I use the term “fetus” to refer to that which a pregnant woman bears. In seeking to be ecumenical on the issue of abortion, I use a term that advocates of both sides can adopt to name that which the pregnant woman carries. Supporters of the pro-choice movement recognize it as a fetus. Supporters of the pro-life movement would say that this fetus is not just a fetus but *also* a person; in so insisting, however, they do not deny that the being the pregnant woman carries is a fetus.

1. A Declaration of our Dependence

It can be quite striking, on reflection, to consider the fact that nearly the first entire year of our lives is spent inside another human being.⁶ Not just our organs, but our very selves are first cultivated within the confines of another person’s body.⁷ Of course, that is to say nothing of the between one and two decades that many of us spend reliant on our caregivers’ provision. Most Western ethical imaginaries, however, conceive of ethical agents as detached, unencumbered entities. Seyla Benhabib (2004, 156) rightly excoriates Hobbes, for example, for having recommended that we “consider men . . . as if but even now sprung out of the earth, and suddenly, like mushrooms.” Perhaps this is how we would like to imagine ourselves: owing nothing to anyone, freely choosing and freely acting. It does, after all, quicken the breath to think about that first year each of us developed our limbs and lungs and brains within the confines of another person.⁸ But the fact remains that none of us can take any credit for our own fetal growth, our appearance in the world, the bodies we inhabit. Our very selves have been granted to us. Social theorists have, after all, had increasingly more to say about the “given” and the “givenness” of human life in recent decades, but not nearly as much to say about who exactly has been doing the giving. We would do better to acknowledge not only *that*, but also *by whom*, we have inherited our lives.⁹

So ought ethicists. Susan Moller Okin (1989, 9–10), for example, forcefully writes in *Justice, Gender, and the Family* that “theorists of justice . . . take mature, independent human beings as the subjects of their theories without any mention

⁶ East Asian societies incorporated this fact in their identification of age. Traditionally, babies in most of East Asia were considered to be a year old at their birth. This system has all but disappeared in China, Japan, and Vietnam, but it still prevails in South Korea. A westerner travelling there thus has to add a year to her age to correspond to the local age calculation scheme.

⁷ This is an overlooked experience not only in contemporary United States society more generally, but also in the field of religious ethics. We rightly pay attention to the religious aspects of death and mourning, but rarely consider the experience of childbearing and birthing. There are, however, ongoing efforts to foreground the experience and practice of motherhood in the discipline; this special issue of the *JRE* represents one such effort.

⁸ This perhaps not least because it reminds us that, as we have been born, so we will someday die.

⁹ This is as much a religious as it is an empirical question, which is another reason this example is so relevant in religious ethics.

of how they got to be that way.”¹⁰ Surely, significant progress has been made in the thirty years since Okin first published her *tour de force*. The work of caring for children and other dependents, done mostly by women, has received more attention, thanks to the painstaking labors of ethicists of care. Yet the work pregnant women have done to make each of our lives possible, and to sustain our collective life more generally, still goes unnoticed all too frequently, even by feminist ethicists.

To be fair, I can think of at least four reasons that motivate this abstention. First, feminists rightly seek to transcend the dyadic thinking that appears in works like Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice*, where women’s “nature” is subjected to a certain essentialist portrayal over and against that of their male counterparts. Second, it is important to vacate motherhood from the ideals of womanhood to which women are often subjected. Third, pregnancy raises thorny political questions about abortion that can undermine political unity. Fourth, pregnancy is an act of care that some people—including many women—cannot participate in, and so to highlight it can be exclusionary. Other difficulties remain. Nevertheless, I am troubled that such concerns have motivated feminist theory to consign pregnancy to the margins, even as almost nine out of ten women will become mothers at some point in their lives.¹¹

The work that pregnant women do, moreover, is not insignificant. The average mother will have spent years of her life either pregnant, postpartum, or breastfeeding—many more if she has experienced miscarriage or had multiple children. In that period of time, she will endure nausea and vomiting, bodily aches, sleep loss, fatigue, thyroid disease, blood pressure disorders, hemorrhaging, breast infections, and childbirth. As many as a third of American women also undergo major surgery in childbirth. Recovery from a caesarean section can take months. It is worth noting that these sacrifices are not merely of the childbearer’s time, or effort—although both of those are also demanded in pregnancy. What is remarkable is the way pregnancy requires the giving of one’s very body for that of another.¹² As we have rightly been reminded in recent decades by thinkers like Susan Bordo, the Cartesian mind-body dualism that permeates Western societies is sorely misguided.¹³ We live and move through the world in our bodies. To share them is a great offering.

Because each human is a product of pregnancy, it follows that for each of us to have been, some other person—perhaps someone we know well, but perhaps

¹⁰ Linda Barclay (2000, 57) affirms alongside Okin that “contemporary champions of individual autonomy, such as John Rawls and Robert Nozick presuppose women’s labor and care for the family and at the same time deny, even if implicitly, that they are politically relevant.”

¹¹ Furthermore, Bordo notably urges that while “[f]eminists may be made queasy” by focusing on pregnancy, “we stand a better chance of successfully contesting [patriarchy] if we engage in the construction of a public, feminist discourse on pregnancy and birth rather than leaving it in the hands of the ‘pro-lifers’” (2004, 95).

¹² It is not difficult to find in this fact echoes of Luke 22:19 and 1 Corinthians 11:24.

¹³ I am thinking especially of Bordo 2004.

someone we do not know at all—must have borne a great deal. That we tend to be sheepish about admitting our erstwhile dependence on those that once carried us is to our discredit. Lest the point be misunderstood: it is not that we ought to be more willing to *confess* our earliest dependence upon others, but that we ought to celebrate those upon whom we have been dependent. Reflecting on the demanding work of pregnancy, upon which all of our beings depend, should not prompt our shame, but our reverence and awe.

Of course, in some sense I am merely adding my vocal support to a chorus that long precedes me.¹⁴ The push to recognize and even value human dependence more openly has appeared in various fora for decades, including in this journal.¹⁵ While I may be adding to the surging crescendo on this theme, I do not want to merely amplify but also sharpen the claim. In considering the event of pregnancy, we do not merely witness the fact of human dependence, but also its universal reach. That is to say, while the degree of dependence varies across citizens at different stages of life, all of us universally—*without exception!*—are beneficiaries of the unique undertaking we call pregnancy. This is one of the remarkable facts of pregnancy: I cannot think of many other universals that have absolutely no exception.

Eva Feder Kittay helpfully foregrounds this fact in *Love's Labor*, now a classic in the ethics of care. Kittay discusses the identification of a human being as “some mother’s child,” and finds in that phrase a potential basis for human equality and dignity. Kittay explains that what a person is doing when she claims that she, too, is “some mother’s child,” is asserting her equality. Notably, though, she does so only “by invoking a property that she has only in virtue of a property *another* person has” (Kittay 1998, 25). Kittay thus calls this a “connection-based equality,” as opposed to “the individual-based equality more familiar to us” (Kittay 1998, 28). In her 2017 book *Human Dependency and Christian Ethics*, Sandra Sullivan-Dunbar contests Kittay’s account on the basis that many who are born of a woman, as Kittay puts it, do not enjoy the love or affection of the one who bore them. As such, we are not able to ground human equality in the fact that all humans were beloved by their mothers. I think, however, that this worry need not follow. To see why, we must return to where motherhood often begins: pregnancy.¹⁶ As we have seen, each of us has been a beneficiary of women who carried us, irrespective of their psychological state or sentiments toward us. Every single one of us owes our

¹⁴ I have in mind the scholarship done by so many feminist theorists that makes clear that dependence is not to be avoided, either as an empirical or a normative matter. This list includes Eva Feder Kittay (1998), Iris Marion Young (1990), Martha Nussbaum (2000), Virginia Held (2005), Adriana Cavarero (2014), among many others.

¹⁵ I am thinking here of Sullivan-Dunbar 2013.

¹⁶ In some cases, motherhood begins at adoption or a less formal assumption of caretaking duties. However, all beneficiaries of mothering begin their lives in the unique circumstance of pregnancy.

existence to the gestational efforts of someone else.¹⁷ The “connection” to which Kittay refers need not be one of affection or love, but can be constituted by the fundamental bodily connection that first made our lives possible. In the crucible of dependence that is pregnancy, each of us is forged into personhood only by virtue of the labors of another, regardless of their mental state. Therein lies our moral equality: our common indebtedness to those who carried us for the approximately nine months before our births.

The event of pregnancy thus reveals two things about dependence. It makes plain that human dependence is universal, and furthermore, that each of us is *equally* dependent in the earliest days of our lives.¹⁸ It also makes clear that that dependence need not be something to lament or fear, but in many cases, such as pregnancy, can be something to celebrate. There is, I should note, an important caveat to be made here. I do not mean to argue that dependence is good *as such*, such that the more dependence one experiences, the better off one is. We need not seek out ways to render ourselves dependent, so that we can benefit thereby. Indeed, it is not difficult to conjure cases of dependence that undercut the welfare of the dependent. I merely want to insist that neither is it the case that dependence is bad *as such*. We may benefit greatly from circumstances in which we find ourselves dependent upon another, and in such cases, we ought to celebrate that dependence.

2. Deliver Us

I have argued thus far that the work that pregnant women do has long gone underappreciated. But pregnant women have nevertheless received plenty of attention otherwise—in admonition and disciplining. Even as Western societies tend to fail to appropriately demonstrate appreciation for mothers, they simultaneously place unbearable degrees of responsibility on pregnant women, dubbed by one scholar as “total mothering” (Wolf 2011). In her 2005 *Mass Hysteria: Medicine, Culture, and Mothers’ Bodies*, Rebecca Kukla painstakingly shows how pregnant women have for too long been directed to subject their every decision to careful consideration about what would best serve the fetus they carry. As they consider their meal choices, for example, pregnant women are told to “make every bite

¹⁷ We might call this thinking about pregnancy “from the other side,” so to speak—an experience which we all have undergone, even if we don’t personally remember it. This would help us to do as Leora Batnitzky recommends: to highlight *all* humanity’s dependence, rather than base theories of an ethics of care on gendered assumptions about what counts as “feminine.” See Batnitzky 2004.

¹⁸ All fetuses are completely dependent upon the women that carry them until about the age of viability, and then continue to be dependent on them for their increasing benefit until the end of pregnancy. That said, the women upon whom they depend occupy different bodies and different social locations, and so may be disparately dependent on others. Women who are in more vulnerable social positions may also experience greater degrees of dependency than others. I am grateful to Candace Jordan for bringing this point to my attention.

count,” as per a passage of *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* that Kukla cites. The passage continues:

You’ve got only nine months of meals and snacks with which to give your baby the best possible start in life. Make every one of them count. Before you close your mouth on a forkful of food, consider, ‘Is this the best bite I can give my baby?’ If it will benefit your baby, chew away. If it’ll only benefit your sweet tooth or appease your appetite, put your fork down. (Kukla 2005a, 129)¹⁹

Failing to take seriously the “dangers” of sweets and other temptations constitutes what the authors of *What to Expect* call “Playing Baby Roulette.” One might object that this is only private advice, given individually to mothers. Kukla, however, illustrates how this kind of admonishment typifies a pervasive attitude that subordinates the needs and wishes of a pregnant woman to the welfare of the fetus she carries.

Pregnant women today are warned to avoid alcohol and smoking and to limit their caffeine intake. They are to refrain from consuming certain fish, soft cheeses, and unpasteurized milk products, as well as any foods that might contain listeria, including raw vegetables and cold meats. They are to avoid certain plastics, and forego X-rays. At the same time, they must remember to drink plenty of water, to consume enough protein, to take their vitamins—but also to scrupulously ensure those vitamins contain enough iron and folic acid—to exercise regularly, and, somehow, to keep their stress levels low all the while. Foregoing any of these responsibilities equates to spinning the baby-roulette wheel. As Deborah Lupton reports, “the pregnant woman has become a public figure. Her body is on display for others to comment upon, and even to touch, in ways not considered appropriate of any other adult body. Pregnant women find themselves subject in public to a critical and censorious gaze” (Lupton 2012, 332).

What justifies this degree of intrusion into women’s private spaces and choices? A disturbing collectivism is at work, which discounts the personhood of the pregnant woman, with all its attendant rights and privileges, for the sake of the welfare of the future citizen. As Kukla portrays the problem,

the fetus cannot become an inhabitant of civic space without serious repercussions for the maternal body in which it is housed. Insofar as the fetus is a public citizen whose rights and well-being are a matter of civic concern, the pregnant body, whose behavior can form and deform this fetus, becomes itself a civic space appropriately subject to social regulation and surveillance, like a school or a hospital. (Kukla 2005b, 294–95)

Kukla’s readers are rightly troubled by the easily identifiable parallels between the North American disciplining of pregnant women and, say, the Nazi requirement

¹⁹ A 2009 *Atlantic* article notes that Joan Wolf responded to this passage by writing, “any self-respecting pregnant woman should respond: ‘I am carrying 35 extra pounds and my ankles have swelled to the size of a life raft, and now I would like to eat some coconut-cream pie. So you know what you can do with this damned fork!’” (Rosin 2009).

that women breastfeed, or the United States' forced sterilization of "unruly" women—typically women of color (Kukla 2005a, 94).²⁰ In fact, in Puerto Rico, the procedure was simply referred to as "la operación," and as many as a third of Puerto Rican women were subjected to it.

By no means would I deny that the health and well-being of future generations is in the collective interest. Indeed, in a later section, I will insist that this is yet another reason that all members of a society ought to appreciate the work women do in pregnancy. Yet I want to argue that there are limits to what the collective interest in the health of future citizens can authorize, especially in terms of state restrictions on women and pregnant women.

Consider, for example, present-day efforts to penalize women for activity they undergo while pregnant. Several state legislatures have enacted or are considering laws that criminalize the use of certain substances, including alcohol, while pregnant, calling such a practice "prenatal child abuse."²¹ In several states, pregnant women who test positive for certain drugs can be involuntarily committed; proposals to detain or otherwise penalize women who birth babies with fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) are also prevalent. Public concerns about FAS are fairly raised: the disorder can render children severely physically and cognitively disabled; treatment and therapy of an individual with FAS costs two million dollars, on average, over a lifetime; and it is completely preventable. Why not deter pregnant women from engaging in an activity that can cause such grave consequences? Doing so would undoubtedly benefit individuals *and* the community as a whole.

Yet it is worth recognizing that while there is no established limit under which drinking during pregnancy is safe, there is also no evidence to show that moderate alcohol consumption can lead to FAS. Furthermore, the most dangerous period for consuming alcohol during pregnancy, in terms of its risk for exposing the fetus to FAS, begins at three weeks gestation, before a woman can even know that she is pregnant. For this reason, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has officially recommended that all women who are not on birth control refrain from consuming alcohol (Victor 2016). That recommendation, it should be noted, met significant opposition, especially when one CDC official referred to all women of childbearing age as "pre-pregnant" (Armstrong 2017, 66).

Thus, the objections to the criminalization of drinking while pregnant are manifold. Not only does it seem wrong to penalize women for a "crime" they simply cannot know they are committing, but a consequence of doing so would be to render most women of childbearing age potentially vulnerable to criminal penalties. Additionally, studies have shown that criminalizing prenatal drinking deters women from getting prenatal care, which has a vastly greater influence on the

²⁰ Kukla notes, citing Marilyn Yalom's *A History of the Breast*, that Nazi women were also required to undergo regular exams to determine how much milk they produced. The heartbreaking stories of sterilization of African American, Native American, and Puerto Rican women are foregrounded in Solinger (2005).

²¹ State Supreme Courts in Alabama and South Carolina have upheld such laws.

wellbeing of a fetus. Penalizing women, either before or after childbirth, itself also tends to have detrimental effects on the welfare of their children.

It seems to me that this challenging state of affairs is incredibly compelling and stimulating, and thereby merits more serious attention in lecture halls and classrooms. The relevant considerations are affecting: thousands of children are born every year with a devastating, completely preventable, neurological disorder; meanwhile, in an effort to combat that disorder, millions of women are demoted to “pre-pregnant,” diminishing their status as autonomous individuals. Not only is this a moving, germane, and accessible case study; it also teaches us important things about autonomy and rights. Too many cases in ethics writing and teaching posit or presume the interaction of independent actors. The widely accepted harm principle—which can be glossed by the old saw that says “your liberty ends where my nose begins”—presumes clear boundaries between actors. Yet in so many circumstances of great ethical consequence, it can be difficult to draw boundaries between persons, or to posit them on equal footing.²²

The trouble regarding the prevention of FAS is not easily resolved. By no means do I want to suggest it is. Rather, I want to recommend that we think in terms that seek to grant the dignity of both the fetus and the childbearer, rather than recurrently juxtaposing them in a zero-sum relationship. A useful heuristic for such a case, I want to suggest, can be found in the way St. Paul understands the relationship between the parts of the body of Christ in the Pauline epistles. Consider the following passage from 1 Corinthians 12:

[J]ust as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ . . . If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.”²³

Paul drew on this image throughout his epistles; while it is most thoroughly developed in 1 Corinthians, it also appears in Romans, Colossians, and Ephesians. In the bodily metaphor, he identified a mutual interdependence that entails not hierarchy but parity: no body part, no matter how significant or strong, can dismiss the rest. Each needs every other. In fact, not only does each part need every other, but the parts must also be different.

Paul’s metaphor of society-as-body was by no means original.²⁴ Oligarchic rulers used the image to convince the masses to accept social inequalities by arguing

²² I suspect that this difficulty is at the heart of the fifth-century disputes over Mary being styled as the *theotokos*, or “God-bearer.” Because of the *communicatio idiomatum*, it is not just Christ’s humanity that is born by a human, but God’s own self is borne by the pregnant Mary. For discussion, see Frost 2019.

²³ 1 Corinthians 12:12, 15–21; also see Romans 12:4–5.

²⁴ For discussion, see Martin 1995, 45; Horrell 1996, 178–79.

that that even the apparently lazy belly—which, of course, corresponded to the moneyed classes—performed a necessary function in society. Latin historians including Livy and Dionysius report that the Roman senator Menenius Agrippa successfully used this fable to quiet a riotous multitude. When Paul drew on the same metaphor, however, he did so not to justify social inequality, but rather to undermine it, in order to promote an alternative social vision (Martin 1995, 47, 68). Instead of leveraging the metaphor of the body to the benefit of one or another social class, Paul used it to stress the distinctive value of each of an organism's many parts.

A Pauline appreciation of the pregnant body, corresponding to this framework of unity-in-diversity, would recognize the intrinsic integrity of every woman's body. Even as the oligarchs justified the exploitation of some members of the social body for the purported benefit of all—not unlike how the sterilization of poor women was justified in recent decades for the purported benefit of all—Paul heartily rejected that approach. For Paul, the recognition of difference between individual members does not mean they fail to identify with one another; rather, it demands their mutual identification all the more (see 1 Corinthians 12:22–26).

What might change about the struggle to prevent FAS (and other disorders) if we were to adopt a more Pauline view? With such an approach, we might better grapple with the fact that fetal alcohol exposure is usually more likely to lead to FAS in cases where the pregnant mother is undernourished, exposed to abuse, or smoking. We might work toward ameliorating the issue by caring for pregnant women—even those who struggle with addiction—rather than incarcerating them. We might recognize the value of providing free prenatal care, one of the best ways to ensure not only the health of the fetus but also the woman who carries it. We would better recognize that the pregnant woman is not to be treated as a mere baby receptacle but respected as a free and responsible person—and this recognition would also likely lead to healthier and happier births.

3. Mommy vs. Me

In the preceding discussion, I have brought to the reader's attention circumstances that seem to put the welfare of fetuses and the welfare of mothers into sharp relief. It is undeniably the case that in certain ways, these goods can conflict. Carrying a fetus takes inestimable effort and can impose long-lasting costs on a childbearer.²⁵ In the opening chapter of her recent *Motherhood: A Confession*, for example, Natalie Carnes (2020, 12) reflects on her midwives' report—apparently presented with “too much cheer”—that “your body will take calcium from your

²⁵ Shulamith Firestone (1970) has famously argued that the biological phenomenon of pregnancy will always keep women in a position of oppression. Only when we develop the ability to gestate children in artificial wombs will patriarchy end. I have to confess that I am troubled by this vision. Romanticizing the possibility of children emerging *ex nihilo* puts Firestone's ideal closer to the patriarchal imaginations of Hobbes than she might admit.

bones to give it to your baby.” In the maternal theology she offers, Carnes conceives of the calcium sacrifice mothers make as “a faint echo, a sign, of Christ’s gifts.” For Carnes, pregnancy inescapably entails some sort of sacrifice on behalf of another.

Yet pregnancy is not merely, and perhaps not even primarily, a sacrifice. Nor is the relationship between mother and fetus a zero-sum game. As Carnes notes only paragraphs after her reflection on her calcium offering, fetuses also grant their mothers fetal cells that, in Carnes’ telling, “help tend the wounds in my body and repair any brokenness in my heart.”²⁶ Even as they enjoy the provision offered to them by another, fetuses also grant benefits to the ones carrying them. In this instance and many others, pregnancy can be a mutually beneficial relationship.

Here is yet another marvel of the event of pregnancy: it can also be mutually beneficial. After all, for a pregnant woman, offering care to the fetus inside her often—if not always—means she must also care for herself. This includes, as discussed above, eating and sleeping well and avoiding harmful substances. The benefits of these undertakings do not just accrue to the fetus inside her; the pregnant woman also enjoys the benefits of this care. In fact, it is precisely *because* these activities benefit her that they benefit the fetus inside her—they quite literally share blood. As Sandra Sullivan-Dunbar (2017, 82) points out, “mothers often experience the pressing desire to breastfeed precisely because their babies need to be fed, and the physiology of breastfeeding means that the baby’s need for food becomes the mother’s need to release her milk.”²⁷ The mother’s need is not to be conceived over and against that of her child; their needs and desires are by no means mutually exclusive. That is not to say that the relationship between the pregnant woman and the fetus she bears is always one of mutual benefit.²⁸ It is simply to highlight that there are *both* competitive and non-competitive goods in the relationship between mother and fetus constituted by pregnancy.

Too often, ethical and social theorists posit agents in an oppositional relationship: we condemn to death *either* the five people tied to the track *or* the one person bound to a sidetrack. Admittedly, ethics is concerned with human action, and choices tend to be mutually exclusive. One can either make choice A or *not* make choice A, but not both. Insofar as many human goods are competitive, it is inevitable that we identify and contend with the opposition between, say, the five bound to the main track and the one person bound to the side track. However,

²⁶ Carnes (2020, 15) quotes a study which observes that “fetal cells selectively home to injured maternal hearts.”

²⁷ For the uninitiated, women who breastfeed need to empty their breasts on a regular basis. Otherwise, they pass through an uncomfortable stage of engorgement, which signals to the body that the baby no longer needs breastmilk, such that their body stops producing it. This is why, for example, women who want to breastfeed their children at while home need to pump while away at work.

²⁸ I am grateful to Raissa von Doetinchem de Rande for inducing me to clarify this point. As she pointed out to me, even as the mother’s need to nurse often coincides with a baby’s need to eat, that need can often materialize at unwelcome moments.

our tendency to submit all reflection to such binary terms forecloses our ability to imagine other possibilities.

Here I have in mind the tired opposition posited between the autonomous individual and the others in whose society she lives. This picture is not only assumed by male-dominated liberal theory—though it certainly appears there—but also by many feminist theorists who focus on the ways oppressive socialization constrains women’s autonomy. To be sure, there is plenty of reason to point out the extent to which women are unfairly limited by the social world in which they find themselves. The trouble is that such an account obscures the way that socialization makes our life together possible in the first place. Most, if not all, of the resources and competences that make life gratifying are granted to us, alongside those things that constrain and oppress us. While it is undeniable that too many of us are also wronged by the norms that constitute our life together—in different ways and to different degrees—it is also the case that many social norms benefit us. That we drive on one side of the road, that we take oaths to guarantee our truthful testimony, and that we have a language which enables us to communicate: these are all mutually beneficial elements of our social world.

This is especially the case as regards autonomy and dependency, as Sullivan-Dunbar reminds us. “Autonomy and dependency are not mutually exclusive,” she writes (Sullivan-Dunbar 2017, 15). Indeed, Sullivan-Dunbar goes so far to speak of “autonomy-in-dependency”:

Just as a haiku poem is not what it is, cannot do what it does, without the form that limits and defines it, so our agency is shaped by our limits. In our social and political lives, we should work to examine and overcome concrete social and political inequalities that prevent the fullest possible expression of this autonomy-in-dependency. But this political work can go wrong if it evades the dependency that shapes the autonomy we seek to enable. (2017, 227–28)

Similarly, the event of pregnancy helpfully brings the possibility of non-competition between a dependent fetus and a childbearer into stark relief. Just as there is no *necessary* competition between a pregnant woman’s self-care and the welfare of the fetus she carries, neither need there be any such competition presumed between the good of an individual and the social world which makes that good possible. Consider Kukla’s conclusion to *Mass Hysteria*:

We mothers are neither simply ‘one with’ our children, nor simply independent of them; assimilation and abandonment are not our only options. . . . The fact that our children shape the very terrain of our life possibilities . . . is usually cause for our commitment and celebration, not selfish or grudging regret. None of this detracts in the slightest from our very real need for limits, privacy, a separate identity, self-determination, and a room of our own. (2005a, 231)

It is worth taking into consideration the possibility—which is, again, by no means inevitable—that the interaction between persons might not always take the form of contestation, but might rather be constituted by cooperation. In fact, it seems to

me that cooperation ought to be one of the major desiderata in ethics, which is all the more reason for ethicists to concentrate on scenarios in which mutually beneficial consequences are possible. To be clear: I am not suggesting that either/or thinking is never warranted. Not every tension will be resolved. Not every conflict can be overcome. I merely want to commend that we always be on the lookout for opportunities to overcome such dichotomous reasoning. Reflecting on pregnancy inspires us to do so.

4. Honoring Your Mother—and Every Mother

There has been a lamentable trend, in the age since the Great Awakenings, to use the word “piety” as a mere synonym for “devoutness.” Piety, to the contemporary ear, conjures a sense of personal religious feeling and practice. For example, Saba Mahmood’s distinguished text *Politics of Piety* has as its theme the individual agency of women in Islamic societies. Meanwhile, untold books in the field of religious studies simply use “piety” as a stand-in for “religion.” This use of the term is not limited to the academic study of religion; recently, one liberation theologian has even demanded that we move, in the words of the title of his book, *Beyond Piety* (Cavazos-González 2010). The thesis of that book rests on the premise that piety is altogether personal, and insufficiently transformative.

Yet the word piety has not always suggested private religious practice. For the ancients, piety was hardly personal at all; rather, piety was a public affair. For Cicero (1949, 329 [2.53.161]), piety “is the feeling which renders kind offices and loving service to one’s kin and country.” According to Augustine (1998, 392), the word *pietas* both signified the worship of God and “is also used to denote the duties which we owe to parents.” Thomas Aquinas similarly compares piety to religion, such that if religion is granting the worship to God that is due, it is not unlike piety, which grants due appreciation to all sources of our being. “Piety,” Aquinas (1920, ST II-II, Q. 103, A. 1) wrote, “extends to our country in so far as the latter is for us a principle of being.” Our gratitude is not only owed to God, therefore, but also to those many others that make our lives possible.²⁹ According to the ancients, this kind of appreciation serves as the glue that holds human society together. I emphatically recommend that we recover this ancient virtue of piety.

We are all debtors, so to speak, with debts we could never repay. We have already seen above that each of us of us been borne by—and, indeed, within—another. It’s incumbent upon us to keep in mind that we are all, as the Jewish and Christian holy texts put it, born of women.³⁰ To fail to do so is unjust. Of course,

²⁹ Even as I have quoted Christian sources here, piety is surely not a uniquely Christian virtue. Mara Benjamin (2018) writes that to be under obligation—to both God and neighbor—is part of what it means to be Jewish. She writes of the experience of coming to terms with the depth of this obligation in the process of becoming a mother. “To live with and be responsible for a newborn, a baby, a toddler, is to suddenly wake up to one’s un-freedom,” Benjamin writes (2018, 16). “It means having the concrete experience, dozens of times each day, of being beholden to another.”

³⁰ See Job 14:1, 15:14, 25:4; Matthew 11:11; Galatians 4:4.

none of us can offer our mothers the care they offered us in the act of childbearing. Instead, we offer them piety, a distinct kind of reverence and gratitude. As each of us owes something to the woman who carried us for between six and ten months, the responsibility of piety also devolves upon each one of us.³¹

Yet we each owe a debt of pious gratitude not only to our own mother, but to all those mothers who have borne our neighbors and fellow citizens, too. To clarify the point, I'll cite an allegory I devised recently while teaching feminist Christian ethics to undergraduate students. I wanted to highlight the inequality that obtains between men's and women's work in reproduction. I offered my students the following fictional scenario:

The year is 2041. In 2023 there was a crazy and highly contagious disease that made it impossible for women to bear children. Uteruses just don't function anymore.

For years, there were no new babies. This was, of course, a crisis. Fortunately, in 2032 scientists at NIH developed a way to have children, by attaching a sort of fanny pack to a person, with a very sophisticated plug to facilitate the provision of nutrients and oxygen to the growing fetus. Gestation still takes approximately forty weeks. Remarkably, both men and women can successfully wear the fanny pack.

For some reason, however, the fanny pack system only works on people who were born in the first half of the year, now called "JFAMs" (an acronym formed from the first letters of the months between January and June). Why this is the case is uncertain, though some suspect that it is because of the amount of sunlight JFAMs' mothers were exposed to during pregnancy.

The parable allowed students to step back from their own gendered identities and consider the inequitable burdens of reproduction from a new perspective. I asked students born in the first half of the year if they would be willing to wear the fanny pack. Remarkably—or perhaps not remarkably at all—all of the women born between January and June were glad to take on the work of bearing children; most of the men were unwilling to do so. ("I'm a stomach sleeper!" joked one male student who was born in June.) Some of the students born in the first half of the year who nevertheless wanted to be parents said that they would simply marry another "JFAM," who could take on the work of bearing children for their family.

Things became more pointed when I presented the following addendum:

At first JFAMs were widely appreciated. But already now in 2041, people have forgotten about the crisis. Now, the same old troubles that women faced before the end of natural pregnancy are falling to fanny pack wearers. When they have to take

³¹ An important consequence of the argument I make extends beyond the primary claim that pregnancy and motherhood deserve more attention in religious ethics. Foregrounding these practices might actually show us that contemporary methods in the study of religion need to be expanded, such that all sorts of ways of appreciating the sources of one's existence—that is, all sorts of instances of piety—be considered by scholars of religion.

off of work for doctor's appointments or for the decoupling—as they call births nowadays—JFAMs tend to be penalized. In fact, in most cases, the lives of those who wear the fanny packs are never the same as they would have been if they never wore the fanny pack.

Many students were appalled. “The government wouldn't let that happen!” one insisted. Some students remarked that in their own procreation they would try to time conception such that their children would be born in the second half of the year, so that they would not be expected to do the thankless work of bearing children.

Remarkably, it took quite a bit of time before the students recognized that currently, pregnant women tend to be vulnerable to all sorts of mistreatment precisely because they have taken up the substantial work of childbearing. One sociologist, Michelle Budig (2014), calls this the “motherhood penalty.” Budig shows that, on average, women's salaries drop about four percent for each child they have.³² Furthermore, such statistics only concentrate on the secondary effects of becoming pregnant. They say nothing of the exorbitant costs of medical care, or the physical and psychological strains associated with pregnancy, which are left to pregnant women to bear.

The parable of the JFAMs brings into stark relief questions about what is owed to those women who do the work of bearing children. At the very least, such women should not be penalized, as they are today, given that their generosity in childbearing ensures that there might be future generations. But most of my students also agreed that it would be puzzling if those who did the socially beneficial work of bearing children might not in fact be rewarded, socially or otherwise, for their labors. That the United States is one of only three nations in the world that does not federally guarantee paid maternity leave is especially puzzling here.

Could the public provision of resources to the real JFAMs of our world—the women who carry and deliver thousands of children in the United States every day—mean engaging in the kind of collectivist constraining of individual freedom discussed above? Some might be concerned that offering certain resources buttresses social norms that coerce women into having children. I do not share this worry. After all, there are many ways that such social norms could be combatted. I am skeptical that protecting the freedoms of women who do not choose to have children *requires* withholding support for women who do choose to have children. These two estimable goals need not be mutually exclusive.

³² Meanwhile, this trend is even more troublingly mirrored by a “fatherhood bonus,” where men tend to receive raises of about six percent for each child they have (Budig 2014, 8). In another study, sociologist Shelley Correll sent over a thousand fake résumés out to hundreds of employers, all identical—except that some of the résumés included a line about membership in a parent-teacher association, signaling that the applicant was a parent. Mothers received a call back about half as often as nonmothers, while fathers were slightly *favored* over their nonfather counterparts. Furthermore, employers indicated that, if hired, fathers ought to be offered a starting salary that was \$6,000 more than nonfathers; mothers, on the other hand, were to be offered \$11,000 less than nonmothers. See Correll et al. 2007, 1309–27.

Furthermore, there is a fundamental asymmetry between the promoting and the constraining of choices. It would be a disastrous thing to *compel* women to have children, even if only by means of social norms. It is another entirely to communicate that there will be social and financial support for their pregnancies, *should they choose* to bear children. Constraining women's choices—by outright disenfranchisement, for example, or by workplace, educational, or housing discrimination—is wrong.³³ Facilitating women's abilities to bear children, on the other hand, by providing resources like parental leave, lactation rooms, access to health care, and low-cost childcare in no way constrains their choices. In fact, in some sense, it's the *withholding* of these resources that constrains choices. According to the Pew Research Center, forty percent of women in the United States at the end of their childbearing years said they had fewer children than they wanted (Livingston 2014). Supporting those who are pregnant can help meet a social need while also conveying support for those women who do the hard work of bearing children.

Turning to the event of pregnancy in ethical reflection thus helps us not only to think about our dependence, to respect the discreteness of persons, and to transcend dichotomous thinking in ethics. It also foregrounds the way all human subjects—including the one engaging in ethical reflection—bear obligations to those who grant and sustain their lives.³⁴ If more of our teaching and scholarship were to reflect this truth, it would be a triumph.

5. Conceiving Anew

In all that has preceded, I have introduced the unique phenomenon of pregnancy as a helpful paradigm for thinking about ethics and piety anew. I have insisted that foregrounding an event like pregnancy prompts us to recognize facts about human activity that do not often emerge in the hypothetical cases commonly taught in introductory ethics courses. However, I fear I have yet to fully clarify my point: am I suggesting that the event of pregnancy is *representative type* of human agency, in that it models how we relate to another in our earliest days? Or perhaps instead I ought to say that the relationship between a pregnant woman and the fetus she bears is a *sui generis* kind, not to be compared to other ways of relating?

In fact, I want to claim that it is both, in different senses. On the one hand, pregnancy underscores the situatedness of all human living, even from our very first days. It shows the ways that different positionalities—like one person's being dependent on another—can fundamentally shape the ethical considerations at play. It also shows how important it is to respect persons as such. These dynamics

³³ In fact, we might say that it betrays a lack of piety to do so! I am grateful to Margaret Kamitsuka for noting this.

³⁴ Again, to what degree this includes piety toward God is yet another important consideration for religious ethicists.

are more evident than usual in the circumstance of pregnancy, but they appear in all human interaction. Even as I note its representativeness, however, I do not want to overlook the fact that there is simply no other mode of relating quite like pregnancy. It is indeed a *sui generis* type of relationship.³⁵

To illuminate the point, in a particularly timely fashion, I turn to an essay published by Mary Pezzulo on Patheos, a website devoted to issues in religion, this March. There, Pezzulo reflects on her young childhood, in which she was taught how important it was that pregnant women care for the unborn child they carried—and how important it was for other community members to support pregnant women in that effort. “This is part of life,” she affirmed, “and we do it. Because you’re not supposed to hurt people, even if that’s inconvenient for you. Even if it keeps you from doing things you like to do” (Pezzulo 2020). To be sure, that doctrine has had some adverse consequences for many women, as Pezzulo concedes, but she continues to affirm the justice of the notion that all ought to do what they can to refrain from hurting others. Pregnant women, she insists, do indeed bear unique responsibilities for the lives they hold in trust. Pezzulo expresses her deep distress, however, that the very same voices that insist on this precept have, during the coronavirus pandemic, failed to take responsibility themselves for the lives they risk by continuing to socialize and refusing to wear masks.

now that they are the people being told not to do exactly as they please, they say it’s not wrong to act recklessly, knowing that doing so will allow a natural thing like a virus to kill others . . . When they have to stay indoors and not go to dinner parties and galas and whatever else they were going to do in the next few weeks, just in case they become the domino that knocks over a thousand others and overcrowds the ICU? That’s demonic. They should be allowed to do whatever they please. (Pezzulo 2020)

There is a profound inconsistency between the scolding that so many religious, conservative voices have directed at women, and the license that is defended—mostly by men—to move about in the world without concern for others.³⁶

Pezzulo is doing here exactly what I want to encourage ethicists to do: to think alongside pregnant women to learn what new insights might be gained in the face of ethical challenges. She is not denying that pregnancy is a unique circumstance

³⁵ Gene Outka’s (1999) point that pregnancy is unlike any other circumstance in the human experience comes to mind here. This fact may raise interesting questions about whether those who are or have been pregnant have some unique epistemic access or advantage that others do not have. Without doubt, it is apt that philosophers have increasingly paid attention to “transformative experiences” in epistemology, and pregnancy has been portrayed as a transformative experience *par excellence* (see Paul 2015). That certainly doesn’t mean that only those who are or have been pregnant are entitled to reflect on pregnancy, however.

³⁶ She has in mind especially R.R. Reno’s (2020) post on the *First Things* website which recommended that readers “reject the specious moralism that places fear of death at the center of life.” Several conservative and evangelical leaders backed Reno’s position. Her concerns might have been exacerbated by his later tweets that all who wear masks are “cowards”—though Reno did later apologize for these remarks.

but using the phenomenon of pregnancy to expose the failure of those who fail to conform to important ethical commitments. The fact of pregnancy, and particular instantiations of pregnancy, taught Pezzulo about the crucial virtue of regarding those whose welfare is at your disposal. That conservative voices failed to see their own violation of this principle was something Pezzulo chose to point out by reference to their own declarations about pregnancy.

We are living in a season in which it is particularly important that we keep in mind several truths about human life: our dependency, our dignity, our possibilities for mutual benefit, and, perhaps more than anything, our indebtedness to others for our very being. We ought especially to bear these considerations in mind as we undertake the task of ethical thinking and teaching. Few contexts can help us to do so better than the event of pregnancy.

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