ДРУШТВО ЗА АНТИЧКЕ СТУДИЈЕ СРБИЈЕ

АНТИЧКА КУЛТУРА, ЕВРОПСКО И СРПСКО НАСЛЕЂЕ

Зборник радова

ДРУШТВО ЗА АНТИЧКЕ СТУДИЈЕ СРБИЈЕ
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Should the baby live? This is quite annoying a question for Applied Ethics, since the answer seems most of the times obvious: if I was allowed to live as a fetus and an infant, then all fetuses and infants should ceteris paribus be allowed to live. Ethics, though, is about real life, and in real life cetera nunquam paria sunt. Every case is substantially different from any other, and the advance of time has allowed no answer to stand for more than a blink of the eye. This is why the drill always seems to be the same when it comes to ethics: most of the moral dilemmas can be traced back to the dawn of philosophy, and no solution can boast for being final. The same applies to abortion and infanticide. Although both were distinguished as moral dilemmas more than two and a half thousand years ago, they remain open up to now. It is that kind of openness that makes ethics charming, alluring and fascinating, for it allows enterprising approaches to worn out issues, and every now and again recompenses us with the blessing of a new rigor, when an imaginative approach allows the nearly utmost certainty that we are finally face to face with some kind of unshakable truth or, at least, with true genius.

Concerning abortion and infanticide, ethics has always seen to each one as quite puzzling an issue. The dilemma expectedly goes like this: “Are they morally good, permissible or acceptable, or are they not?” All three major approaches in ethics, viz. virtue ethics, deontology and consequentialism, have fervently exerted themselves in order to settle both. A virtue ethicist is expected to approach the issue wondering: “Is performing abortion and infanticide indicative of virtues, to wit of character traits that the virtuous agent possesses?” A deontologist would bring the dilemma up for
discussion asking: “Is conducting abortion and infanticide in accordance with some moral rule or principle?” To an act utilitarian, on the other hand, the same question would strike as: “Do abortion and infanticide promote the best consequences, to wit those in which happiness is maximized?” All three approaches have been applied to the subject matter ever since the classic era, sadly with no remarkable success and, most of the times, even without the slightest suspicion of the promised rigor.

The Pythagoreans clearly opted for deontology, blending it with such a good smack of metaphysics that the mixture they created proved to be not only enduring, but also extremely influential. To the question concerning the morality of abortion and infanticide they would bluntly reply that both violate the moral principle according to which the sanctity of life should be revered. If someone was bold enough to ask why we should revere life per se, they could just invoke the cornerstone of their philosophical system, to wit the belief that – at least, animal – life is indicative of the presence of an immortal, divine soul. And there comes metaphysics. In modern terms the Pythagoreans’ is a Non Reductionist one, spiraling around the all or nothing principle, according to which any person who definitely exists at some time is such that at any other time the person either definitely exists or definitely does not exist. Personhood is determined by a further fact that can be reduced neither to physical nor to psychological continuity, for it is utterly conditioned by the existence of the divine immortal soul. However, which is the very first, slight period of time during which a being becomes a person, due to the fact that it is henceforward endowed with a soul? On the Pythagoreans’ view – as on the view of modern Non Reductionists –, the sharp borderline after which a being is considered to possess a soul and, thereupon, comes into existence as a person, can only be drawn at conception. According to them a fertilized human egg is as much a person as any adult is. If conception is just a

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1 Xenophanes mockingly cites the following incident: “they say than once as he was passing by a puppy being beaten, he felt compassion and said this: stop, don’t beat it, since in the truth it is the soul of a friend which I recognized upon hearing it cry out” [Xenophanes Fragment 7; Diogenes Laertius De Vitis 8.36]; there is not absolute certainty, though, that the Pythagoreans confined the possession of a soul strictly to animal existence [cf. Empedocles’ Fragment 117: “for already I once have been a boy, and a girl, and a bush, and a fish that jumps from the sea as it swims”].


5 Paul Carrick, Medical Ethics in the Ancient World, Georgetown University Press, 2001, p. 126.
part of a person’s life, and if any part of a person’s life is *as much* a part of a person’s life *as any other*, then killing a fertilized human egg is straightforwardly killing an innocent person. Pythagoreans clearly rejected abortion and infanticide on metaphysical grounds. The basis of their attitude towards both was their profound belief to the immortality and the sanctity of the soul, which they tended to equate with life. That conviction led them straight to the adoption of the *transmigration of the soul* doctrine. All living beings possess an immortal, divine, sacred soul; it leaves their body when they die and enters the body of another creature at the time of conception.6 The germ is considered to be a piece of brains containing hot vapors within it.7 Both soul as well as sensation originates from this vapors.

Having adopted the metaphysical tenet that even the germ is an alive and ensouled being (although not a person in strict moral terms) and embracing the moral deontologist imperative that human agents should revere and protect life (soul) *as such*, the Pythagoreans rejected any deliberate human intervention to the continuation of life at any stage. From their point of view fetal, infant and adult life are *ex hypotthesi* of no *qualitative* but only of *quantitative* difference, a fact that calls for the acknowledgement of equal moral rights to all three. Therefore the Pythagoreans would not advocate even therapeutic abortion, not to speak of infanticide.

Plato, on the other hand, seems to entertain utilitarian tendencies as to foeticide and infanticide. While not only sharing with the Pythagoreans their Orphic background, but also endorsing many of their beliefs – most importantly the transmigration of the souls doctrine –, surprisingly he is more flexible towards both abortion and infanticide. This is due to the fact that Plato, much more secular a philosopher than any of the Pythagoreans, had to compromise his metaphysical convictions with the urge of sustaining a well established and functional *polis*. Since deficiencies in the newborns were to be nothing but a burden for the state, an apt law maker should not only prevent the conception of the defected ones, but also provide for their annihilation.8 Plato is not at all adamant against eugenic abortion, since – according to his metaphysics – the body is being ensouled not at conception, but at birth; the soul, after all, enters the body from without, through the infant’s first breath.9 Relocating the ensoulment threshold from conception to birth, Plato achieved to overcome a moral obstacle towards abortion, since he no longer had to justify the taking of

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7 Diogenes Laertius, *De Vitis*, 8.28-29.
8 Plato, *Republic*, 5.460ff.
9 Ibid., 10.601bc.
innocent human embryo life or the annihilation of its soul\textsuperscript{10}. Surprisingly enough, when it comes to infanticide he seems to totally by-pass this obstacle, not scrupling to come out open with explicit regulations for the annihilation of misfit offspring. In the Republic specific measures are taken in the case that offspringprocures from bigamy, adultery, incest, premarital sexual intercourse, or whenever the father is older than fifty five and the mother than forty years\textsuperscript{11}. It is evident that in the Republic Plato as to infanticide is strictly focused on politics and ethics, entirely disengaging himself from metaphysics. Summum commune bonum is sought in sharply defined utilitarian terrain, and the law maker or the ethicist allows himself not even the most hastily sidelong glance towards metaphysics.

It is only peculiar that when it comes to Aristotle, the par excellence ethicist and political thinker, things are not as straightforward as one might expect, since he unexpectedly side glances towards metaphysics; Aristotle favored – leastways under specific circumstances, to wit when an infant is being born with deformities – infanticide\textsuperscript{12}, but as for abortion he was quite skeptical, mostly due to the fact that in his view the fetus is being ensouled at some time during gestation. According to him the soul is inseparable from the body and permanently bound to it as the power of the sight is to the eye\textsuperscript{13}. Hence, one can only discuss about embodied souls, the transmigration and reincarnation doctrines being just myths\textsuperscript{14}. He locates the threshold of ensoulment to the emergence of motion, since the body prior to acquiring the capability to move its parts should already have obtained its form. Accessing the subject matter by virtue of the welfare of the state, Aristotle accepts abortion in the case a couple exceeds the fixed quota of children; surprising though, this should only happen before the fortieth or the ninetieth day for male and female fetuses respectively\textsuperscript{15}, an interval at which according to Aristotle a fetus acquires what he calls nutritive (\textit{to zen}) and, henceforward, sensitive soul (\textit{aesthesis})\textsuperscript{16}. After that interval it seems that to Aristotle abortion is morally unjustified\textsuperscript{17}. His view was later on adopted by Augustine: “The body is created before the soul. The embryo before it is endowed with a soul and is \textit{informatus}, as its destruction by human agency is to be punished by a fine. The embryo for-

\textsuperscript{10} Paul Carrick, \textit{Medical Ethics in Antiquity}, D. Reidel, Dordrecht 1985, pp. 112-119.
\textsuperscript{11} Plato, \textit{Republic}, 5.461a-c.
\textsuperscript{12} Aristotle, \textit{Politics}, 7:16.
\textsuperscript{13} Aristotle, \textit{De anima}, 412b.5; 413a.1.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 407b.22.
\textsuperscript{15} Aristotle, \textit{Historia Animalium}, 8.3583b.
\textsuperscript{16} Aristotle, \textit{Politics} 7.16, 1335b.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 7.1335b.20.
matus is endowed with a soul; it is an animate being; its destruction is murder and is to be punished by death."\textsuperscript{18} Variants of this distinction endured in Roman Catholic theology until 1869, when Pope Pius IX formally eliminated the distinction between animate and inanimate fetus. He further decreed that all fetuses should be considered ensouled from conception, and that therefore any abortion is equivalent to murder. Aristotle’s line of reasoning concerning abortion and infanticide is a quite sharp one. To be morally permissible, both have to be (under specific circumstances) the choice of the virtuous man, to wit whom that possesses virtues, viz. character traits that allow somebody to achieve eudemonia. However, true happiness is only affordable within the framework of an autonomous, prosperous and well functioning city-state. That kind of city-state ought not to exceed a specific population limit; hence, if abortion and infanticide promote the observance of that limit, then both are fundamental to its prosperity. Since the virtuous moral choice is that which brings about permanent true happiness to the moral agent, and if that happiness allegedly rests (along with other conditions) to the upkeep of a fixed population quota, then abortion and infanticide would well be indicative of moral virtue; consequently both would well suffice as the moral choice of the virtuous man.

So far so good, yet still nothing thrilling. Philosophers hitherto have done nothing but elaborate, expand and scrutinize common belief, religious or other. Where is the enterprising, forward-looking view? Where is the promised new rigor? On my view it only emerges together with the Stoics, whose collective account of both abortion and infanticide bears fresh and fetching potential. The Stoics cast metaphysics out of the debate and confined it to clear-cut moral terrain. Their metaphysics concerning fetal life is one after the Platonic fashion, since they abide by Plato’s conviction that the body is being ensouled at birth, with the psyche entering the body from outside through the infant’s first breath.\textsuperscript{19} Their ethics concerning abortion and infanticide, though, doesn’t seem to have much to do with their metaphysics. On the Stoics’ view the fetus resembles a plant; it possesses a physis but not a psyche. The fetus just cannot count as a human being in either the biological or the moral sense, thus it can be no possessor of moral rights. Thereupon abortion ought not to be rejected on grounds of violation of rights. They use the fruit – tree analogy to support

\textsuperscript{18} Augustine, Questiones in Exodum 80.  
\textsuperscript{19} Seneca, Consolation to Marcia 24.4.  
their argument. The fetus is considered to be only a part of the woman’s body, just as a fruit is to a tree; therefore the mother can do with it as she pleases\textsuperscript{21}. The infant, on the other hand, though an alleged complete human being in the biological sense, could not even \textit{arguendo} be seen as a complete moral agent, since it lacks rationality. According to the Stoic view, justice extends only to rational beings. Thus, only they can be deemed as possessors of rights. An infant, though, is no more rational than a horse or a dog and, evidently, ethics allow for no dogs or horses to share in – \textit{quod licet jovi non licet bovi}. Thus a human infant can have no moral rights, nor is it a person in the moral sense. As a matter of fact many Stoics at the time of Seneca did actually believe that the human soul continues to expand its capabilities up to the age of fourteen, when it acquires the full capacity of rationality\textsuperscript{22}. It was only after that when they could fully enjoy rights\textsuperscript{23}. No rationality means no personhood, and no personhood means no moral rights at all; limited rationality means limited personhood, and limited personhood means in turn restricted moral rights. Thereinafter moral agents performing infanticide are by no means violating the right to life that the infant allegedly has, since no infant can participate in the covenant of ethics. The fact that the infant is an ensouled being is actually – according to the Stoics – morally irrelevant, as far as rights are concerned. If a baby is weak or unnaturally formed, not to mention monstrous newborn, it should be destroyed\textsuperscript{24}. The Stoics did not maintain that fetal or infant life was of no worth and could be terminated with no reason at all. What they seem to have insisted on is that the fetus or the infant ought not to be treated as possessors of any right – and, specifically, the right to life. Centuries afterwards Thomas Hobbes also exempted infants from the covenant of ethics\textsuperscript{25}.

Nowadays two of the most prominent philosophers in the field of Applied Ethics, the Canadian Michael Tooley and the Australian Peter Singer, seem to after the Stoics concerning the ethics of abortion and infanticide. They both by-pass the worn out question “is performing abortion and infanticide morally acceptable or permissible?”; instead they approach the subject matter focusing in the possibility of ascribing moral rights to fetuses or infants; they both reject this possibility on grounds which are

\textsuperscript{22} Paul Carrick, \textit{Medical Ethics in the Ancient World}, Georgetown University Press, 2001, p. 135.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 138.
\textsuperscript{24} Seneca, \textit{De ira} 1.15.
not a far cry from the Stoic ones. Michael Tooley distinguishes between persons and human beings. The former is a moral term, while the later is not. According to him when we say that X is a person, we mean that X has certain moral rights. However for one to be a person, he needs possessing the concept of continuing self; apparently fetuses do not, and so do infants – at least sort after birth. Therefore fetuses and infants are no persons; hence they can possess no moral rights. Even if we were to acknowledge them some moral rights due to their potential of becoming persons, this would not necessary entail the ascription of the right to life. Being alive does not necessarily mean that you have a commensurate right to life. Given the choice, for example, most adult human beings would prefer to be brutally tortured for an hour instead of being killed. So it seems plausible to say it is worse to kill an adult human being than it is to torture him for an hour. In contrast, while it doesn’t seem to be necessarily wrong to kill a newborn kitten, it is seriously wrong to torture one for an hour. That means that a kitten could still have rights, even thought not the right to life. The reason why one could plausibly acknowledge a kitten the right not to be tortured is the fact that a kitten can feel the pain and seems to dislike it; on the contrary, the kitten can not conceive itself as a continuous existence over time, it has no sense of a distinct self, hence it could not be ascribed the right to life. An infant – not to speak of a fetus – is no more self conscious than any newborn kitten, thereat it can possess no right to life, if any.

Tagging along behind Tooley, Peter Singer regards characteristics like rationality, autonomy and self-consciousness to be decisive attributes, due to whose existence any being is rendered a person. The fact alone that a being belongs to the species Homo sapiens would not by itself suffice for it to participate in the covenant of ethics. There are severely handicapped human infants, comatose patients, retarded people who suffer irreversible intellectual disabilities; all these human beings entirely lack self-consciousness, thus they can not be considered to be persons. This is the case of – even normal – human newborns, as well. The fact that fetuses and infants possess the potential to become rational, to wit persons, would not suffice

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27 Ibid., p. 40.
28 Ibid., p. 63.
to endow these creatures with rights – in particular with the right to life –, unless we are also prepared to reject on precisely the same grounds contraception and, even, celibacy, since the ovum or the spermatozoon also have the potential of becoming – if their coupling is allowed – a fully rational human being. Peter Singer argues that we should treat human beings “in accordance with their ethical relevant characteristics, some of which are inherent to the human nature” beyond rationality, autonomy and self-consciousness he also mentions the capacity of physical, mental and social interaction with other beings, having conscious preferences for continued life and having enjoyable experiences. Only as far as a being possesses the attributes above-mentioned it can be counted as a person and, hence, allowed to share in the covenant of ethics. Consequently, given that fetuses or infants – shortly after birth, at least – do not possess any of these attributes, they should be excluded from ethical reasoning, leastways as far as rights are concerned. Feticide and infanticide, therefore, mean no violation of moral rights and should not be opposed on grounds as such. Once again we are face to face with the Stoic line of reasoning, only that rationality has been replaced by self-consciousness as a prerequisite. It is not surprising at all that Peter Singer’s views concerning abortion and infanticide have attracted severe criticism and sharp accusation for being antihuman, fascist and incoherent, so far they can potentially apply – besides to fetuses and newborns – to many more undeservingly suffering human beings. Peter Singer’s approach is sure to have given ethics the precious new rigor one might seek in philosophy, but has not even slightly settled things down. On the contrary, it gave rise to various pushing new considerations, some of which I intent to share with you.

Roughing out – though, inevitably, in broad outline – the ethics of abortion and infanticide from the classics to Peter Singer, we can only see for ourselves that the moral debate over both issues is susceptible – and sometimes, eager – to embrace ontology and metaphysics, deriving moral attributes from ontological facts and metaphysical tenets. Moral rights, for instance, are considered to be constant properties, integral and non detachable parts of the physis of a being; namely, if the being in question can be deemed as the pos-

33 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., p. 209.
37 Oliver Tolmein, *Wann ist der Mensch ein Mensch? Ethik auf Abwege*, C. Hanser Verlag, Munich / Vienna 1993, pp. 57-76.
sessor of a soul, a *psyche*, then it should enjoy certain rights, primarily the
right to life; likewise, particular stages in the human being's development
grant it access to the covenant of ethics: diminished capacity to feel, to rea-
son, to claim one's rights and to be self aware, means restricted rights; no
such capacity means no rights at all. Thus ontological properties allow for –
or, better, impose – moral ones, in particular the so called right to life.

Ontology, though, is by definition engaged in the quest for the *actual
nature* of beings, while ethics are dealing with the *ideal order* of things.
Moral properties – such as rights – are not preexisting attributes; they lay
exclusively in the eye of the beholder, since moral evaluation emerges to-
gether with the evaluator. In other words, no being can be deemed as the
*actual* possessor of any kind of moral value; on the contrary, it is *us* who
aspire such a value to anything we chose to. When we allow metaphysics
to overlap with ethics, we engage in nothing more than shifting paradigms,
and we create new dilemmas where there should be none. If we abide by
the tenet that from self-awareness, for example, *sequitur* the validity of
moral rights, we may find ourselves in the desperate position to explain
why beings that lack self-awareness are still considered enjoying certain
moral rights. We often talk about the rights of the generations to come,
about animal rights; we refer to rights that are ascribed to impersonal en-
tities such as the environment, corporations, ecosystems, states etc. The
truth is that moral rights have nothing to do with self-awareness, rational-
ity or the capacity to feel. As a matter of fact, moral rights have nothing to
do with the possession of any *actual* property, for they are *ideal* ones. The
diseased, for example, are considered to retain some moral rights which
impose moral duties to those who outlived them; they are usually ascribed
the right to a descent burial, to the attribution of proper honors, to the ex-
hibition of due respect to their corpses etc, although it is evident that –
apart from rights – they are in no position to *retain* anything at all.

I strongly believe that, after all, ethics – and, consequently, Applied Eth-
ics – is not at all just about rights; it is equally about feelings and emotions,
as Aristotle put it\(^{39}\). The covenant of ethics, more than sustaining a func-
tional world – what is chiefly the vocation of the law, – is primarily intend-
ed at creating a *worthwhile*, a pleasant one. Imagine a world in which all
moral rights are deeply revered; it can still be an unpleasant – if not an un-
bearable – world to live in. After all, thirty eight people sitting by and hear-
ing Kitty Genovese\(^ {40}\) struggling and dying for more than an hour meant no


\(^{40}\) The "Genovese syndrome" or the "bystander effect": on March 13, 1964, Kitty
Genovese was attacked by Winston Moseley just outside her home in Queens. Though se-
violation of her rights; it was not *them* who deprived her of her life, the murderer did. Still, no one would be happy nor would he feel secure enough if he lived next to such callous neighbors. Callousness is seldom immoral or unjust; still it is most of the times indecent. Indecent acts can still be performed even if no rights are violated, in exactly the same manner a decent act can be performed despite the violation of someone else’s moral rights on behalf of the doer; Wilhelm Canaris failed attempt to murder Adolf Hitler in his headquarters was intended to violate the latter’s right to life, but it was still a decent and highly merited act of great moral value. Therefore, an applied ethics which exclusively focuses on moral rights could only be a restricted and defective one.

Moreover, such an ethics would inevitably be inclined to overlap with metaphysics through the misleading appeal to rights, which ethicists tend to look on as if they were permanent properties of a being – or of a being’s specific stage of development. In other words, the term *moral right* bears metaphysical implications which constitute an unshakable burden pending it from being effective in the framework of ethics. This is evident in the way that the appeal to moral rights leaves approximately half of our species – to wit fetuses, infants, retarded people, comatose patients etc – as well as the rest of the creation pray to moral callousness, unless we engage ourselves in the highly hazardous and often hilarious endeavor to expand our ethical horizon and acknowledge moral rights to beings who *evidently cannot possess no rights at all*, such as fetuses, comatose patients, even maggots or chipmunks. Instead of wrestling with metaphysics in order to investigate the import and the validity of such an insignificant and misleading technical term as *moral rights*, ethics could focus on the precise definition of the *moral duties* agents do – or, should – have towards beings which may well be deprived of rights, but need be in the covenant of ethics. Instead of debating about whether a fetus or an infant have particular rights or no rights at all, applied ethics could just altogether leave rights to the law, and probe into the duties that moral agents may or may not have towards fetuses and infants, irrespective of their *actual* condition. An effective ethics needs metaphysics and ontology in order to be well informed, but cannot afford to be utterly and profoundly formed by neither; that is, if it is to preserve its autonomy and retain its unique potential of bringing about that precious *new rigor*.

Very wounded she tried to escape and entered her house. An hour later the attacker returned, raped her in her house and stabbed her to death. According to the *Times of New York* thirty eight neighbors were from the start fully aware of the attack, but none intervened or called the police.
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Aristotle, *Politics*.
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Seneca, *De ira*.

ЕВАНГЕЛОС Д. ПРОТОПАПАДАКИС

ПОГЛЕДИ НА АБОРТУС У АНТИЦИ И У НОВИЈЕ ВРЕМЕ

Резиме

Аутор разматра питање оправданости и допуштености абортуса код античких аутора (Питагоре, Платона, Аристотела и стоичара) и католичких теолога, (Св. Августина). Док су питагорејци одбацивали
абортус из метафизичких разлога, Платон и новоплатоничари су на-
стојали да помире теократске погледе са секуларним интересима, а
Аристотела су занимали у првом реду захтеви полиса. Једино су се
стоичари одвојили од питања душе и посматрали су абортус стрикт-
но у моралним оквирима.

Аутор сматра да код Питера Сингера, једног од најистакнутијих
савремених философа, налазимо одјеке стоичких доктрина у њего-
вим контроверзним погледима на абортус, иако ни он није успео ову
прастару дебату да ослободи терета онтологије.