

Abortion: The Utilitarian View Towards Society

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Abstract-Morality is an on- going process in the life of human beings from its primitive stage to the present stage. Moral ideas have undergone many changes during long period. This change is reflected concerned with beliefs and actions which are in is reflected in two more ideas in contemporary moral philosophy- one is abstract-meta-ethics and other is concrete--Applied ethics. One particular kind of applied ethics that raises distinct concern is Bio- ethics. Bio- ethical issues such as ‘abortion’, ‘euthanasia’ etc often involve beings whose moral standing is much more contentious. Conformity with the social norms shaped and modified over a length of time. The belief about what is right and what is wrong, what ought to be done and what not to be done is generally defined as moral belief. Thus, morality is an on – going process in the life of human beings from its primitive stage to the present stage. But, in this age of globalization all human beings with their rapid developments feel insecure in every spheres of life. The problems of bio-ethical issues like Abortion, Euthanasia etc are especially urgent in the present day. They are rather the problems of human beings in situations in which not only ethical decision is necessary for every moments of our life. Thus, in applied ethics ethical principles are required to be applied to solve practical moral problems.

Thus, the present paper focuses three major points-----

Firstly, it discusses about our moral beliefs and actions.

Secondly, the problems of bio-ethical issues like abortion has been taken in discussion and

Thirdly, utilitarianism view on abortion is given.

Key-words—morality, bio-ethical, applied-ethics, abortion, utilitarianism .

1. Introduction: Ethics:

According to Mahatma Gandhi “Ethics shape character and character shapes man”. A man without character is a man with flesh and bones and nothing more than that.”

In the age of globalization all human beings are busy to attain material comfort or happiness due to rapid technological advancement and modernization of the society, but it seems that they feel insecure in every sphere of life. As a result they are unable to lead a meaningful life which is termed as good life. To preserve social harmony and integration, morality and moral codes are very essential.

Ethics is the branch of philosophy that deals with values relating to human conduct, with respect to the rightness and wrongness of certain actions and wrongness and badness of the motives and ends of such actions.

Philosophers today usually divide ethical theories into three general subject areas: Meta-ethics, normative ethics and Applied ethics.

II. An approach to Applied Ethics:

Applied ethics is the branch of ethics which consists of the analysis of specific, controversial moral issues such as abortion, euthanasia etc. In recent years applied ethics issues have been subdivided into convenient groups such as medical ethics, business ethics, environmental ethics etc. Thus, applied ethics is a growing interdisciplinary field dealing with ethical problems in different areas of society.

While the term „applied ethics“ gained currency only a few decades ago, it is not a new idea. Philosophy has traditionally concerned itself with questions of personal morality (what should I do?) and public morality (what is the good for society?). While these questions are fundamental to applied ethics, they also characterize ethics in general. It gives particular and direct attention to specific issues and controversies in private and public life. In the private sphere ethics issues can include matters relating to the family and in the public sphere applied ethics may involve assessing policy in the light of the impact of advances in biomedical and genetics example, life and death, Risk Technology and ethics or it could mean duties to future generations in the light of environmental problems. Thus, applied ethics is the art or science of reflecting on moral dilemmas and moral problems in different social contexts.

One of the influential philosopher in the field of applied ethics is James Childress defines applied ethics as follows:-

“The term „applied ethics“ and „practical ethics“ are used interchangeable to indicate the application of ethics to special arenas of human activity, such as business, politics and medicine and to particular problems such as abortion, euthanasia”¹ (Childress, 1986)
. Let us now look at the field of bio-ethics---

III. Bio-ethics:-

The term “Bio-ethics” is the combination of “bio” representing biological knowledge and “ethics” which refers to knowledge of human value system. The issues of medical ethics come within the domain of bio-ethics. The large scale introduction of biomedical and other technologies in second half of the 20th century has intensified old problems and added new ones such as issue over the definition of death and withdraws of life sustaining medical treatment, abortion, the use of human, animal tissue for scientific research etc.

Today, the ethics of life covers a very wide field including surrogacy, abortion, organ transplantation, cloning etc. Thus solving bio-ethical issues is a complex one.

Here, in this paper, I like to discuss one bio-ethical issue the issue of ‘Abortion’.

IV.Abortion:

Medical ethics is an important area of applied ethics and Abortion is one of the items of it. Abortion is one of the most controversial moral issues in today's society. It is a human right issue because human beings have a right to life. Abortion is the expulsion of a fetus from the uterus before it has reached the stage of viability. An abortion may occur spontaneously in case it is also called a miscarriage, or it may be brought on purposefully in which case it is often called an induced abortion. Abortion is a sensitive topic that requires a considerable amount of understanding when addressing the ethics behind it.

Now the question arises---'Is abortion morally permissible?', or under what conditions is an abortion morally permissible?' ,or 'whether fetus is a person'. In looking at the conditions surrounding a particular abortion, we are able to get a better understanding, regarding permissibility and impermissibility of abortion.

Let us take one argument against abortion—

First premise: It is wrong to kill an innocent human being.

Second premise: A human fetus is an innocent human being.

Third premise: Therefore, it is wrong to kill a human fetus. 2 (Peter Singer, 2011).

In this argument it shows that as the fetus is an innocent human being so it is wrong to kill a human fetus. But, the question arises that whether 'fetus can be termed as a person?' Many of those who defend abortion try to establish the point that fetus not a person, but only a bit of tissue that will become a person at birth. In early pregnancy the event may be termed as natural miscarriage. But they are not distressing in the same way as the death of a person. A parent who loses a child faces one of the worst experiences with hopes and dreams. But a prospective mother who suffers early miscarriage does not have someone to mourn and suffer for her own lost hopes and plans. For this reason, although she may deserve sympathy, she is not in the same category as the mother who loses a child.

Secondly, contrary to act utilitarianism 'rule utilitarianism' believes that people should follow the standards which have been set by society. It states that we should create a rule about abortion that then applies to all circumstances, as the decision should not be bound by individual welfare but by societal welfare. Hence, too, even cultures that forbid abortion do not insist on a full burial service for a dead fetus. So, a newly fertilized ovum, a newly implanted clump of cells, is no more a person than an acorn is an oak tree without itself being an oak tree. 3 (Steven Cahn, 2009). In this paper, my ethical justification for abortion stems from a utilitarianism standpoint.

V. Utilitarian view: Act Utilitarianism and Rule utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is the consequentialist ethical theory that views abortion through the principle of utility, which promotes the maximization of welfare in society. There is no absolute value placed on human life as it avoids moral questions about when human life begins—this is regarded as the great strength of utilitarianism regarding *abortion*. Based on the above questions whether abortion is permissible or not if we use the utilitarian consequential principle of ethics, we establish a set of general morals and rules in which we can apply to every moral question based upon our utilitarian findings. Firstly, Bentham's version of utilitarianism, known as '*actutilitarianism*' is the most adequate theory because it looks at the consequences of an abortion, taking each situation into separate account of all others. It prefers to judge each individual case on its own merits that is it is very much up to the mother and what consequences would be for her life. This means circumstances such as severe fetal abnormality, rape can be considered under utilitarian thought. Thus it would then enable women who have been raped, for example, to choose whether they go ahead with the birth because they may not be able to live with the consequences of their situation bring the child up with the history of the conception attached to the child. So, the abortion would give the mother a more pleasurable life.

Secondly, contrary to act utilitarianism '*ruleutilitarianism*' believes that people should follow the standards which have been set by society. It states that we should create a rule about abortion that then applies to all circumstances, as the decision should not be bound by individual welfare but by societal welfare. A society that recognizes the rule that permits women to choose abortion is likelier to be a happier society than one that thus not recognize this rule.

ActUtilitarianism:

The Principle of utility and assessment or choice of action.

RuleUtilitarianism:

The Principle of utility, moral norms and assessment or choice of action. Since utilitarianism in general is based on the empirical evidence that supports the widespread happiness of many, it's important to include the medical and health benefits of abortion as it spreads happiness amongst a great number of the populace. Many women would experience unwanted childbearing and unwanted child bearing affects the entire family. Mothers with unwanted births suffer from higher levels of depression and lower level of happiness than mothers without unwanted births. So any situation that spreads depression on the populace can be seen as ethically wrong from the utilitarian outlook. Utilitarian's therefore believe that under certain circumstances an abortion could be justified.

Respect for life and respect for individual dignity, these two basic points are involved with abortion. Balance between respect for life and respect for individual dignity are necessary for smooth running of the society. Thus, in the system of human rights, there is often a need to balance right against each other.

VI. Conclusion:-

There will always be great debate whether or not abortion is right or wrong or moral. Everyone will have their own opinions and justification for why they feel abortion should be legal or illegal, moral or immoral. Thus, Utilitarianism aims to have the greatest amount of happiness and least amount of pain, at the highest quality for the greatest of people.

In the conclusion we have to understand that the utilitarian consequential principle of ethics seeks to set a general rule for which to be applied to all moral decisions. In the case of abortions, the utilitarian states that all unwanted pregnancies and pregnancies that represent a physical, mental, emotional and financial hardship should be terminated via abortion.

As an end result what is important is happiness. This is why Mill would agree that a mother is the best judge to determine whether or not to terminate a pregnancy. Thus to solve bio-ethical issues there should be a balance among various factors---- the interest of the fetus, the interest of the pregnant woman and the interests of society. However, that would be an extremely open ended analysis.

Notes:

1. Childress, James , *Applied Ethics*, 1986.
2. Singer, Peter, *practical Ethics*, 2011.
3. Steven Cahn, *Exploring Ethics*, 2009.

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