

Phenomenology of Pregnancy: Moral Consequences for Abortion

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Abstract: Pregnancy has a profound impact on individuals' lives, yet the subjective experience is often absent from the discourse on reproductive rights and ethics. Although pregnancy is an epistemically transformative experience, phenomenology can help us describe common structures in the many different subjective experiences of pregnancy. Doing so shows us that the effects of pregnancy go beyond the physical symptoms; they invade the experience of the self and the world and transform identity. If someone wants to formulate an argument against abortion, they will have to include the existential impact of pregnancy. In this paper I will further explore the impact of pregnancy through a phenomenological analysis of birth and birthmothers and show that the existential impact of pregnancy does not cease to exist after birth. Giving birth fundamentally changes the world of the pregnant person and leads to irreversible changes in identity. Their world will never return to the way it was before pregnancy. Arguments against abortion would have to take these existential implications into account as well. Finally, I will argue that a similar argument will also become relevant in the discourse on ectogenesis.

Keywords: Philosophy, Ethics, Abortion-Induced

Introduction

The subjective experience of pregnancy is often overlooked in academic discussions on reproductive rights and ethics. While legal and medical aspects are often discussed, ethical discussions are often overshadowed by rational discussions about rights, personhood, and moral status. However, analysing subjective experiences can provide new insights and help outline moral dimensions more effectively. One example of a moral debate in which the inclusion of a subjective experience is valuable is abortion.

Pregnancy is an epistemically transformative experience, and although someone will never fully grasp what it is like to be pregnant unless that person has been pregnant before, phenomenology can help to reveal common structures in these subjective experiences that help us to understand pregnancy in general terms^{1,2}. These common structures can help us better understand the existential impact of pregnancy in general terms. Through a phenomenological analysis, I will argue that even with the inclusion of the existential impact of pregnancy, ethical arguments on abortion risk underestimating this impact, as birth fundamentally changes the pregnant person's world. Arguments against abortion should consider the existential impacts after birth, as giving up a child for adoption does not change the world back to its pre-birth state.

In the first paragraph, I will present Fiona Woollard's argument that pregnancy is an epistemically transformative experience and that the subjective experience of pregnancy should be included in moral debates on abortion. In the following paragraph, I will describe the phenomenological concept of pregnant embodiment and demonstrate how physical changes that occur during pregnancy not only affect the experience of the world but also the sense of self. Lastly, I will argue that after birth, these existential impacts lead to a permanent change in identity that impacts women even when they give their baby up for adoption. In the last paragraph, I will briefly discuss ectogenesis, which is often seen as a humane alternative to abortion, and I will argue that in this moral debate similar existential impacts need to be considered.

Pregnancy as an epistemically transformative experience

Fiona Woollard's work, *Mother Knows Best: Pregnancy, Applied Ethics, and Epistemically Transformative Experiences*¹, posits that pregnancy is an epistemically transformative experience in both the narrow and the wide sense. In the narrow sense, pregnancy grants individuals access to new knowledge that is otherwise unattainable. In the wide sense, pregnancy alters the individual's epistemic position, as the knowledge gained through pregnancy is inaccessible to those who have not been pregnant. Woollard thus distinguishes between two types of knowledge: knowing as in knowing that a pregnant personⁱ can experience morning sickness and knowing as in fully grasping what it means to experience morning sickness. Similarly, someone can know all there is about pregnancy, without fully grasping what it is like to be pregnant because that person has never been pregnant before.

The fundamental issue at hand is the challenge of conveying the subjective experience of pregnancy to others. According to Woollard this can never be fully accomplished. There are two main reasons for this. First, pregnancy is such a unique, vivid and complex experience that any narrative of it falls short of fully capturing the experience itself. Consequently, individuals who, willingly or unwillingly, do not become pregnant, will remain unable to fully comprehend what it is like to be pregnant. Second, while pregnancy does place individuals in a new epistemic position, it does not guarantee a full understanding of the general experience, as each pregnancy is unique. Every pregnancy is different, and even two very similar pregnancies can be experienced very differently. An uncomplicated pregnancy is a very different experience from a complicated pregnancy, as is the

ⁱ I deliberately use 'pregnant person' rather than 'woman' or 'mother' to acknowledge that it is not just women who are pregnant. Nor does 'mother' acknowledge the fact that a pregnant person may not see themselves as a parent.

experience of a wanted pregnancy compared to an unwanted pregnancy. Which parts of a pregnancy a person grasps, fully depends on the particulars of their own pregnancy. However, analysing subjective experiences of many different pregnancies will help us gain a fuller understanding of what it is like to be pregnant in general terms. While epistemic barriers will persist, Woollard suggests that phenomenology, literature and other metaphorical and stylistic tools can help bridge these gaps by expanding our conceptual understanding beyond literal interpretations¹. Jonna Bornemark has also addressed this issue. She argues that although every pregnancy is different, there are common structures that we can describe. In doing so, we can create spectra within which different experiences can exist. One such common structure, according to her, is the tension between 'control' and 'powerlessness'. Some pregnant people will feel more in control of their pregnancy while others will feel more powerless. By analysing the different experiences within this structure, and thereby acknowledging that every pregnancy lies somewhere in between, the possible impact of pregnancy may still be assessed; despite the fact that there are still certain epistemological barriers². In the next paragraphs I will outline how the phenomenology of pregnancy can contribute to moral arguments about abortion.

Phenomenology of pregnancy

An important concept within phenomenology is embodiment. This concept underscores the inseparable connection between the mind and the body and emphasises that we exist as a body in the world. It tries to encompass how we perceive, interact with, and make sense of our surroundings through the lens of our bodily experiences³. This notion is particularly significant in understanding the subjective experience of pregnancy, as pregnant individuals undergo profound physiological changes. By investigating embodiment during pregnancy, it is possible to gain insight into how pregnant individuals make sense of their changing bodies, and how these changes shape their sense of self, their identity, and their relationship with others. Two crucial aspects emerge when exploring the embodiment of pregnancy. The first pertains to the physical change that pregnant people undergo during pregnancy, and the second aspect involves the presence of another human being, growing within the pregnant person's body. I will discuss both aspects separately below.

Something that is often discussed is that pregnancy is a challenging process. Every pregnancy involves medical risks. In 2020, around 287,000 women died due to complications related to pregnancy and childbirth⁴. Risks include severe bleeding, infections, high blood pressure (pre-eclampsia and eclampsia), and thrombosis^{4,5}. These are extreme cases, but even in a relatively uncomplicated pregnancy, there are numerous physical symptoms that can occur. These include increased urination, fatigue, poor sleep, and back pain. Women report that, in particular, back pain and tiredness limit their daily living activities⁶. Because these risks and physiological changes impair someone's bodily integrity, many have argued that these outweigh the (future) rights of a foetus, even if the foetus is considered to be a person^{7,8}.

What is often overlooked, is that these uncomfortable sensations do not just reside inside the body, but invade an entire world experience^{1,9}. In a healthy person, the body is often experienced as transparent. The body is lived and recedes to the background of our experience so that we are not overly preoccupied with the movements of our body. However, when an individual becomes ill, the body becomes more prominent in their experience. This can manifest as a limitation, as the body no longer performs the functions that the individual desires^{ii,10}. Similarly, during pregnancy, the physical body becomes more prominent due to the physical changes that occur. As the body grows, the boundaries of the body become blurred, making ordinary things more difficult. Where there usually is

ⁱⁱ For a more rigorous phenomenological analysis of illness see: Toombs, 1992¹¹; Leder, 1990¹²; Merleau-Ponty, 2013¹³.

a continuity between the customary body and the actual bodyⁱⁱⁱ, during pregnancy this continuity is broken. For example, the belly may unexpectedly bump into things, forcing itself into the foreground of the pregnant person's experience^{15,16}. The physical symptoms of pregnancy cause previously ordinary and effortless movements to become projects that require effort. Like tying your shoelaces, or standing up when your back hurts. While this can cause feelings of alienation and imprisonment, there can also be a sense of wonder. This means that even when the pregnant body is experienced as a resistance, the limitations can simultaneously be experienced as a fullness¹⁵.

Another crucial aspect of the phenomenology of pregnancy is the presence of another human being growing inside the body. This is often described as 'splitting'^{15,16,18} or as an intertwinement or intimacy¹⁹. These concepts are used to demonstrate that the body is no longer experienced as just one. Instead, there is another human being growing inside the body which is simultaneously part of that body. This means a pregnant person can feel both one and two at the same time^{15,16,18,20}. As Iris Young describes it: "Then I feel a little tickle, a little gurgle in my belly. It is my feeling, my insides, and it feels somewhat like a gas bubble, but it is not; it is different, in another place, belonging to another, another that is nevertheless my body"²¹. The ability to distinguish between what is touched and what is touching is usually straightforward when we touch something external to our bodies. However, this becomes more difficult when we touch ourselves, because that which is touching is at the same time being touched and vice versa²². When the foetus moves, a similar phenomenon occurs²³, despite the presence of two entities: "Within these touches there is no possibility of distinguishing what is touching from what is being touched. How can I speak this? 'I/you touch you/me'"²⁴. This is why Margaret Little speaks of an intertwinement and an intimacy. This intertwinement can be experienced as a loss of self, or a subsumption of the self, because the self is shared with another being^{16,19}. It is important to note that although the term 'subsumption of the self' may sound daunting, this too may be experienced with a sense of wonder. However, it certainly is a fundamental change in how people experience their identity.

Pregnant embodiment in moral arguments

Although the academic literature on the phenomenology of pregnancy is gradually expanding, these are often personal accounts of wanted pregnancies. However, when discussing abortion, it is essential to consider the experiences of unwanted pregnancies instead. These personal accounts are unfortunately scarce. Despite this, Little has attempted to construct an interpretation of unwanted pregnancies based on phenomenological accounts of wanted pregnancies. She argues that the very aspects that can make pregnancy a magical experience, can also make it harmful. To be pregnant can be experienced as an invasive occupation, and the subsumption of the self, which can be a wondrous change, can also be experienced as a true loss. So, to force someone to be pregnant is to force them to be intimately intertwined with someone else, and to go through changes that invade their sense of being in the world and their sense of self¹⁹.

Woollard argues that the moral debate on abortion is incomplete without considering the subjective experience of unwanted pregnancies. Existing literature often minimises the impact of pregnancy¹, and does not take into account that this impact can be even bigger when it is an unwanted pregnancy. Opponents of abortion frequently argue that the foetus is a separate individual with a right to life, whether based on actual personhood or potential personhood, that overrides the uncomfortable aspects of pregnancy²⁵⁻²⁷. However, these uncomfortable aspects of pregnancy often do not include the existential impact of the physical changes and the invasion of the self, as described

ⁱⁱⁱ In his analysis of phantom pain, Merleau-Ponty illustrates these two concepts. In cases where patients experience pain in an amputated arm, their actual body no longer coincides with their habitual body. These patients experience pain because they remain open to possibilities from the world that used to be answered with an arm movement. As the arm is no longer there, this has become impossible and has resulted in a tension between the habitual body and the actual body¹⁴.

above. Woollard therefore argues that simply stating the foetus is a (potential) person with rights is insufficient. Opponents would also have to argue why these rights result in an obligation on the pregnant person's part to keep the foetus alive at all costs. If these 'costs' do not include the subjective experience of an unwanted pregnancy, then according to Woollard, they are an incomplete representation of the true costs¹.

I fully agree with Woollard that literature on abortion should acknowledge the intimate intertwinement and how this can be harmful to the pregnant person if they want to depict the impact of a forced pregnancy in a true and complete way. Because an experience that is not discussed is an experience that does not influence our construction of the world²⁸. But what is still missing from Woollard's account is that this intertwinement does not end at birth. I will argue below that even after the birth of the infant, there is a continued intertwinement, which, similarly to the intertwinement during pregnancy, has an existential impact. This should not be excluded in arguments about abortion.

Birthmothers and abortion

Adoption is sometimes presented as a humane alternative to abortion, offering women an escape from parenthood without the necessity of terminating the pregnancy²⁹. But after nine months of being intimately intertwined, birthmothers^{iv} are often encouraged to move on as if nothing happened. That now the pregnancy is over, they can pick up life where they left off³⁰. In this paper I have mostly used the concept of intertwinement to express pregnant embodiment because I believed it described the concept of two entities being one well. But Young and Julia Kristeva were also spot on when they called it 'splitting'. Not only because the physical body goes from being one to two, but because the change in identity and the sense of self during pregnancy is also a splitting. During pregnancy, the feeling of an 'other' grows and becomes more distinct closer to the due date. After birth, a part of you is now out there in the world. You have split, and the 'I' is spread out into the world²³. As Little describes it: "Parenthood is a lived, personal relationship, not just a legal status, one that, in the ideal, involves a restructuring of psyches, a lived emotional interconnection, and a history of shared experiences"³¹.

That parenthood is a lived personal relationship is evident in the lived experiences of birthmothers. Birthmothers may experience grief and feelings of loss up to 20 years after the adoption³². This loss is particularly evident during special occasions such as holidays and birthdays^{29,30,32}. Unlike the grief associated with the death of a child, which may lessen over time, the emotional impact of adoption may intensify over the years. Partly because with there is always the possibility of a reunion³⁰. Dorothy Rogers warns that we should not simply view these feelings as pathological. Because although grief could be treated in therapy, there is another aspect to birthmothers²⁹. There are many personal accounts of women who gave up their child for adoption who state that their child is always with them^{29,30,32}. The intertwinement that develops during pregnancy, after nine months of intimately sharing a body, may persist even after the child is born. Women who feel this sometimes describe themselves as "childless mothers"³³. This shows that pregnancy can have long lasting, and perhaps irreversible, effect on identity.

It is important to note that, as with the personal accounts of pregnancies, these accounts are from women who chose not to have an abortion but gave up their child for adoption instead. Although some women mentioned they felt societal pressure to make this choice³⁰. Despite the fact that their situation is different from pregnant people for whom abortion is not an option, the above accounts demonstrate that one's changed identity and sense of self does not simply return to how it was before the pregnancy. In addition to this, the accounts of birthmothers who state that their child is always

^{iv} Birthmothers are women who gave up their child for adoption after birth. Not every woman agrees with this term, and some prefer the term 'first mother' or just 'mother' as they feel 'birthmother' implies their role ends at the moment of birth, which they sometimes feel it does not. Nevertheless, within academic literature, the accepted terms right now are 'birth mother(s)', 'birth father(s)' and 'birth parent(s)'³⁰. For convenience's sake I will also use these terms in this paper.

with them, show that after birth their world has fundamentally changed. Where it once was a world-without-child, it is now a world-with-child. Giving up a baby for adoption does not reconstitute a world-without-child.

Of course, something similar could be argued for abortion. Having an abortion irrevocably changes the world into a world-after-abortion. But how can we be sure this is a better world than a world-with-child? Is it not only the pregnant person themselves who can decide with which world they can cope in a better way? How we experience the world is determined by how we interact with it, and our interaction with the world is not only coloured by our past and physical situation, but also by our ideological and moral views³⁴. For instance, a pregnant person who is morally opposed to abortion could potentially be better off with an adoption. Forcing them to live in a world-after-abortion would be as cruel as forcing a pregnant person who wants to have an abortion to live in a world-with-child. Those who wish to formulate an argument against abortion should, in addition to including the existential aspects of an unwanted pregnancy, also include the existential impact of a (unwanted) world-with-child.

Ectogenesis

In the 1970's, Thomson already argued that the right to abort is distinct from the right of the death of the foetus⁷. A safe removal of a foetus to gestate outside the womb was, at that time, perhaps a matter of science fiction. However, scientists are now making rapid progress in the design of an artificial womb³⁵, and this has brought up a moral debate about abortion in case it would be possible to extract an embryo from a uterus without invasive surgery and have it gestate in an artificial womb.

Gestaticide – the killing of an embryo or foetus that is gestating in an artificial womb – is arguably more difficult to justify than abortion. If it is possible to remove the embryo without invasive surgery in the early stages of pregnancy and place it in an artificial womb, a pregnant person can opt out of pregnancy and parenthood without killing the embryo. Arguments about bodily integrity as well as the existential impacts of pregnancy, as formulated above, would be harder to defend. Some have therefore suggested that gestaticide is not only a form of infanticide³⁶, but also equivalent to infanticide in terms of justification³⁷. Some philosophers have therefore argued that gestaticide is never permissible on the grounds that there are always parents who are willing to adopt^{27,37,38}. Although further research is required, a qualitative study has indicated that there are women who would prefer an abortion over ectogenesis^v because they believe ectogenesis might lead to feelings of responsibility towards the child³⁹. The fact that women are concerned about assuming responsibility, suggests that the existential impact of ectogenesis and adoption may have similarities. At least, as with adoption, we should not underestimate the impact of living in a world-with-child when ectogenesis becomes a possibility.

I do not want to argue for or against gestaticide in this paper, but I do believe gestaticide will require a different justification than abortion, and that we have to determine how the rights of the birthfather stand in this case. Simply because the existential implications due to the intimate intertwinement will not necessarily occur in the case of ectogenesis. But, similarly to adoption, there is still a being that was once sharing a body with the pregnant person (however briefly) that is now living in their world. Even if the embryo is removed in the early stages, the pregnant person will have to live in a world-with-child. Whether this will be a similar experience as with adoption is of course unknown; subjective experiences of ectogenesis do not exist because the procedure is not possible yet. However, if one is to argue against the right to terminate a pregnancy in a context in which ectogenesis is possible, it is necessary to consider the existential impacts of living in a world-with-child as well.

^v More precisely defined, what I call ectogenesis is in fact partial ectogenesis, if we follow the definition by Elselij Kingma and Suki Finn⁴⁰. Partial ectogenesis occurs when an embryo or foetus is gestated outside the womb for a part of the gestation period. This already occurs in IVF and in the care of very premature babies.

Conclusion

Pregnancy is an epistemically transformative experience in both the narrow and the wide sense, meaning that fully grasping pregnancy can only be achieved through personal experience. To understand a general pregnancy, it is necessary to analyse many personal accounts. Phenomenology can help reveal common structures in different subjective experiences. Current phenomenological analyses show that the impact of pregnancy extends beyond simple medical risks. The physical changes during pregnancy invade the experiences of the body and the world, and the intimate intertwining of the pregnant person and the foetus results in a subsummation of the self and a change in identity. If one wishes to argue for an obligation to keep the foetus alive at all costs, it is essential to consider these existential aspects of pregnancy.

Through a phenomenological analysis of birth and birthmothers, I have argued that this intimate intertwinement does not stop at birth. Birthmothers and their children remain connected after an adoption. After birth, the world has fundamentally changed from a world-without-child to a world-with-child, and this is accompanied by irreversible changes in identity. Arguments against abortion should take these aspects into account as well.

Although the realisation of ectogenesis might still be far away, there are fast progressions in the development of an artificial womb. Like adoption, ectogenesis is seen by some as a humane alternative for abortion. While it is true that the justification of gestacide seems more difficult than abortion, as with adoption, ectogenesis results in a world-with-child. We must not overlook the existential implications of having a child and need to take this aspect into consideration in our ethical discourse on ectogenesis.

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