

# Abortion: a dilemma in Medical ethics

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## Abstract

**Context:** Abortion is one of the most important human right issues in medicine, because human beings have a right to life and is one of the controversial issues discussed in medical ethics. **Evidence Acquisition:** In this paper, the history of abortion within different religions was reviewed by examining the arguments of supporters and opponents of abortion, exploring the evidence on both sides and requirements of philosophical theories of natural law, hedonism, utilitarianism, deontologist, and freedom. We examined related books, articles, Fatwas and websites, collected over almost a year through searches of databases such as Medline and Iran Medex and search engines such as Google and Yahoo. In addition, Fatwa requested from great Sunni and Shiite authorities and references recommended by experts, and also related rules and guidelines in Islamic Republic of Iran were considered search terms included Abortion, Miscarriage, Prenatal diagnosis, Islam and Islamic. In this short review, we discuss literature review articles in the electronic databases of MEDLINE, EMBASE, CINAHL, AMED, and PsycINFO. **Results:** It was revealed that theories of Islam are harmony with the divine command consistent with reason and natural law are the only solution. They consider sacred the Islamic concept of life, recognizing the development of sperm in the woman's uterus, especially after four months, as a human being. This view arose from certain advantages assigned by Islam to humans embodying life and the divine spirit. This theory can both statistically and theoretically resolve the dilemma within medical ethics. **Conclusions:** Islam authorizes abortion only in cases where the maternal life has been jeopardized. Any verdict to permit abortion would devalue the human, allowing the murder of human being weakened physically or mentally.

**Keywords:** abortion; dilemma; medical ethics; Iran

## INTRODUCTION

Abortion is one of the controversial issues discussed in medical ethics <sup>[1]</sup> And is a human right issue because human beings have a right to life <sup>[2]</sup>. Abortion, defined as the deliberate termination of a pregnancy before normal childbirth, is an old, but living topic for debate and disputation <sup>[3]</sup>. All of main existing religions in the world have their own perspectives towards abortion. In Abrahamic religions, abortion is not forbidden but it is not permitted to be done on demand. Abortion is only permitted for serious reasons and with consideration on its own merits in every case and the decision should be taken after consultation with a rabbi competent to give Advice on such matters <sup>[4]</sup>.

Ethical issues are identified and framed through a 'naturalized bioethics' approach. This approach critiques traditional bioethics and gives attention to everyday ethics and the social, economic and political context within which ethical problems exist. Moral problems of healthcare extend well-beyond the issues that interest the media and ethical experts. Expanding our concept of an ethical problem to include the moral problems of everyday life strengthens the moral imagination we need to create 'good' obstetric care <sup>[5]</sup>.

Ethical dilemma in the medical ethics is a practical problem in which an individual faces two alternative decisions each compelling in its own right and personal calculations rarely yield a conclusion. In most cases, abortion has rather become a dilemma. In a couple's marital life, the birth of a child is a blessed event, prompting the humans to support the origin of the creation, i.e. embryos in the womb, devising certain regulations about it. Nonetheless, the values of embryo in some cases have been downgraded by scholars who violate human rights. Some, abortion has been prescribed due to

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measures such as birth control or saving the maternal lives. In addition to religious, legal, and ethical discussions about abortion, there are social, political and medical perspectives considered. In any case, conflicting views have often been presented. Where a group with a variety of reasons permits abortion without any restrictions, another group bans it and yet others authorize the action.

Nowadays, the groups supporting a ban on abortion are pro-life advocates in the West, whereas the groups opposing the prohibition of abortion are called pro-choice proponents.

In the distant past, there were also two perspectives. For instance, Socrates permitted abortion by the maternal desire, while Aristotle authorized it when the mother has numerous children [6].

Perhaps the most important idea opposing abortion at the time was natural law whose proponents believed that it seems like divine religions providing the most comprehensive expression of the nature of objective moral principles. Cicero the Roman philosopher proposed a perfect description of the doctrine of natural law: “true law is consistent with common sense and nature, whose overall scope of application is invariant and eternal, the commands call to duties and prevent from errors. any attempt to change the law is a great sin. For all nations and all times, there will be only one valid, eternal and infinite law, and only one God and one king rules over all of us, since He is the legislator of the law, promotes it and referees it [7].

In ancient Egypt, the criminal abortion was applied to heavy punishment after referral to the Forensics and approval of the court [8].

In ancient Iran during the Median, Achaemenid, Parthian and Sasanian ages, there were codified laws of medicine and physicians know and used a variety of drugs aborting the embryo authorizing its application. It was determined how to distinguish between criminal and medical abortions, so as to verdict on the fate of the accused [7, 8].

In subsequent periods, for the first time distinction was made between the embryo with obvious signs of life and that without the signs of life, and abortion was authorized in the latter case [9].

Hippocrates, the famous Greek physician, stated in his famous oath that abortion is a condemned action and warned physicians to make available to pregnant women the tools for abortion [10].

Given the contents of the Torah as the oldest scripture, Judaism deems abortion and prevention from contraception a sin and considers the family head responsible for this.

The infertile woman, no matter how beautiful and rich, was ashamed in front of her child-bearing slave. Most infertile

women adopted children to get rid of the stigma. Later on, the Prophet Moses (AS) adjusted this tendency in his teachings in chapter one to fourteen Travel wisdom in the Torah for the Hebrew people and the Israelites [11].

The majority of Christians, especially Catholics, prohibit abortion in any circumstances. Thomas Aquinas, a Medieval Christian priest proposed in his *Summa Theological* that the idea a universal natural law sustained by God to govern the world. Therefore, he raised a comprehensive order of the relationship between nature and supernatural deeply rooted in all theological, philosophical and legal theories in the West. Until the present time, its basis has remained for the expression of Roman Catholic and moral theology. In this light, moral philosophy is founded on both the nature and religious faith.

The Catholic Church believes that every person, including an embryo formed immediately after the conjunction of a male sperm and female and ovule has the right to live as granted by God. The right has not been granted by the parents or society or authorities. Hence, any intervention in the embryo's life is a moral crime against the law of God and nature. Consequently, the murder of a child would not be fair even if serving to save the mother's life. The life of the baby in the womb should be saved even if it leads to certain death of the mother [12].

In recent years, Cardinal Alfonso Lopez the President of the Pope Council announced that the Pope has composed a 100-page letter on his opposition to contraception (safe sex) as well as homosexuality and abortion [13].

This view that abortion is morally wrong in all circumstances argued that the fetus has the same rights as any other person for life. Official announcements by the Roman Catholic Church were most coherent form of this perspective [14].

Casticonnubii (1930) described abortion as “murder of the innocent”.

Today, most Christians believe that a fetus should be treated like an adult because there may be the danger of wasting human life [15]. Several Islamic thinkers contend that in cases prior to four months of gestation, abortion should be permissible only in instances in which the mother's life is in danger or in cases of rape [16, 17].

It can also be suggested that abortion is banned in verse 228 of Baqarah: “separate women from three menstrual cycles look forward to separation or return, and if they believe in Allah and the Last Day it is not lawful for them to deliberately conceal what Allah has created in their wombs.” (Concealing means: deliberately covering something and in the verse it means “deliberately covering the fetus” or “wasting” it). [18].

One interpretation of the verse could be that: Unhappiness and dissatisfaction of the woman with her husband after

separation and the possibility that I might not return again to my husband and marry another man, which cannot a good reason to deliberately destroy their unborn child.

### Problem statement and fundamental questions

This paper attempted to clarify the issue as a dilemma in medical ethics rooted in faith, moral and professional health care and medicine. The approach was to accept or reject the idea based on the key reasons behind the opponents and proponents of the most important school in moral philosophy.

**Evidence Acquisition:** In this paper, the history of abortion within different religions was reviewed by examining the arguments of supporters and opponents of abortion, exploring the evidence on both sides and requirements of philosophical theories of natural law, hedonism, utilitarianism, deontologism, and freedom. We examined related books, articles, Fatwa and websites, collected over almost a year through searches of databases such as Medline and Iran Medex and search engines such as Google and Yahoo. In addition, Fatwa requested from great Sunni and Shiite authorities and references recommended by experts, and also related rules and guidelines in Islamic Republic of Iran were considered search terms included Abortion, Miscarriage, Prenatal diagnosis, Islam and Islamic. In this short review, we discuss literature review articles in the electronic databases of MEDLINE, EMBASE, CINAHL, AMED, and PsycINFO

### Key questions

1. Is embryo only an organism separate from the mother?
2. Is the embryo philosophically a perfect human being?
3. What are the legal rights of the embryo's parents at any stage?
4. Is abortion authorized to preserve the mother's health or if it is defective or the result of adultery for birth control or other reasons? Is it in any case a homicide?

At this point, it is necessary to bring the pros and cons of abortion.

### The reasons behind the need for liberation and legalization of abortion

- The ever-increasing progress of science has led to lower mortality and thus overpopulation.

Overpopulation will give rise to poverty and human misery.

If the responsibility for upbringing fewer children is on the shoulders of parents, then the emotional needs can be fulfilled more accurately and patiently. This is only contradictory to the laws of nature, but is rather emphasizes the first law of nature for self-preservation.

In 1999, the United Nations carried out a global study on the administration of miscarriage, exploring the main reasons.

The reasons of abortion were considered to be:

1. Saving the maternal lives,
2. Maintaining the physical health of women,
3. Maintaining the mental health of women,
4. The status of embryos resulting from rape and incest,
5. Deficient embryos,
6. Economic and social reasons,
7. Woman's desire.

According to available statistics, criminalization and punishment cannot be adopted to prevent or reduce abortions [19-22].

Studies showed that children not born as a result of abortion would have systematically been more likely to live in poor conditions and argued that the legalization of abortion reduces abuse and exploitation of children. Unplanned child may have a negative impact on child development [23, 24].

A sizeable proportion of women in 2004 and 1987 also reported having completed their childbearing (38% and 28%), not being ready for another child (32% and 36%), and not wanting people to know they had sex or became pregnant (25% and 33%). Considering all of the reasons women reported, the authors observed that the reasons described by the majority of women (74%) signaled a sense of emotional and financial responsibility to individuals other than themselves, including existing or future children, and were multi-dimensional. Greater weeks of gestation were found to be related with citing concerns about fetal health as reasons for abortion [20, 23, 25, 26].

- Many proponents of the primacy of freedom believe that abortion is authorized for protecting the rights and freedoms of the individual woman, since the fetus is considered as an organ of the mother which is still not at the level of free choice and its abortion is the mother's inalienable right [25, 26]. In their view, the words soul, or the will of God for each person, do not necessarily make sense. They do not consider the fetus an adult at least in the early stages of pregnancy. In fact, many of the proponents of abortion think the fetus is merely a batch of cells in the mother's body because there is no need to rely on the religious values about processes of conception and pregnancy, and the mother can get rid of it at will. Moreover, there is no reason to call abortion a murder, especially when it comes to medical abortion [23, 26].

### CONCLUSIONS

Starting a coherent and consistent family in light of the moral and religious beliefs will fulfill the main objectives of moral rights within the legal systems [27]. Abortion is a choice between human rights and the interests of parents as well as child survival for the life granted by God [28]. If the fetus is in a full ontological shape as we know, abortion denied the right to life of the unborn baby. Abortion is actually murdering of a fetus as an unborn child and a human being, whereas abortion implies that fetus was an inorganic being allowed to be destroyed. Any action that leading to disrespect for human life is wrong [29]. Humans differ in actions and reactions ranging from self-awareness, knowledge of the past, present, future, reflection, planning and other human characteristics

covering a wide spectrum of severity and weaknesses. It is impossible to measure the extent to which the factors can be combined to create a human being. Whenever we decide to destroy a number of human lives due to poor formation or invaluable life that can prevent the killing of mentally retarded people, patients, the disabled and mentally ill and old people who cannot live alone as well as hemodialysis patients whose lives are dependent on the devices? By this logic, even killing the fetus after birth could be permitted<sup>[3]</sup>. Woman and child in her womb are so close together that perhaps no two creatures in the world connect so tightly. Such relationship is not only biological, but also psychological and emotional. A woman with the intent to harm her child actually attacks the deepest thoughts and unconscious needs and the innate aspects of her emotions, for which there will be psychological affects and the Hereafter<sup>[30]</sup>. Ban on abortion should be part of a major social policy that covers the availability of equipment and legitimate ways of preventing unwanted pregnancies, and the free flow of accurate information to young people and culture for the avoidance of sex among adolescents and many other measures. They include training and raising knowledge necessary to society, financing those families forced to destroy their children due to poverty and prevention from spreading corruption especially violence and rape of women, which are among the issues directly related to the prevention of unwanted embryos.

### Conflict of Interests

The author declares that there is no conflict

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