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**Your Mother Should Know: Pregnancy, the Ethics of Abortion, and Knowledge Through Acquaintance of Moral Value**

Fiona Woollard

**Abstract**

An important strand in the debate on abortion focuses on the moral status of fetuses. Knowledge of the moral *value* of fetuses is needed to assess fetuses’ moral status. As Errol Lord argues, acquaintance plays a key role in moral and aesthetic knowledge. Many pregnant persons have acquaintance with their fetus that provides privileged access to knowledge about that fetus’ moral value. This knowledge is (a) very difficult to acquire without being pregnant and (b) relevant for assessing the moral status of fetuses. This has implications for public debate on abortion and the research methods of philosophers working on abortion.

**1. Introduction**

The moral status of human fetuses (henceforth ‘fetuses’) is widely recognised as an important aspect of the ethics of abortion?1 I argue that pregnancy gives privileged access to knowledge relevant to this question.2 Pregnancy can provide access to knowledge about a fetus’ moral value that is (a) very difficult to acquire without being pregnant and (b) key for assessing the moral status of fetuses.

This project is inspired by L.A. Paul (2014, 2015)’s work on epistemically transformative experiences: experiences that provide knowledge the subject could not have otherwise acquired. Such experiences are philosophically interesting. How can we reason about whether to have an experience if key knowledge is inaccessible beforehand? As I argue elsewhere (Woollard 2021, 156-157), there is a similar interest in experiences that are epistemically transformative in a wider sense. Experiences that provide a privileged access to knowledge also require review of how we reason.

I argue that many pregnant persons have an acquaintance with their fetus that provides privileged access to knowledge about its moral value. My argument draws heavily on Errol Lord’s work on the acquaintance key role of acquaintance in both aesthetic and moral knowledge (Lord 2018). Acquaintance is needed for an important type of knowledge which Lord calls ‘appreciative knowledge’ (Lord 2018, 76).

My argument comes apart from Lord’s in two ways. First, Lord argues that we can have the relevant acquaintance through imagination. I argue that it is difficult, if not impossible, to acquire appreciative knowledge of the fetus through imagination. Second, my argument is narrower than Lord’s and my conclusion somewhat weaker. I limit my discussion to the role that acquaintance plays in knowledge of moral value and do not need to claim that acquaintance is always necessary for appreciative knowledge. I only need to claim that it is difficult, if not impossible, to acquire the required appreciative knowledge of the value of the fetus without the acquaintance available in pregnancy.

In Section 2, I describe Lord’s account of acquaintance in aesthetics and morality, including his account of appreciative knowledge. In Section 3, I build on Lord’s account, arguing that, in many cases, first-hand acquaintance is superior to acquaintance based on imagination. In Section 4, I give an account of moral value, explaining how it is relevant to moral status. I then argue that the knowledge of moral value required to assess moral status is what Lord calls appreciative knowledge – and that first-hand acquaintance puts one in a better position to have such knowledge. In Section 5, I argue that it is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine the fetus accurately with enough detail for appreciative knowledge. In Section 6, I argue that many pregnant people have an acquaintance with their fetus that puts them in an especially good position to have appreciative knowledge of its moral value. In Section 7, I show that this provides privileged access to the moral value of fetuses in general. In Section 8, I show that we cannot assess either the moral status or the moral value of the fetus by appealing to moral principles. In Section 9, I discuss how those who have not been pregnant can draw on the knowledge of those who have been pregnant in assessing the moral status of the fetus. Using such testimony in moral reasoning requires an ongoing dialogue with critical respect for the pregnant person’s privileged access to knowledge, rather than a one-off transmission of testimony. I finish with a caveat that my conclusions do not support mandatory ultrasound laws.

**2. Lord on Acquaintance and Appreciative Knowledge in Aesthetics and Morality**

Suppose that one day I see Rodin’s *The Gates of Hell* with my own eyes for the first time. It is widely accepted that there is something special about this type of acquaintance with an artwork. This type of acquaintance is often supposed to dramatically improve your aesthetic knowledge.3

Errol Lord argues that acquaintance is necessary for appreciative knowledge: knowledge that enables rational appreciation. To rationally appreciate an artwork involves fittingly having a range of conative and affective reactions to it (Lord 2018, 76, 78). These include ‘being moved by the [artwork], wanting to protect the [artwork], intending to look at the [artwork], caring about the [artwork], etc’ (Lord 2018, 76). Lord notes that we often want to rationally appreciate art. Appreciative knowledge – and thus acquaintance – is central in our aesthetic lives (Lord 2018, 78-79).

Lord argues that for a reason to justify a reaction, the agent must have that reason *as a reason for that reaction*. Consider Watson, informed by Sherlock that the boot print in the snow was made by a size 9 Iron Ranger. Watson is initially unable to use this fact to identify the killer. Sherlock adds that the cabby wears size 9 Iron Rangers. Watson is now able to use the fact about the killer’s boot print to deduce that the cabby was the killer. Lord argues that it is only after he has the additional fact that Watson possesses the reason *as a reason to believe that the cabby did it*. Lord understands possession of a reason *as a reason* in terms of being able to manifest a certain kind of know-how: in Watson’s case, knowledge of how to use the fact to infer who the killer is (Lord 2018, 77).

Rational appreciation of an artwork requires that the agent possesses facts about the artwork’s properties *as reasons to appreciate the artwork*. They must possess facts about the artwork’s properties as reasons to be moved by the artwork, protect the artwork, etc. Lord argues that this requires acquaintance with the artwork – or more specifically with the artwork’s properties. Acquaintance is required because these appreciative reactions are usually reactions to the particular ways in which the artwork in question is beautiful, elegant etc. Lord quotes Budd: ‘appreciation of a work is not a matter of knowing what its aesthetic properties are, but of perceiving them as realized in the work’ (Budd 2003, 392, quoted in Lord 2018, 78).

Lord gives an analogous account of acquaintance in moral knowledge. He discusses a striking example based on George’s Orwell’s ‘A Hanging’. In an incident plausibly based on Orwell’s own experience, ‘George’ is required to guard over an execution. The first-hand experience of the hanging has a profound impact on George, allowing him for the first time to ‘realiz[e] what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man’ (Orwell 2000, 45, quoted in Lord 2018, 82). Lord argues that George learns that the hanging is wrong. Moreover, this knowledge is importantly similar to the knowledge gained through acquaintance with an artwork:

…there is a tight connection between his knowledge and the fittingness of his conative and affective attitudes. The facts that he knows are themselves strong reasons to have those reactions—the fact that the execution is wrong is a reason to be repulsed and a reason to desire that the man’s life be spared. Finally, the way in which he acquired the set of attitudes seems important. His acquaintance with the particular hanging puts him in an especially good position to not only gain the moral knowledge he gains, but also to have the fitting conative and affective reactions he ends up having. George’s knowledge is appreciative knowledge. (Lord 2018, 83-4)

George initially gains appreciative knowledge of the wrongness of that hanging. However, Lord argues that appreciation of this particular moral fact enables George to be sensitive to similar features in other situations and to appreciate ‘the force of a certain type of consideration—e.g., the great weight of the reason not to kill provided by the capacities of agents like the Burmese prisoner’ (Lord 2018, 83).

Lord identifies two key objections to his claim that acquaintance is required for appreciative moral knowledge. The first objection is that we do not have perceptual access to morally relevant facts. In response, Lord endorses two accounts of perceptual access to moral properties. First, he argues cognitive penetration can allow us to perceive moral properties using the standard five senses: just as our background attitudes can allow us to perceive second-order non-normative properties such as kind-membership, our background attitudes can also allow us to perceive moral properties (Lord 2018, 89).4 Second, Lord endorses sentimentalist perceptualism: the view that our affective and conative states themselves can represent particulars as having certain moral properties. ‘So, for example, George has a basic repulsion to the concrete scene before him. This state presents the hanging as wrong. It provides George with basic knowledge that the hanging is wrong’ (Lord 2018, 90).5

The second objection is that we can access morally relevant facts ‘from the armchair’ without acquaintance. Lord’s response draws on his previous argument that we can perceive moral properties through affective responses. Lord argues that contingent truths play an important role in the acquisition of moral knowledge for the average person. When we gain armchair knowledge of contingent moral truths, we do this by thinking about cases. We imagine the cases in enough detail to have affective perceptions of the moral properties. Lord notes that the same process occurs in aesthetics: a composer may gain appreciative aesthetic knowledge by imagining what a string of notes would sound like (Lord 2018, 93).

To sum up Lord’s account: Acquaintance is needed for appreciative knowledge. Appreciative knowledge is required to rationally have the appropriate affective and conative responses and to appreciate the force of certain types of consideration. We acquire such knowledge when we perceive morally relevant properties – which can be done by imagining cases in sufficient detail.

**3. Real-Experience Acquaintance vs Imagination-Based Acquaintance**

Lord gives a convincing account of the role of acquaintance in aesthetic and moral knowledge. Nonetheless, something is odd here. The examples he discusses involve gaining knowledge after actual first-hand experience with an artwork or a moral phenomenon: Hanna appreciates the beauty of *Nefertiti’s Bust* after examining the artwork in a museum; George appreciates the wrongness of a hanging after standing guard. Lord claims that Hanna and George’s experiences put them in a particularly good position to gain knowledge and to have the appropriate affective reactions. This claim might seem less plausible if we were told that Hanna and George had simply imagined the artwork/hanging. Yet, Lord argues that we should understand acquaintance broadly, so that the imagining of a case can enable acquaintance with the moral and aesthetic properties.

There is a further puzzle. As Lord acknowledges, we seem to acquire much moral knowledge through ‘armchair ways of thinking’ (Lord 2018, 92). Even if Lord is right that there are parallel cases in aesthetics – for example the composer who can assess symphonies in his head – we tend to think of these as anomalies involving specially gifted individuals. Why this asymmetry?

I attempt to solve both puzzles by arguing that not all acquaintance provides equally good access to appreciative knowledge. Call acquaintance through imagining, ‘imagination-based acquaintance’. Call acquaintance based on first-hand experience with a real artwork/ situation, ‘real-experience acquaintance’. Real-experience acquaintance is often superior to imagination-based acquaintance. This matters in paradigm cases of aesthetic appreciation.

On Lord’s account acquaintance enables appreciative knowledge through the affective perception of morally/aesthetically relevant properties. Not just any imaginative consideration of a case provides acquaintance. If we cannot imagine the case with sufficient accuracy and detail to have appropriate affective reactions, imagination-based acquaintance will be impossible.

Even when imagination-based acquaintance is possible, real-experience acquaintance may be better. Real experience is likely to be more vivid, detailed and accurate than an imagined scenario. Other things being equal, real experience places us in a better position to have the full appropriate affective reaction than imagination.6

Lord appeals to the need for appreciative reactions to reflect the particular ways the properties are realised in the work. References to the importance of the particular in aesthetics are often combined with claims that aesthetic judgment is holistic.7 The key insight of holism may be relevant to Lord. The particular way a property is realised in a work will depend upon how that property interacts with other aspects of the artwork. Real-experience acquaintance allows us to confront the artwork as a whole and to see how various aspects interact. This is difficult to do when merely imagining the artwork. It adds another layer of imaginative-work and it is difficult to know if one has imagined accurately.8

Real-experience acquaintance is likely to be superior when: (1) the entity or situation is difficult to imagine accurately and in detail; (2) we want to have the full appropriate affective reactions; or (3) it is important to understand how the different aspects of the entity or situation interact.

This may explain the aforementioned asymmetry between the aesthetic and the moral. The claim that appreciation of artworks requires first-hand experience is often focused on great works of arts.9 Fully appreciating such artworks often involves either an extremely strong affective response or grasping exceptional or unusual features interacting in new and complex ways.

My focus in this paper is knowledge of moral value. I therefore leave aside the question of whether real-life acquaintance puts one in a better position to have appreciative moral knowledge generally. I also leave aside the question of whether we often need appreciative moral knowledge and whether this requires acquaintance in Lord’s broad sense. Instead, I argue that when it comes specifically to moral value, first we often require appreciative knowledge and, second, real-experience acquaintance puts one in a better position to have appreciative knowledge of moral value – especially if the entity is, like the fetus, significantly different from other entities with which one is familiar.

**4. Moral Status and Appreciative Knowledge of Moral Value**

I begin by explaining what I mean by ‘moral value’ and how it is relevant to the assessment of moral status. Then I argue that the knowledge of moral value required to assess moral status is appreciative knowledge – and that real-life acquaintance puts one in a better position to have such appreciative knowledge.

My use of ‘moral value’ and ‘moral status’ are not standard. These terms are often used almost interchangeably. I use them to identify two quite different types of claims about how much a type of entity counts morally.

Mary-Anne Warren argues that ‘ascriptions of moral status serve to represent very general claims about the ways in which moral agents ought to conduct themselves towards entities of particular sorts’ (Warren 2000, 9) When discussing certain entities (fetuses, animals), often we want to make claims about the rights that such entities have and the duties that are owed to them. We might discuss whether a fetus has the same moral status as a normal adult human. We are normally asking whether e.g. the fetus has the same right to life.

There is a different question, prior to questions about moral status. This is the question of what moral value an entity has. Moral value concerns the ways in which the entity is morally valuable: its value as relevant to moral deliberation.

Moral status concerns the rights an entity has and what duties are owed to it. We might think of this as an aspect of how to respond appropriately to that entity’s moral value. The appropriate way to respond to an entity’s moral value will depend on how it is valuable. Of course, the appropriate response to an entity’s value may depend on features other than its value, such as the potential impact on the moral status of others. Thus, an entity’s moral status may also depend on these other features of that type of entity. In the case of pregnancy, the rights that fetuses can have –and thus the moral status of fetuses– may be restricted by the potential impact on the pregnant person’s moral status.10

Assessing moral status requires not just knowledge of moral value but appreciative knowledge of moral value. Remember appreciative knowledge is knowledge that one can use as a reason to appreciate, to have the fitting conative and affective responses to an entity. This is precisely the type of knowledge required to understand an entity’s moral value and assess how to respond to it.

To draw conclusions about an entity’s moral status, we must understand how the entity is morally valuable, rather than how valuable it is, where this is understood as assigning it something like a numerical figure. A Giant Redwood and a typical adult human both have significant moral value, but in very different ways. To work out the moral status of a Giant Redwood, or an adult human, we must consider the ways in which each type of entity is valuable. Different ways of being valuable will give reasons for an entity to have different rights and to be owed different duties and thus to have a different moral status. It may even be that an entity can be very valuable while lacking moral status.

Assessing moral status requires us to understand the force of the specific way in which an entity is valuable. This requires appreciative knowledge of moral value. Remember Lord’s comment that appreciative reactions are reactions to the particular ways in which the artwork in question is beautiful, elegant etc.

As argued above, real-experience acquaintance is likely to be superior when: (1) the entity or situation is difficult to imagine accurately and in detail; (2) we are interested in having the full appropriate affective reactions; or (3) it is important to understand how the different aspects of the entity. I will now argue that (1) applies to entities, like the fetus, that are significantly different from any entity with which one is familiar, while (2) and (3) apply to appreciative knowledge of moral value in general.

Let’s start with (1). Amy Kind (2022, 39) identifies four elements relevant to imaginative quality: appropriate manipulation of constraints; exercise of combinatorial capabilities; experiential resources; quality of mental imagery. This last includes: clarity, level of detail, force/steadfastness, controllability and accuracy. The middle two elements (exercise of combinatorial capabilities and experiential resources) are based on the claim that we imagine by combining raw materials from our experiences. Kind (2022, 39) quotes Hume (1777/1977, 11) and Nagel (1974, 439), as well as the psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1967/2004, 29, 34) as sources for this claim. For unfamiliar entities, there are two possibilities. First, the entity may be different from any one thing that we are familiar with, but we may be able to imagine it by combining aspects of several familiar things. For entities very significantly different from anything familiar, a lot of imaginative work (exercising combinatorial capacities while being appropriately sensitive to constraints) is required. This will be difficult, especially if the aim is to produce a high quality of mental imagery with enough clarity, level of detail, steadfastness, and accuracy to have appreciative knowledge. Imagining the way in which the different features interact adds an additional layer of imaginative work. Alternatively, the entity may have one or more key features that we have not encountered before. In such cases, if Kind and her sources are right, it will be impossible to accurately imagine the entity.

So, condition (1) (the entity or situation is difficult to imagine accurately and in detail) applies to entities that are significantly different from familiar entities. Real-experience acquaintance helps significantly with appreciative knowledge of such entities’ moral value. Condition (1) interacts with the other two conditions: the more difficult it is to imagine an entity accurately, the less likely one will be able to have the full appropriate reactions or to understand how the features interact through imagination. Equally, the more important it is to have full appropriate reactions/ understand how the features interact, the higher the bar for a ‘sufficiently accurate and detailed’ imagining. I now argue that appreciative knowledge of moral value, like appreciative knowledge of aesthetic value, meets conditions (2) and (3). If this argument succeeds, the just-described difficulties are exacerbated, making real-life acquaintance even more important.

First, real-life acquaintance may enable one to appreciate the full force of an entity’s moral value. Imagine that Fred plans to cut down a 500-year-old yew tree to build a supermarket. His plans change when he visits the development site and is confronted with the ancient tree. He looks up at its gnarled branches. He places his hand on the living wood. He is suddenly struck by the sheer age of the tree and knows he cannot chop it down. Fred does not understand the implications of the age of the tree until he sees and feels it. His real-experience acquaintance allows him to have the full appropriate reaction: a strong sense of awe. This affective reaction allows him to grasp the moral value arising from this property. It seems as if condition (2) applies to the appreciation of moral value: just as experiencing the full appropriate affective reactions is an important part of appreciating aesthetic value, experiencing the full appropriate affective reactions is an important part of appreciating moral value.

Second, as with aesthetic value, the moral value of an object may depend upon the interaction between different features of an object. For example, it seems as if the way in which the age of the oak tree makes it valuable is affected by the fact that it is a living tree. An ancient oak tree may be valuable in a different way than an equally ancient human artifact. Appreciative knowledge of moral value meets condition (3): it is important to understand how different aspects interact.

It seems that real-experience acquaintance lets Fred grasp the moral value of the ancient oak tree, even if age is not a perceptible property. Lord’s account explains this by claiming Fred perceives the normative property itself: he perceives the value of the tree through his awe (2018, 90). Nonetheless, someone might find the example convincing and accept my main point while rejecting Lord’s explanation. For example, someone might hold that the affective reactions are not perceptions of moral value, but instead that they help to make the moral value salient to Fred. We should also remember that perceptible properties such as complexity and, indeed, aesthetic properties such as beauty may contribute to moral value.

So, real-life acquaintance puts one in a better position to have appreciative knowledge of moral value in general and of the moral value of unusual entities in particular. When it comes to moral value in general, we meet both condition (2) (we are interested in having the full appropriate affective reaction) and condition (3) (it is important to understand how the different aspects interact). Entities that are significantly different from familiar ones also meet condition (1): the entity or situation is difficult to imagine accurately and in detail.

**5. Imagining Fetuses**

I now argue that the fetus is significantly different from familiar entities. Indeed, I will argue that the fetus is unusual enough that many people will be unable to imagine the fetus with enough accuracy and detail for appreciative knowledge.

The significant difference between fetuses and other familiar entities is based on the combination of the following features. They are genetically human. In the right circumstances, they become independent human beings. But they are not yet independent human beings. They grow within another human who existed independently before their arrival. They can only be interacted with through that pre-existing human. Nothing else on Earth has this combination of features. Nothing else on Earth is quite like a human fetus.

It might be argued that fetuses share enough features with familiar entities that we can imagine them accurately. After all, it may be argued, we are acquainted with other creatures with similar cognitive abilities and with newborn humans who depend upon others for survival.11 Perhaps we can use our combinatorial capabilities to imagine a fetus by combining aspects of these familiar creatures.

I have my doubts about ‘matching’ the fetus’ cognitive capacities with those of non-fetal creatures. Fetuses may have distinctive features.12 But set those doubts aside. The property of having X cognitive capabilities as an adult is still a different property than the property of having developing cognitive capacities currently at stage X. At the very least, if we are trying to imagine the fetus by drawing on the cognitive capacities of other creatures, we need to make sure that our imaginings reflect how the significance of the fetus’ current cognitive capacities interact with its being a developing entity.

Drawing on acquaintance with newborn humans is also of limited help.13 Significant physiological changes occur at birth: a healthy newborn has a functioning pulmonary and circulatory system (van Vonderen et al, 2014) and is conscious in a way that a fetus is not (Lagercrantz, Changeux 2009). While newborns depend on others for their survival; they are not growing within any other human being. This is a profound change, perhaps even a metaphysical change: the fetus may be a *part* of the pregnant organism (Kingma 2019).

So the fetus is a developing human that grows inside another human being and may even be part of that human being. These are properties – or combinations of properties – that are very different from what we are familiar with. It is thus likely to be very difficult for someone to form a clear, accurate picture of the fetus based purely on their imagination. For many people, this will not be possible.

**6. Real-Life Acquaintance with a Fetus**

A pregnant person is not acquainted with their fetus in quite the same way as Hanna is acquainted with the *Nefertiti’s Bust*. They cannot see the fetus without external intervention such as an ultrasound, which normally requires the interpretation of a trained technician. Nonetheless, looking at an ultrasound of a fetus *is* a way of perceiving a fetus. Looking at an ultrasound counts as acquaintance with the fetus.14

A pregnant person’s acquaintance with the fetus is often very different from someone who has looked at ultrasound scans and listened to recordings of fetal heartrates without being pregnant. Both have real-experience acquaintance with the fetus, but the pregnant person often has a much better acquaintance.

First, many pregnant persons develop an ongoing acquaintance with a particular fetus. The external means of acquaintance follow the development of that fetus over time, from the first flickering dot on the ultrasound.

Second, the external means are ways of looking at what is happening within the pregnant person’s own body and these often interact with, and are interpreted by and affect their interpretation of, their acquaintance with the fetus through internal means. By internal means of acquaintance with the fetus, I mean the pregnant person’s awareness of the fetus’s presence and movements through their awareness of what is happening in their own body. This occurs when they feel implantation pains or pregnancy sickness, are aware of their expanded womb and, most dramatically, when they feel the fetus move and kick.

Because many pregnant persons have a multidimensional acquaintance with a particular fetus over time, they can develop a much more detailed understanding of fetal development over time. This is crucial to understanding the fetus’ value. To focus only on what the fetus is now, without understanding how it has developed and is developing, misses crucial aspects of the fetus.

Finally, their unique relationship with a particular fetus puts the pregnant person in a position to develop appropriate affective responses which cannot be equalled by looking at ultrasounds of unidentified fetuses.

David Velleman argues that a pregnant person cannot be acquainted with their child until they first perceive it ‘at the point traditionally called quickening’ (2008, footnote 4, p. 269-270).15 I agree that quickening, when the pregnant person can feel the fetus move within them, provides an importantly new form of acquaintance with the fetus. Nonetheless, I count awareness of pregnancy symptoms, especially in conjunction with external means of acquaintance such as ultrasound, as acquaintance.16 To feel the symptoms of pregnancy is to feel the fetus acting on you. This is a form of perception.

If the fetus were an artwork, it would be an interactive, multi-sensory artwork that changes over time. Many people who have been pregnant are like someone who has been immersed in this interactive, multi-sensory artwork for months. Someone who has only seen an ultrasound is like someone who has only seen a photograph. While both have some acquaintance with the artwork, one type of acquaintance is better for forming an accurate picture of the fetus.

Of course, even this sustained acquaintance may not be sufficient to provide an accurate picture of the fetus. In many cases, pregnant persons also gain significant knowledge of the typical development of fetuses through pregnancy books etc. Very few people undertake this kind of study of pregnancy unless they or their partner is pregnant. The experience of being pregnant motivates one to learn the biological facts. It makes certain information salient. We see a similar phenomenon when we recognise that people of colour often have a greater factual knowledge about occurrences of racially motivated assault because these facts are more salient to them. It is possible to learn these facts without falling into the relevant group, but the identity / experience is still relevant to the knowledge. This information interacts in an important way with the pregnant person’s acquaintance with their fetus. It is hard to grasp the significance of this information in the abstract. Pregnant persons’ grasp of the moral value of their fetus often comes from bringing together their perceptions of their fetus and the information about human biology that they have acquired. This can be thought of as similar to the way an art expert draws on their knowledge when looking at a painting: neither the acquaintance alone, nor the information alone can replace the informed acquaintance.

Many pregnant persons are in a privileged epistemic position with respect to their fetus’s value due to their informed acquaintance with it. They possess (a) significant information about the typical development of fetuses gained from pregnancy guides and other reference works; (b) sustained acquaintance with a particular fetus; (c) both internal and external means of acquaintance; (d) a unique relationship with the fetus. This enables an accurate picture of their fetus and appropriate affective responses.

Many people who have not been pregnant lack all these features. They are in an extremely poor position to judge fetuses’ moral value. However, some groups of people who have not been pregnant will have some of these features, or something like these features.

Some biologists have a lot of information about the facts of prenatal human development. Knowledge about these facts alone does not usually enable an accurate picture of a fetus or understanding of its value. We can know many abstract facts about the fetus, but without acquaintance it is extremely difficult to put these together and to understand their significance.

What about experienced midwives and partners or co-parents of pregnant persons?17 Both have acquaintance that provides access to knowledge about a fetus’ value. However, the pregnant person’s acquaintance with the fetus is continuous and often involves the interaction between internal and external means of acquaintance. The pregnant person may have a fuller sense of their fetus’ as a particular individual developing over time. This, plus their unique relationship with that fetus, mayput the pregnant person in a better position to have appreciative knowledge of the fetus.

In this section I have argued that many pregnant persons have an acquaintance with their fetus which puts them in a particularly good position to have appreciative knowledge of its moral value. Others, such as experienced midwives and partners or co-parents of pregnant persons have epistemically significant real-experience acquaintance with fetuses, but this lacks some important features of many pregnant persons’ acquaintance with their fetus. Seeing ultrasound pictures is real-experience acquaintance with a fetus, but is unlikely to enable an accurate understanding of the fetus and its moral value.

**7. From the particular to the general**

The relationship between the moral value of any particular fetus and the moral value of fetuses in general is a substantial ethical question. One possibility is that appreciating the moral value of any particular fetus is sufficient to appreciate the moral value of fetuses in general – because all human fetuses are morally valuable in the same way and to the same degree. This view is only plausible if we draw a clear distinction between the moral value of a fetus for its own sake and its derivative moral value. A fetus may be derivatively valuable because it is incredibly precious to the prospective parents. Not all fetuses are precious to their prospective parents, so not all fetuses have the same derivative moral value. So even if we think that every fetus is valuable for its own sake in the same way and to the same degree, a pregnant person must be careful not to mistakenly attribute their fetus’ derivative moral value to fetuses generally.

On other views, not all fetuses have the same moral value. On a relational account of moral value being in a morally significant relationship of love or concern affects an entity’s moral value. This implies that a fetus who is loved has a higher moral value *for its own sake* than a fetus that is not.18 According to Elizabeth Harman’s Actual Future Principle, what will actually happen to a fetus can affect its moral status. A fetus that is going to one day have the moral status of a person is ‘a different kind of thing’ than a fetus that is going to die before acquiring any morally considerable properties (Harman 1999, 311-312).

Thus, I might know the moral value of my own fetuses without knowing the moral value of fetuses in general. Nonetheless, appreciative knowledge of the moral value of one’s own fetus does provide privileged access to the moral value of fetuses in general.

First, this knowledge helps us assess accounts of the general moral value of fetuses and accounts of the relationship between the value of a particular fetus and fetuses in general. Either of these may be inconsistent with a pregnant person’ appreciative knowledge of the value of their fetus.19

Second, appreciative knowledge of a particular fetus may put one in a better position to accurately imagine other fetuses. If you are familiar with one fetus and trying to imagine another fetus, what you are trying to imagine is not so different from the entity you are familiar with. We should not underestimate the significance of differences between fetuses. Nonetheless, someone who has been pregnant does seem to be in a better position to imagine another fetus than someone who has only looked at fetal ultrasounds.

The best way to understand the moral value of fetuses is to draw on the knowledge of people with a range of experiences of pregnancy. Even if I have knowledge of the moral value of one fetus, I need to check that my understanding of the moral value of fetuses generally is consistent with others’ knowledge. Even if all fetuses have the same non-derivative moral value, different experiences may provide better access to different aspects of a fetus’ moral value. It may be that different experiences of pregnancy, carrying a pregnancy to term, having a miscarriage and having an abortion, *each* provide deeper insight into the moral value of a fetus but that they provide different insights, providing access to different aspects of the fetus’ moral value.

When I say that pregnancy provides an opportunity for acquaintance with the fetus, I take this to include all pregnancies including those ending in miscarriage or abortion.20 The precise acquaintance with the fetus may vary – and some persons who have had abortions or miscarriages may lack some aspects of acquaintance with the fetus that I discussed. However, this is also true of some persons who have carried a fetus to term. Jennifer Scuro (2017) argues that pregnancy must be understood in light of all possible outcomes (birth, stillbirth, miscarriage, and abortion). It seems the same is likely to be true of the moral value of the fetus. My main argument goes through even if I have shown only that those who carry a fetus to term have epistemically significant acquaintance with the fetus – or even if I have only shown that this applies to those who carry to term while having regular ultrasounds and becoming informed about fetal development. Nonetheless, I do not intend my argument so narrowly.

**8. Appeal to Moral Principles**

I now argue that we cannot assess either the moral status or the moral value of the fetus by appealing to moral principles. This is a response to potential concerns that I have so far missed this obvious route to moral knowledge.

There are widely recognised concerns with using existing moral principles to make claims about the moral status of fetuses. The standard naïve argument against abortion starts from the principle that ‘Humans have a right to life’ and concludes that, because fetuses are human, they too must have a right to life. This argument is naïve because it involves equivocation. It is undeniable that human fetuses count as human, in some sense. It is also uncontroversial that humans, in some sense, have a right to life. However, it is unclear whether fetuses count as humans in the morally relevant sense (Warren 1973). The principle is normally used to govern conflicts between humans that have already been born. We don’t know how to apply the principle that humans have a right to life to unborn humans, which are in many ways different to humans already born.

This objection has generated a vast literature addressing the moral status of the fetus.21 Arguments typically proceed in one of two ways. In each case, the goal is to find a principle governing moral status that we know how to apply to the case of the fetus. Some arguments proceed by analogy. First, we are asked to agree that certain groups have full moral status and that other groups do not. A feature is identified that all and only the groups with full moral status have. We are asked to accept either that fetuses have this feature (and so have full moral status) or that they lack this feature (and so lack full moral status). A full justification requires explanation of why this feature should make the difference to whether an entity has moral status. Other arguments skip the analogy and argue from first principles that humans have full moral status in virtue of a given feature, that fetuses have (or lack).

Such arguments play an important role in assessing the moral status and value of the fetus. Nonetheless, there are serious concerns about using such arguments without acquaintance with a fetus. As argued earlier, fetuses are very different from most entities we are familiar with. Even if our principles are correct for more familiar entities, they may not apply in the same way to fetuses. Suppose having feature F normally gives an entity moral value, V. There may be some other feature, F’ that only ever combines with F in the case of a fetus. It might be that F’ undermines or defeats F, so that having feature F gives an entity moral value, V, except when the entity also has feature, F’. Because fetuses are so different from familiar entities, without acquaintance with a fetus it is easy to miss possible undermining features.

**9. Using Testimony From Those Who Have Been Pregnant: Critical Respect and Ongoing Dialogue**

I have argued that it is extremely difficult to acquire the knowledge of fetuses’ moral value needed to assess their moral status either by applying moral principles or through imagination. If those who have not been pregnant are to assess fetal moral status, they should draw on the knowledge of those who have been acquainted with the fetus. I will now say something about how to do this. First, ideally, *on-going dialogue* is needed rather than a one-off transmission of knowledge; second, we require *critical respect* for the pregnant person’s understanding of the value of their fetus, rather than simply unquestioning acceptance of what they say.

*9.1 The Need for On-going Dialogue*

In *pure* testimony the hearer is simply asked to accept the truth of a moral judgment. As noted earlier, to assess fetuses’ moral status, we need appreciative knowledge of *how* the fetus is valuable and the *implications* of that kind of value. We are unlikely to get what we need through pure moral testimony.

In impure moral testimony, the listener is given reasons to support the moral judgment. Hearing moral testimony can convey some moral knowledge gained through acquaintance.22 Eloquent testimony can pick out some of the unexpected features that we may have missed and help us to see their significance. It even allows us to feel some of the appropriate affective responses. Nonetheless, in at least some cases, there is still knowledge that the person with acquaintance has, which we lack. Their understanding of the fetus, and thus of its value, is likely to be more detailed and vivid.

The limits of even impure testimony can be seen in the appropriateness of a kind of moral deference to those who have first-hand acquaintance.23 When we use this kind of testimony in moral reasoning, we should be open to correction from such sources. We should be alive to the possibility that we have missed some key detail or underestimated the significance of some proposition.

Knowledge of the value of the fetus is a case where testimony is unlikely to convey all the knowledge acquired through acquaintance. Because the fetus is so different from more familiar entities, it is difficult for those who have not been acquainted with it to accurately imagine it *even if* imagination is aided by the testimony of those who have had acquaintance with the fetus. Even after a wonderful description from a sensitive pregnant person, I may be missing or underestimating something. This points towards a model of ongoing dialogue where the pregnant person can point out such issues. This is epistemically safer than a model on which the pregnant person transmits their knowledge to the non-pregnant philosopher who then goes off and draws their conclusions from it.24

*9.2 Fallibility and Critical Respect*

A pregnant person’s acquaintance with their fetus gives them *access* to knowledge about the moral value of their fetus, and fetuses in general. It does not automatically give them knowledge of either of these things. This is exactly what the analogy with aesthetics suggests. Few assume that by seeing an artwork you automatically know its aesthetic value. Responding to pregnant persons’ epistemic advantages should not mean simply accepting their claims uncritically. We need *critical respect* for the pregnant person’s understanding of the value of their fetus. This requires awareness of how they might be mistaken.25

First, the pregnant person might be misled about the value of their fetus. One of the claims in this paper is that affective responses can give us moral knowledge. This is compatible with affective responses sometimes leading us astray. Cultural or personal factors may distort our affective responses. Lord notes the possibility that some affective perceptions of moral properties may be non-veridical, giving as an example the bigot’s repulsion towards homosexual sex (Lord 2018, ft 48). This does not undermine the claim that *when things go right* affective responses provide knowledge of moral value.26 Nonetheless, it is important to recognise the possibility of error. Critical respect in this case requires alertness to possible distorting factors.

Second, the pregnant person might be mistaken in their conclusions about the moral value or moral status of fetuses generally. As argued above, the relationship between the value of a particular fetus and the moral value/ moral status of fetuses generally is not straightforward. It is easy to make mistakes. Critical respect for the pregnant person’s testimony requires us to explore how they are moving between the different claims and to be alert for mistakes.

There may be basic disagreements about moral value that cannot be traced to identifiable errors. Here the third party can also appeal to reflective equilibrium. We are looking for an account that provides the best match between appealing general principles and strongly held convictions about particular cases. This should include an explanation of any mistaken convictions about moral value.

**10. Conclusion**

I have argued that appreciative knowledge of fetuses’ moral value is needed to assess their moral status – a key aspect of debate in the ethics of abortion. Drawing on Lord’s work on the role of acquaintance in ethics and aesthetics, I have argued that acquaintance is required for such appreciative knowledge. I have added to Lord’s account by arguing that in some cases acquaintance through imagination is not enough for appreciative knowledge. Finally, many pregnant persons have a sustained and informed real-experience acquaintance with their fetus that puts them in an especially good position to have appreciative knowledge of its value. It is difficult to acquire such knowledge without being pregnant.

Recognising that pregnancy provides privileged access to knowledge about the moral value of fetuses requires review of our approach to the ethics of abortion. This has implications for both the activities of professional philosophers and for public discourse. As professional philosophers, our research methods may need to be adjusted to respond appropriately to differences in epistemic status. Public discourse about the ethics of abortion must be deeply informed by the voices of those who have been pregnant. This is not to say that only those who have been pregnant should engage with the ethics of abortion. Instead, discussion of the ethics of abortion should include *ongoing dialogue* with pregnant persons that displays *critical respect* for their understanding of the value of their fetus. If different experiences of pregnancy provide access to different aspects of the value of fetuses, even those who have been pregnant need to engage in such dialogue.

This paper does not support mandatory ultrasound laws. I have remained deliberately neutral in this paper on what a pregnant person may learn about the moral value of their fetus. Although I will not argue for this here, I believe that acquaintance with the fetus reveals that it has a unique moral value, quite different from the moral value of either body parts or humans who are already born, and that recognition of this value is compatible with holding that abortion is morally permissible and should be genuinely accessible. A philosophy course may put you in a better epistemic position to evaluate the ethics of abortion. It does not follow that one must do a philosophy course before having an abortion. The practical cost is too high a price for the epistemic advantage. Similarly, undergoing treatment that is at best invasive, and at worst can make abortion practically inaccessible, is too high a price for the epistemic advantage of seeing an ultrasound. Rather than requiring individual pregnant persons to improve their epistemic status in this way, public and philosophical debate on the ethics of abortion should be informed by the voices of those who have been pregnant.

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NOTES

1. To select just a few examples from a vast literature, see Marquis 1989; Tooley 1972; Boonin 2003, chapters 2 and 3.
2. I argue elsewhere that pregnancy provides privileged access to knowledge about what it is like to be pregnant, which also relevant to the ethics of abortion (Woollard 2021).
3. The debate surrounding aesthetic testimony tends to focuses on question of whether you can gain *any* aesthetic knowledge through testimony and take for granted the superiority of aesthetic knowledge gained through direct acquaintance. For an overview, see Robson 2012.
4. Lord cites Werner 2016 and Audi 2013.
5. Lord cites Johnston 2004 and Schafer 2013.
6. As Martha Nussbaum argues, engagement with literature can enable emotional reactions that would not be possible from merely reading a standard philosophical thought experiment. Nussbaum 1992, 47. For argument that literature cannot replace experience, see Woollard 2021, 160-161.
7. For an influential example, see Sibley 1965.
8. Jennifer Church (2016, 177) argues that imagination can help us to acquire knowledge by allowing us to work through how we expect the different elements to interact. See Maibon (2016) for discussion of the flaws of human imagination.
9. Paisley Livingstone argues that the ‘truism’ that direct experience is needed to make adequate aesthetic judgements should be rejected for two much weaker successors, one of which states that direct experience is needed for the adequacy of some aesthetic judgments, including those ‘pertaining to complex features of exceptional or unusual works of art’ (2003, 266), the other of which argues that direct experience is needed to ‘appreciate the inherent aesthetic value of an artwork’ (2003, 267).
10. For a similar claim, see Warren 2000, 216.
11. I thank an anonymous referee for pressing me on this.
12. For discussion, see Lagercrantz, Changeux 2009.
13. It is also worth noting that accurately imagining a fetus based on one’s experience with a newborn requires familiarity with a newborn. If sustained acquaintance with a newborn is required to assess the moral status of fetuses, this is an interesting result in itself.
14. Lisa M. Mitchell discusses the ways in which the mediated nature of ultrasound may affect the pregnant person’s understanding of her fetus (Mitchel 2001, 697). We should be aware of these pitfalls without overreacting by discounting the ways in which the pregnant person’s acquaintance with their fetus can provide knowledge.
15. I thank Gerald Lang for drawing Velleman’s work to my attention.
16. I thank Sally Haslanger for pressing me on this.
17. I thank Chris Janaway for raising this issue.
18. Lindsey Porter (2015, 39) discusses how a modification of Mary Ann Warren’s (1989) relational account of moral status can provide a variable account of fetal value. As Porter notes, other relational accounts of moral status include Nussbaum 2006, Kittay 2005, Fox 2002, Steinbock 1978.
19. See, Lindsey Porter (2015)’s argument that taking seriously grief caused by miscarriage is incompatible with holding that fetuses lack final moral value.
20. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this.
21. See, for example, Warren 1973, Tooley 1972, McMahan 2001.
22. I thank Aaron Ridley for pressing me on this.
23. See Thomas 1998, 364-5; Wiland 2017.
24. For further discussion of this point, see Woollard 2021.
25. On a narrower understanding of acquaintance, it is a direct epistemic relation that guarantees something like certainty. When understood in the relatively broad way relevant to the moral and aesthetic knowledge, acquaintance does not imply certainty.
26. Someone might think that our affective responses do not provide us with knowledge even in so-called ‘good’ cases. Appeal to affective responses might seem particularly vulnerable to evolutionary debunking arguments: arguments that cast doubt on the justification for our moral beliefs on the basis that they are the product of evolutionary processes that are independent of truth. (For a classic example, see Joyce 2006. For discussion of the specific difficulties posed for a view on which affective response are key to moral knowledge and a potential response, see FitzPatrick 2015, 902-3). My position may also be vulnerable to debunking arguments appealing to other non-truth-tracking influences on affective responses i.e. cultural influences. There are two options for those convinced by these targeted debunking arguments. First, they may hold that acquaintance can provide knowledge of moral value without appeal to affective responses, simply through allowing an accurate picture of the entity. Second, they may hold that we cannot gain knowledge of moral value through acquaintance. If my arguments succeed in casting doubt on the usefulness of imagination and moral principles for assessing the moral status of the fetus, then rejecting knowledge through acquaintance implies that we may not be able to assess the moral status of the fetus. The implications of this for debate about the ethics of abortion would be even more radical than my own conclusions. It is a presupposition of such debate that knowledge of these matters is possible – or at the very least some anti-realist counterpart of moral knowledge. Some versions of the debunking arguments are taken to support moral anti-realism. (See Street 2006) What I say can be translated to be compatible with such a theory.

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