

Sketch of an Existential Bioethic: Abortion *qua* Existential Despair

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ABSTRACT: Abortion – in fact, bioethics more broadly – is rarely discussed within an existential-phenomenological framework, even though many themes that the abortion issue encompasses (e.g., selfhood) are existential in nature. The effort to do bioethics from the existential point of view will produce its own unique challenges. This essay attempts to apply the insights of existential-phenomenology to the abortion debate. It argues that abortion is an act of existential despair by using Gabriel Marcel’s comments on the phenomenological notion of “having” and Kierkegaard’s understanding of despair as the self’s refusal to be itself. BY way of example it considers two cases of “bodily despair”: (1) the treatment of the body as a machine and the tendency to consider the child as an unwanted object, and (2) the body’s misrelation of itself to itself in defiantly choosing to terminate the pregnancy.

INDUCED ABORTION¹ – the deliberate termination of pregnancy – is traditionally discussed within the “big three” ethical frameworks: virtue, deontology, and utilitarianism. It is rarely, if ever, discussed within an existential-phenomenological framework, even though the many considerations that abortion encompasses² are existential in nature.

So, to undertake this project offers some important tools for rethinking the morality of abortion. Thinking about abortion in this frame of mind produces unique problems of its own, and yet it behooves us to try, for there is want of an existential bioethics.³

¹ The word “abortion” will be used as an abbreviation henceforth.

² Freedom and the lived-body, among others.

³ Cf. Amy Laura Hall, “You’d Better Find Somebody to Love: Toward a Kierkegaardian Bioethic” in *Transforming Philosophy and Religion: Love’s Wisdom*, ed. Norman Wirzba and Bruce Ellis Benson (Bloomington IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 2008), pp. 239-55, where Hall uses various texts by Kierkegaard to argue for love’s place in bioethical decision making. We are actually using Kierkegaard’s concept of despair to address abortion, and while sympathetic to love in bioethical conversations, it will not play a role here. Also, see James Mumford, *Ethics at the Beginning of Life: A Phenomenological Critique* (Oxford UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013) contains

It only makes sense to use two philosophers whose ideas can contribute to such an endeavor. Specifically, we will begin with Gabriel Marcel's comments on how his phenomenology of "having"⁴ in reference to the human body illuminate the body's relation to itself, followed by Kierkegaard's understanding of despair, which draws our attention to the Marcellian body's refusal to be itself. The final two sections aim to elucidate the ways in which abortion puts the body in despair. When these philosophies are combined, we are led to conclude that abortion is an act of existential despair.⁵

Marcel on Having

Marcel presupposes an understanding of the distinction between problem and mystery in his discussion *Outlines of a Phenomenology of Having*.⁶ A problem involves data – empirical or intellectual information (or both) – and the asking of questions that can be worked on or solved by anyone, that is, the identity of the one asking the question is not an issue. A problem is something outside of my being that I can control with reason by conceptually holding it at a distance from myself. For example, anyone can change a tire and explain how upon being asked, regardless of occupation, social status, etc. One might also think of scientific knowledge.

A mystery, however, is something in which my being participates, and so it cannot be separated from me upon reflection. The identity of the questioner is crucial in the asking of a question or the seeking of knowledge. Marcel calls mystery "meta-problematic," by which he means "a problem which encroaches upon its own data."⁷ This is a fancy way of saying that a problem does not reference itself, but a mystery does. A mystery is a problem turned inward, owning a kind of self-awareness. He gives the example of evil – I cannot examine evil, philosophically or otherwise, without involving myself in the inquiry. To ask "what is evil?" somehow involves my own being, *not* simply

references to existential-phenomenological figures, especially Marcel, but it is not the kind of usage that we are presenting here.

⁴ The use of the word in everyday speech and what it implies about our existence.

⁵ This paper does not take into consideration any real or imagined rights of the mother, for I wish to remain in the realm of the existential-phenomenological as much as possible.

⁶ Gabriel Marcel, "Outlines of a Phenomenology of Having" in *Being and Having: A Metaphysical Diary* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 154-75.

⁷ Marcel, *Outlines*, p. 171.

being “out there” in the realm of the problematic.

As such, I cannot apply a method – what he calls a “technic” – to understanding or “figuring out” evil without at the same time compromising my selfhood in the process. More specifically, “technic” (or technique) is Marcel’s term for a well thought out and teachable “group of procedures...[that when] put into operation...assure the achievement of some definite concrete purpose.”⁸ When technics (found in the realm of the problematic) are brought to bear on mysteries (e.g., humans), the consequences are disastrous.

The move that Marcel makes to distinguish problem and mystery is essential to understanding the role of despair in abortion, because “the realm of having is identical with the realm of the problematic – and at the same time, of course, with the realm where technics can be used.”⁹

With that being said, Marcel begins his analysis of “having” with a distinction between “what we have and what we are.”¹⁰ I can only “have” something if it is independent of me, and in being independent, it is “added” to me and thereby possessed by me. If the thing that I have is possessed, then I can dispose of it just as easily as I choose to keep it. Hence, I can only choose to deal with things to the extent that I “have” or possess them. On the other hand, if I *am* something, I do not say that I possess this thing, but that I *am* something. For example, if I am a hopeful person, I do not say “I have hope” but “I *am* hope.” The reason for this is that Marcel understands us to embody what we believe – our beliefs are part of our ontological make-up as persons. This opens us up to the two kinds of having that Marcel analyses: having-as-possession and having-as-implication.

Having-as-possession, strictly speaking, consists in joining something material to myself. For example, I can “have” a bicycle in the sense of ownership, and I can “have” a painting in my hands. In both cases, a who-ness (person) relates to a what-ness (quiddity) where the identity of the person and thing remains intact, yet the externality of the object becomes intertwined with the inner life of the person. Marcel gives the example of a person attached to a painting so much so that a kind of “link” is established between the two.

⁸ Gabriel Marcel, *Man Against Mass Society*, trans. G. S. Fraser. (South Bend IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2008), p. 61. Technique is essentially technological advancement, but with a belief in dependence on it for mankind’s future.

⁹ Marcel, *Outlines*, p. 172.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

Because the painting can be lost or destroyed, it may become “the centre of a kind of whirlpool of fears and anxieties.”¹¹ If something happens to the painting, it also happens to the self. In other words, I may physically possess the painting in my hands, but really the painting possesses me as I give it my time and attention.

Having-as-implication, however, only allows me to express myself “on a level implying reference to another taken as another.” This means that my relationship to the thing is not “purely interior.”¹² To say “I have an opinion” is to say “this opinion is not everyone else’s.”¹³ If my relationship to having-something-as-implication were purely interior, we would say “I have my own opinion *and everyone else’s*” (notice the use of the “I” here). As with mystery, when I am involved in “having,” the meaning of what – or who – I “have” changes. Just as having-as-possession corresponds to a “problem,” so too, does having-as-implication correspond to mystery.

This kind of having returns us to considering my own body as something that I have. With having-as-implication, the properties of things “[appear]...to be inside, or, as it were, rooted in the inside, of the body which it characterizes,” as compared to the exterior.¹⁴ My body has “absolute priority” over me according to how attached I am to it. If, for example, I refer to my body as “mine,” I possess it as an object, and because it is part of *me*, I actually objectify myself. Yet, in objectifying myself, I no longer have “my” body, but “a” body. But because I consistently refer to this body as *mine* anyway, I eventually make the connection¹⁵ that this body is not something I simply “have” but rather something that I “*am*.” Still, I am not *only* my body either, for if I lose a limb, I am no less a person.

Nevertheless, if I think of myself as *only* my body and its properties, I risk annihilation “by sinking myself in this body to which I cling.”¹⁶ Marcel says: “Having as such seems to have a tendency to destroy and lose itself in the very thing it began by possessing.”¹⁷ Possessions and implications (external and

¹¹ Marcel, *Outlines*, p. 162.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 161.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 160

¹⁵ Marcel does not explain how.

¹⁶ Marcel, *Outlines*, p. 164.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

internal) have a tendency to consume us, *unless* “we are...bound up with something serving as the immediate subject-matter of a personal creative act.”¹⁸ Marcel returns to his example of having an opinion in order to explain that when we create something, there is a risk that it will “exercise a tyrannical power over me as something I am proud of.” This is not unlike the “having” of all people’s opinions mentioned earlier.¹⁹ When I allow this tyranny to overtake me, I am alienated from myself because I have become “unconsciously [or consciously] enslaved” to something that bedazzles the vulnerability of my imagination. This alienation leads us into Kierkegaard’s discussion of despair.

Kierkegaard on Despair

Søren Kierkegaard. Despair is a sickness of the spirit. To despair is to refuse to be oneself. To be oneself is to be in direct, proper relation with the eternal²⁰ in oneself. Despair undoes this proper relationship and arises in one of three ways: unconsciously, consciously *qua* weakness, and consciously *qua* defiance. Unconscious despair is characterized by a complete ignorance of oneself, of even having a self, of one’s own existentially despairing state. Despair as weakness is “the despairing individual...not [willing] to be himself.”²¹ On the other hand, defiant despair is the “[realizing] why he does not will to be himself,” that is, one understands that the eternal is in oneself and deliberately exploits this knowledge “to will in despair to be oneself.”²² The solution that Kierkegaard proposes to despair is faith, specifically “faith’s possibility of being able under God to save a self from certain downfall.”²³ All people are in despair as the result of misusing their freedom. The existential expression of faith is the possibility that one may yet escape despair, that is,

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 165.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 166.

²⁰ The divine.

²¹ Søren A. Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 67. He is unable to be himself because he needs a strong enough will. There is a stress on earthly or temporal things.

²² Ibid. One is unable to be oneself because one refuses to be the self the eternal deems one to be. His will is strong enough to submit to the eternal, except one is not humble enough to corral one’s despair from the freedom one demands.

²³ Ibid., p. 41.

regain consciousness²⁴ of the self that one is intended to be. In order to have faith, the spirit must “[have] the courage to lose itself in order to win itself,”²⁵ or, surrender its freedom before God.

There remain, however, those individuals who choose to stay in despair.²⁶ When thinking about abortion, one does not necessarily need to consider relation to the divine insofar as one can simply decline to have an abortion²⁷ without bringing the divine into conversation. Yet, with or without reference to the eternal, the idea of selfhood still applies because, broadly construed, despair is the improper relation of oneself to oneself.²⁸ What Kierkegaard’s analysis contributes here is despair’s infection of the spiritual, considered as something complementary to the body. It raises the question of how abortion affects being the self that one is meant to be.²⁹

Towards a Bodily Despair, Part I

One aspect toward which the notion of “having” tends is the of treating humans – and the body – as mere machines (having-as-possession), and thus of denying the lived-body, making it an object that one can manipulate and discard at will. This is despair because it is the incorrect relation of the self to the self. Insofar as the body constitutes the self, the body has a relationship to itself. We see this in how it heals cuts, processes nutrients, and filters waste. The relationship that the body has to itself when pregnant is to preserve the life inside and to give birth.³⁰ When one treats one’s own body *strictly* as something that one “has,” abortion logically follows because children become understood as “problems” to be terminated, not as mysteries. The common perception of the pro-life position is one that mistakes it as making women into

²⁴ This is despair’s dialectical nature—it has levels of awareness.

²⁵ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness*, p. 67. Reminiscent of Matthew 10:39, Mark 8:35, Luke 9:24, John 12:25.

²⁶ There are perhaps an infinite number of specific reasons why, yet willfully persisting in despair seems to be more an act of defiance (i.e. a demand to use one’s freedom).

²⁷ Or think it immoral to have one.

²⁸ On this note, the word “spirit” can simply be substituted for “soul” as the life principle in living things.

²⁹ And for that matter, what is this self in abortion’s context?

³⁰ Though miscarriages do happen, the body does not willingly destroy itself to the extent that life, when left undisturbed, does all it can to survive.

“baby factories” because it does not view a woman’s body as something that she strictly “has,” as though she were an object, because “I can only have what I can in some manner and within certain limits dispose of.”³¹

Let us continue to reflect on the application of having-as-possession. Just as a feeling can embody a woman, so a baby can inhabit her body. In this sense, the two are one-in-being, yet unlike the feeling, the baby and the mother are two separate entities. Paradoxically, however, colloquial speech dictates that the mother is “having a baby.” This phrasing suggests that the baby is not an object to be destroyed, for a baby is explicitly a human being. The word “having” here takes on a different persona. It switches from being objective to subjective. As Marcel points out, in order to have something (or someone), this thing or person must be at a distance, or, independent from me. Yet, the expression “having a baby” suggests that the mother does not possess the child in the same way that she possesses a bicycle. The baby is, in Marcel’s words “added to [her]” – there is possession, but not of an objectifying kind.³² This relation refers us to embodiment (hope, for example) where the qualities of something or someone are embedded in the thing or person’s body. To say that a child is “possessed” by his mother is to imply, vernacularly, she is responsible for him.³³ This responsibility sees “the self-surrender of [one] subject to [another] subject,”³⁴ and thus it is not unlike Kierkegaard’s plea for us to have faith in surrendering to God.

On the other hand, under the despair of the notion of having-as-possession, the baby is treated as the mother’s possession of an object, not as his own self. Possession in this circumstance is related to power. A mother “has,” that is, “possesses” her baby; therefore, she has the power to choose an abortion.³⁵ As Marcel puts it, “Power is something which I experience by exercising it or

³¹ Marcel, *Outlines*, p. 155.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ For his care, well-being, health, and safety.

³⁴ Martin G. Plattel, *Social Philosophy*. (Pittsburgh PA: Duquesne Univ. Press, 1965), p. 52. The mother – a subject – surrenders her freedom to benefit of her child because she sees him as subject, not an object.

³⁵ Before the mother possessed the child, she possessed herself. Does this relation to herself not trump the relation to the child? Hardly. A mother is no less responsible for the child before he is born than after. The minimal relational change is between the child and her body as such.

by resisting it.”³⁶ Here, the exercise of power is despair. A woman “is not able to dispose of [her] body or to renounce it without ceasing to be a [mother],” and one can infer this truth applies to renouncing – or disposing – of others.³⁷

Towards a Bodily Despair, Part II

Marcel’s concept of selfhood lies in the union between body and spirit. If he is right in claiming this, and Kierkegaard’s analysis of the self in despair affects the spirit, then despair must also affect the body.³⁸ Just as Marcel points out we can embody a feeling – that is, we actually are the feeling – so too can we embody despair.³⁹ Abortion is one example.

Yet, it is not entirely clear, in this instance, how abortion is an act of despair. After all, giving birth separates the two bodies, as well, and birth is not despair. Why is abortion different? Because, insofar as the body is related to the self as part of the self (the other part being spirit), abortion is the despair of the self’s bodily aspect to relate to itself properly, to be itself. In the case of abortion, the body *qua* self is trying to be a mother. Pregnancy is oriented towards birth. The proper relationship between the body *qua* body in gestation is to bring the child to term. This relationship extends to the body *qua* one-aspect-of-the-self, as well as to the self as a whole (i.e., the body and spirit together).

As a result of the relation of the body and spirit, another manifestation of despair as the root of abortion is seen in how the body existentially “plays out” despair in the choice to have an abortion. In despair, freedom misuses the identity of the body *qua* one-aspect-of-the-self.⁴⁰ Abortion is the defiance⁴¹ of the body against itself. Because the body is necessarily part of the self, the

³⁶ Marcel, *Outlines*, 159. In the context of Kierkegaardian despair, the exercising of power is defiant despair and the resisting of power is despair *qua* weakness.

³⁷ Plattel, *Social Philosophy*, p. 51.

³⁸ This is not the fallacy *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* because there is in fact a causal relationship between the spirit and body: whatever the spirit wills, the choice will be manifested in the body for better or worse. Also, in *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard uses the bodily illness as an analogy to the spirit’s own illness. I am saying here that the body itself is existentially ill in “having” an abortion.

³⁹ Embody not just as an expression of the spirit’s despair, but the actual body’s embodiment of despair.

⁴⁰ The bodies of the mother and the baby.

⁴¹ Defiant despair.

body is intertwined with the spirit in such a way that a violation of one is a violation of the other. In the example of abortion, one is separating the body and spirit so greatly that the body becomes merely a container, a temporary storage place for items to be discarded at whim. Thus we are led back into Marcel's views. In the context of abortion, treating a woman's body as an object is an example of technic at work, for "there lies a certain specialization or specification of the self, and this is connected with [a] partial alienation of the self."⁴²

Conclusion

Within the existential-phenomenological tradition, it is rare to speak of bioethical topics, even though such topics touch contain existential material. Like any position, this mode of thinking has its own pitfalls. Still, one must attempt to address such questions in light of the knowledge provided by two of its preeminent thinkers. Kierkegaard's concept of despair gives us the foundational theory needed to begin studying how and why certain acts are preferable to others, while Marcel's phenomenology of having provides us with the experience of the lived-body necessary for understanding the body's relation to itself and the world, at least in the context of abortion. When combined properly, one finds that abortion is the despair of the body to be itself, hence an act of existential despair.

What is perhaps most mysterious about this conversation is that even with the knowledge of Marcellian selfhood, one may still – as Kierkegaard observes – choose to enter into (or remain in) despair through an abortion. Defiant despair wants to be unrestrainedly free and so the reasons for having an abortion are too numerous to list. One may speculate it has something to do with living one's life in accordance with one's own desires, but any conjecture along these lines does provide any closure on any concrete matters concerning abortion. The woman who desires to have an abortion may be phenomenologically experiencing apathy (e.g., I do not care if my baby is a self, I am having an abortion anyway), but this is related to her experience of her own existence. In other words, she sees her body as a non-living tool, an object for manipulation, instead of a living being. This is Marcel's alienation of the self – when one is at such a distance from oneself that one cannot see oneself, or others, as anything but expendable. Thus, the root of abortion's

⁴² Marcel, *Outlines*, p. 172.

despair is misrelating oneself to oneself.