



# CONCEIVING ANEW

What pregnancy can teach us about the relationship between ethics and politics

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## INTRODUCTION: POLITICS AND PROCREATION

- Our world is made possible by cooperation. We depend on others with little or no recognition of the magnitude of that dependence.
- Politics is concerned with maintaining the cooperation that is indispensable to society. It is about how power is used to enforce cooperation when individuals might be inclined to defect.
- Politics asks: *how might we live together?*
- But cooperation doesn't just consist in our monetary exchanges and observation of traffic laws. We all owe our very selves to the cooperation of others, either through sexual intercourse or with the aid of assisted reproductive technology.
- Especially as societies need future generations, it follows that the bearing and rearing of human beings might belong to the domain of politics.
- Yet the choice (both whether and how) to bear children is profoundly personal. It's not a choice that should be made on anyone's behalf.
- There's a tension here. On one hand, because procreation requires cooperation, and because we need future generations, childbearing belongs to the

domain of politics. But we can't compel particular women to do that work.

- Thus, politics must make space for ethics. Ethics is constituted by the way each of us asks and answers the question: *what should I do?*
- To further demonstrate, I'll offer an analogy.

## ON THE FACE OF IT

- Rock climbers use harnesses and ropes connected to anchors that are bolted into the rock, so that if a climber were to slip, she won't fall to her certain death. The anchors make climbing possible.
- Placing the anchors—"bolting," as the climbers call it—shapes all future climbers' routes.
- When we engage in politics, when we ask and answer the question "how might we live together?" we are bolting. We're shaping the social landscape in which we all make choices.
- We do that in order to promote and constrain certain choices, to incentivize and facilitate cooperation. We engage in politics to influence the paths that future choosers—including ourselves—will take.

- But bolting does not determine future climbs. Nor are bolted paths unchangeable.
- Importantly: there is, so to speak, only one face of the mountain that all of us are stuck on.

### **A WORRY**

- Some of us are more well-endowed than others, which makes some of us more able to transform our views about how we might live together to a material reality that looks like that answer.
- A politics in which some groups exert their views over the views of others is not really politics, because it's not a case of living together; it's domination.
- Climbers' proverbial routes ought not be constrained based on morally irrelevant considerations, including but not limited to race, sex, gender, or sexuality.

### **BEARING IN MIND**

- Here's where the trouble arises. One's status as a pregnant person—or as a person who may become pregnant someday—is not a morally irrelevant criterion. Pregnancy is not morally irrelevant, because we all need future generations.
- We need some people to do the hard work of bearing future generations. It is necessary for society to make accommodations for women who do that hard work.
- Furthermore, when we speak of the moral relevance of pregnancy, we cannot simply consider those who are pregnant now. The choice to become pregnant (or not) is made in advance of pregnancy in most cases. (And the choice involves long-term costs.) So it's not just status as pregnant person, but a woman's *presumptive capacity to become pregnant* that is morally relevant.
- Yet the presumptive capacity to bear children is basically synonymous with sex, and we concluded that sex should be considered morally irrelevant in politics.
- A possible resolution: there is an asymmetry between promoting and constraining choices. It is one thing to compel women to have children; it is another to commit to offering social and financial support for their pregnancies, should they choose to bear children.

- (In fact, research shows that withholding these resources constrains American women today: 40% of women say they had fewer children than they wanted, and the majority of these cited financial reasons.)
- Arranging our social landscape to support those who bear children does not limit but multiplies the routes available to women, to socially valuable ends.
- Pregnancy is both intensely political—in that it requires cooperation—and ethical—as it occasions lifechanging personal choices and generates serious ethical commitments.
- This portrayal makes it seem at first as if politics and ethics were in a competitive relationship.
- Yet these arenas need not be competitive. Our politics can facilitate hard ethical choices.
- In the case of pregnancy, we can make it such that those who intend to make choices that are socially beneficial are supported and protected.
- For example, today breast pumps are provided by insurance plans; lactation rooms are required by law. Some programs are available for poorer pregnant women. Yet the United States' lack of federally mandated parental leave (or subsidies for childcare) impede the choice to bear children.

### **CONCEIVING ANEW**

- What should I do? How might we live together? While these two questions are not dissociable, they are distinct. The former is the question of ethics. It concerns action and choosing. The second is the question of politics. It concerns cooperation and agreement.
- But they are mutually inextricable, and at best mutually informative.
- Ethical politics requires that space be made for fellow citizens to ask and answer the question “what do I do?” Political ethics insist that the ways we ask and answer the question “what do I do?” always has consequences for how we might live together.
- In the case of pregnancy, an ethical politics must make it such that women are able to determine for themselves whether to become pregnant. A political ethics would motivate all of us to consider how each of our choices shapes the experiences of those women who do the hard work of childbearing.