

Abortion, a personal story, a political choice by Pauline

Harmange

For some, abortion appears to be a simple matter of one person choosing, wrongly, to end the life of another, and is therefore impermissible, and that is the end of it. This is sometimes called the ‘conservative’ position on abortion.

The difficulties with this position are the problems around agreeing that a foetus is a person. There is limited agreement around what a *person* is, when a person begins, even when a person ends. These questions are profound philosophical ones, and the arguments around them become extremely technical. It would be good if they could be resolved, but as they have been going on for hundreds of years this may seem unlikely. It is unsurprisingly not long before most of the people involved in making day to day decisions about abortions – the doctors, the politicians, particularly the women having them – lose interest in these arguments, and become motivated by other concerns.

For some, of course, there are religious beliefs to take into account. These can feed into the philosophical arguments and make them even more difficult than they already were. The obvious point here is that while a person’s religious belief may prevent them having an abortion, in a secular society it will not be clear to someone without that belief why they should not.

Most Western societies have faced up to these problems by permitting abortion up to a certain point in a pregnancy. This is, of course, to bypass religious protests against abortion. In secular societies, religion is treated as a matter of personal choice, and no longer provides a basis for law. In the UK, abortion is therefore permitted up to the end of the 24th week of a pregnancy. In France, where Pauline Harmange elected to have an abortion, it is permitted up to the end of the 14th week. In this way, both the UK and France also summarily 'resolve' the issue of whether the foetus is a person. Indeed, in the UK, you are not legally a person until you are born. These legal practices do not of course address the *philosophical* issue of whether a foetus is a person, or even the closely related question of whether it is a human being. They are simply bypassed by English and French law, much as religion is bypassed.

For some, even these fairly permissive legal contexts are not permissive enough. For many women, abortion is a key issue in their understanding of the status of women. Many feminists, whose key desire is that women should have a status that is absolutely equal with that of men, argue that abortion should not have any legal restrictions at all, and should become a matter of private conscience. For them, the state's role is to provide safe abortions to women who have chosen them as a matter of private

conscience, not to determine who may and may not have one. Some feminist philosophers – famous here is Judith Jarvis Thomson - argue that a woman has a fundamental *right* to an abortion ‘on demand’ correlative with an associated right to the use of her own body. The only constraint on the exercise of such a right would be broad moral notions such as what it would be decent or dignified to do. It is assumed that such notions would be managed by broad moral consciousness. But they would not be matters for the State. Some feminists also have strong reservations that men are involved in the making of abortion law at all, holding a ‘no uterus, no opinion’ stance.

The involvement of the ‘abortion question’ with the issue of the status of women and women’s rights raises difficulties similar to its involvement with the philosophical question of what a person is. It makes it much more difficult. There is no doubt that women should be absolutely equal with men, but it is not clear that this implies a right to an abortion. If, for instance, a foetus is a person – and we have accepted that this question is very difficult – then clearly no woman has a right to an abortion. The notion of a right is itself very controversial, once being dubbed by the political philosopher, Jeremy Bentham, as ‘nonsense on stilts’. Apart from positive legal rights, it is not at all clear from where rights emanate, and a complex defence of their existence is required.

One can therefore understand that practical ways forward on the question of abortion always need to be found in advance of a full resolution of the question of rights (and the question of persons).

It is not surprising therefore that Pauline Harmange, in this account of her own elective abortion, does not really address the big philosophical issues of whether a foetus is a person, or whether she has a right to an abortion. What is striking about this account, given Harmange's feminist hinterland – she is described as a 'misandrist' in the blurb – are perhaps the four later chapters of the book, entitled *Selfishness, Shame, Grief and Healing*, where she discusses her complex reactions to her own medical abortion. Also, despite her misandry, she misses few opportunities to speak positively of her husband, whom she married at 20. One is conscious of a woman for whom the choice of abortion was difficult and emotional, morally serious and taken in the context of close relationships with other women, but also with a man. This is no cartoon-cutout of radical feminism. This is an intelligent, subtle woman speaking, one alert to the issues abortion raises and lacking easy answers to them.

Harmange did not plan to have a child when she became pregnant. She used an IUD as a form of contraception. She notes in the book that she may not have been rigorous in checking that it was correctly positioned, but also medical advice that this

probably was not that important. She became thus one of the many thousands of women who becomes pregnant even though they are using contraception. 72% of women in France who have abortions are using contraception. What should she (they) do?

One position often touted here by opponents of abortion is that one should bear the child and then offer it up for adoption. Very few women (about 1 in a 1000) make this choice, preferring abortion to adoption, implying that abortion is widely seen by women as an alternative not simply to motherhood, but to pregnancy. Harmange discussed what to do with her husband. He did not think he was ready to have a child. This was also Harmange's view. She wanted, one day, to have a child and, indeed, the book ends with her pregnant again and wanting the baby, but she did not want to have one now:

'I told myself: I can't force a child to be born into a minuscule, poorly heated apartment, with no financial stability and no future prospects. I imagined myself, eighteen years later, unable to pay for the education of this child, this little nothing that didn't even exist, and I winced' (p.14)

For many other women in the world, most of them in much more difficult circumstances than Harmange, this is a common rationale for choosing abortion, if indeed such a choice is even possible. It is a form of what is known as utilitarian moral reasoning. The prospects for the unborn child are seen to be poor, the difficulties it would cause for the parents are

considerable. Abortion is picked on the basis of some intuitive sense of what will bring about the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Religious and other 'absolutist' opponents of abortion reject this kind of moral reasoning completely, and the battle between the former, and the utilitarians, is one of the large and unresolved philosophical quagmires around this issue and many moral issues. It is interesting that Harmange seems to permit herself a passing reflection on the 'person' debate by referring to her pregnancy as 'this little nothing'. But she never really addresses the issue of the moral status of the foetus. She is not writing that kind of book. No doubt this will frustrate those readers who are still looking for a resolution of the question of whether the foetus is a person, or a human being.

She recounts how, as a young girl, she loved '*taking care*', of her dolls, her stuffed animals, her books, how she had wanted, at 11 to be the godmother for her baby cousin. She was able to practice baby care on her twin baby brothers, changing nappies and giving baths. At 16, she met her future husband and knew she wanted to spend her whole life with him. It is an interesting background for an avowed feminist and alleged misandrist. Then she didn't doubt that she wanted children. But now things had changed. What she had always wanted was 'a child that I would think of before thinking of myself' (p.16). But now she realised

that, in a sense, she had never thought of herself at all, had never really been permitted to think of herself. Now,

‘I had to have an abortion before I could reconceptualise a desire for motherhood that belonged entirely to me, where I wasn’t shoved aside, a passenger in my own life, numb to my own future possibilities’ (p.16)

For conservatives, of course, this might be seen as a form of fecklessness, a lack of a sense of responsibility, a naivete about her situation. Harmange may actually agree to some extent with this. She would agree that when she conceived her child she did not know who she was. Her upbringing as a girl had made her into a ‘carer’. From an early age, she had seen herself as a potential mother. She had fallen in love very young, married very young. Her main realisation is that, in a significant sense, *she* had not chosen this path. She could not be sure that she had become enough of a self to be sure that the choices she had made were ones that she could continue to live with. She had grown up meeting expectations about what she probably ought to be. Now she needed to find herself. She knew, for instance, that she wanted to write, and she had absolutely no sense of how the life of a writer would fit with being a mother.

In the chapter, *Selfishness*, she reflects on whether in having an abortion she has simply been selfish. The mood of the chapter is uncertain and, at times, unconvincing. She reflects on the

reasons she had for her decision and comments, 'There are no good reasons, or bad ones, other than those that we feel deeply in our marrow' (49). But she did seem to present good reasons for her decision. It is not clear why she now doubts them. In this mood, and perhaps feeling defensive, she can drift towards the more radical feminist position: 'The truth is that anyone should be able to have an abortion without shame ...'. But she rejects the view that a man should have no view. She admits that if her husband had been in favour of the child, she may well have had it. Ultimately, she seems to come back to her initial 'good' reasons:

'it was in thinking about the existence this child would have had, if it had been born into those conditions, that I realised this wasn't what I wanted to offer it. I don't feel selfish for refusing to drop a minuscule human being into this furious world without being able to offer it better' (p.54)

Significantly, following the abortion, she 'was filled with rage' that she had not been in a situation where she would have been comfortable giving birth to the child. Nonetheless, 'Choosing my abortion gave me the space to realise myself' (p.56). And, as we learn, in two years or so she would choose to have a child.

For those who see the 'problem of abortion' as something in need of a telling intellectual solution, Harmange's book will seem unsatisfying. Ultimately, she chose an early abortion on broadly utilitarian grounds, with the strong implication that what was

aborted was not a person or a human being. She writes graphically about the actual process:

‘I took the second pill, and I didn’t have long to wait before a violent cramp tore through me, and as I was walking down the stairs, I felt sliding out of my vagina, into my menstrual pad, a rush of blood and the embryo. It had the same consistency as a very large menstrual clot, but the colour was grey, like nothing I’d ever seen before’ (p.40)

Harmange’s book is, to some extent, a reflection on whether what she did was indeed to meet the utilitarian standard of maximising happiness, where what was in the scale, primarily, was her happiness and her husband’s, balanced against whatever pain was suffered by the aborted fetus. To those who think that even the very early fetus is a person or human being, none of this will be remotely convincing, and Harmange does nothing to address the anxieties of such people. Indeed, it is not at all clear what she can possibly do on this score. To women who accept Harmange’s broad philosophical position on the moral status of the early fetus the book will no doubt be of value for the doubts and anxieties that it discusses, which must be widely shared. It is not a strident defence of a woman’s right to choose. Indeed, there is little talk of women’s rights, much more of women’s uncertainties. In the chapter entitled ‘Grief’, she talks openly of being ‘profoundly changed’ by her experience:

‘My abortion forced me to look at myself, as I truly was, naked and vulnerable. I’m beginning to wonder if, maybe, it was my abortion that made me an adult’ (p.67).

Harmange’s essay is arguably in the spirit of some of Naomi Wolf’s comments on the abortion debate. Wolfe was concerned to defend a pro-choice position, but one that recognised ‘that the death of a fetus is a real death’ and, as such, that a sense of grief at the death of a fetus is not inappropriate. She was concerned that even the feminist movement should acknowledge the *seriousness* of abortion. This is Harmange, almost. She may not be close to Wolf in the view that the death of a fetus is a ‘real death’, if this is meant to imply that it is the death of a person or a human being. Harmange, as we said, seems to avoid this question. And while she feels grief, it is, as she says as much a grief for herself, the self that seemed to die as it passed through the experience of abortion and become something else:

So, I imagine that, in a way, my longest, most painful grief was for who I’d thought I was, as the sum of my parts ... The woman who arrogantly thought that abortion Wouldn’t affect her in the slightest, because she was above all that’ (p.69).

For Harmange, abortion was very serious, not because she believed that she had killed a person or a human being. She did not think that. But in that experience she underwent a profound personal change, became much closer to understanding the kind of woman that she could be, something that neither her

upbringing, nor even her marriage, had managed to yet show her. Her message to other women is that they do have the right to an abortion – she does not address the difficult question of whether there should be any restrictions on this – but they must be prepared to be deeply affected by it, even ‘profoundly changed’, as she has been.