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The Fetus as Parasite and Mushroom: Judith Jarvis Thomson's Defense of Abortion

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In an interesting and widely read article, Judith Jarvis Thomson has provided a defense of abortion which claims not to rely on denying human status on the fetus-to-be-aborted.¹ A great deal of the persuasive force of her argument depends, I am inclined to think, on the force of two analogies she uses in the course of her paper. My purpose is to reflect on these analogies and to suggest that they are very strange indeed. The first of Thomson's analogies reflects an excessively individualistic notion of human personhood, a notion oblivious to the bonds which tie us to one another. The second expresses (but does not reflect upon) a person-body dualism. Together these analogies subtly distort the matter under discussion and manifest an insensitivity to the human character of birth and motherhood.

It is not my intent to argue here that all abortion is wrong nor even to provide the beginnings of an argument to that effect.² I will also not try to settle the difficult question of the point in time at which we have among us a new life, a new individual human being. These are important questions and necessary for any full-fledged treatment of abortion. They are not, however, my primary concern here. It is Thomson's images, not her arguments, upon which I focus.

Thomson herself grants for the sake of argument that the fetus is a person from the moment of conception (p. 48). Her concern is to suggest that opponents of abortion have tended to assume that, once this was established, the argument against abortion was finished. She, on the contrary, is puzzled about the move from an affirmation of the personhood of the fetus to the conclusion that the fetus can claim rights against the mother or that abortion is morally permissible. She thinks that opponents of abortion pass over this problem much too quickly (p. 48). In this she may well be correct, though it is worth noting even here that there is something a little strange about her case. If the fetus is a person — which we are granting for the sake of the discussion — then surely the burden of proof is on the side of those

who deny that rights may properly be ascribed to it or who advocate taking its life. Thomson talks as if there is something unusual about this, whereas I should think it rather clear. It is not at all surprising that opponents of abortion should have assumed that persons have rights (and, most basically, a right to life), nor that they should have called upon others to protect these rights. It is not surprising that opponents of abortion should have confined their efforts largely to discussing when human life begins and to criticizing various proposed defenses of aborting such lives. To do that, of course, even to do it successfully, is not to show that no such defense is possible. But it is a perfectly understandable procedure if one assumes that — in the absence of forceful arguments to the contrary — one human life (even that of the fetus) is entitled to as much protection as another. The fact that Thomson seems to distribute the burden of proof wrongly from the outset is itself cause for wonder.

The Fetus as Parasite

Suppose we grant that the fetus is a person, how then might we argue that abortion is, nevertheless, morally permissible? Thomson suggests that the mother's right to decide what happens to her body is stronger than the fetus' right to life — or, at least, that the mother is under no obligation to permit the fetus to continue to grow within her body. She grants, of course, that in some instances it would be morally reprehensible for the mother to abort the fetus. She speaks of Good Samaritans, Splendid Samaritans, etc. But these do more than their duty. There is in no case an *obligation* not to abort or a justified rights-claim on the part of the fetus. At this point we may consider her first analogy: that of the unconscious violinist.

You are asked to suppose this case: There is a famous violinist suffering from a fatal kidney ailment, and you alone have the right type of blood to help him. One night the Society of Music Lovers kidnaps you and plugs the violinist's circulatory system into yours. In this way the violinist can (for the amount of time needed to save his life) live off your system. Your kidneys can be used to extract poisons from his system as well as from yours. You wake up in the morning and find yourself in bed with the unconscious violinist, his system plugged into yours. And the question is whether it would be morally wrong for you or anyone else to unplug you, even though such action would certainly mean the death of the violinist.

The force of the analogy is to present the opponent of abortion with a dilemma. If he says, "Once there is (innocent) life we should not directly take it," he seems committed to leaving himself plugged into the violinist for as long as necessary. If, on the other hand, he claims that the cases are markedly dissimilar in that he did not volun-

tarily consent to be plugged into the violinist, his case against abortion in certain kinds of situations (e.g., cases of rape) seems to collapse.

The one good thing I can think of to say for the analogy and the dilemma Thomson generates on the basis of it, is that it may help us to see why abortion in cases of rape is a very special and different matter. However, I am not certain Thomson always sees why this is so. She seems to think that rape is an exception *just as* a pregnancy which requires the mother to spend nine months in bed is an exception (pp. 49f.). The fact that she can run together pregnancy resulting from forcible intercourse with other cases is nothing short of remarkable. This shows that rape is an exception in her thinking only because it seems to impose a special burden for which the mother did not volunteer.

Thomson seems oblivious to what is surely more important than the fact that the mother did not "invite" this fetus in — namely, the nature of the relationship in which the fetus was conceived, a relationship which strikes many of us as not only less than human but inhuman. This same blind spot is manifested later in the paper when Thomson suggests that a woman who became pregnant as a result of rape ought to carry the child to term if the pregnancy lasted only an hour (p. 60). In that case, the implication seems to be, the burden (though not volunteered for) would not be great enough to justify a refusal. Yet, even in such a case the relationship in which the fetus had been conceived would be one repugnant to our sense of humanity. The woman's body would have been forcibly used as a means for someone else's pleasure in a relationship devoid of genuine giving and receiving. Unless we think persons are not present in their bodies (as, we shall see, there is some reason to believe Thomson thinks), this means that not only the woman's body but her person has been used in an inhuman manner. One would, however, never guess any of this from Thomson's argument.

More important than this, however, is the way the analogy forces one to picture the fetus: as parasite. And, of course, there is no doubt that the fetus does for nine months live off the mother and make use of the mother's circulatory and waste disposal systems. But shall we acquiesce in this picture of the fetus as parasite? Or shall we suggest that it subtly distorts the entire discussion? The latter seems to be the case.

Striking Act of Creativity

There is, in the conception and growth of the fetus in its mother's womb, a striking act of creativity. This very same act witnesses as well to the self-spending which such creativity requires. That for nine months the child lives within (and, indeed, off) the mother provides a paradigm of human dependence and, we might also say, vicariousness.

There is no human being who has not been so bound to others from the moment of his birth. For Thomson this is just so much biology, the relationship between mother and child being merely a biological one with no special human significance (p. 65). Human significance seems in her account to enter only when an act of will takes place, when the parent recognizes or acknowledges the child and thereby takes responsibility for it. Whatever it is that characterizes our humanity evidently has more relation to seeing ourselves as "isolated principles of will"³ than embodied creatures.

And yet, it is not impossible to think differently about the fact that the fetus lives off its mother. We may see there a sign of what is truly human: an inescapable witness to the self-spending which human life requires and to the bonds of vicarious dependence which encompasses the lives of us all. We may see there a sign — indeed, more than that, an embodiment — of the fact that we *do* live off others who never invited us to do so or granted us any rights thereto. And we may even find there an invitation to recognize that we cannot, without forfeiting our humanity, turn from the giving which is the other side of that receiving.

The first thing we notice, therefore, when we begin with Thomson to picture the fetus as parasite is the striking individualistic bias of this viewpoint. Vicariousness is to her simply a burden, not an essential part of creative human love. Perhaps then we ought to examine this picture of the fetus as parasite. The womb is the natural environment of the fetus. We expect to find it there. We expect to find it nourished by and living off the mother. We expect, in short, that it will be dependent in this way. Yet, if we want to claim that there is moral significance to be discerned here — that here we may learn something about the proper shape of human life — we will have to say more than this. For could we not say much the same of any parasite that lives off its host? Is not the host its natural environment? Do we not expect to find the parasite dependent in this way? Will we not find both fetus living off mother and parasite living off host in nature? Why, then, should the cases be different?

"For most creatures," Annie Dillard writes, "being parasitized is a way of life."⁴ We could, she suggests, write a "lives of the parasites" which would be a kind of "hellish hagiography," the devil's *summa theologica*.⁵ Parasitism may, though I think it ought not, be defined simply in terms of dependency. On this sort of definition "the essential criterion of parasitism is dependency, the loss of freedom to live an independent existence. . . ."⁶ Such a definition may be too broad, however, since it might with some justification be taken to apply to almost anything in nature understood as an interconnected system. It is perhaps better to define parasitism more narrowly as "a type of symbiosis in which two different kinds of organism habitually asso-

ciate with one another, to the detriment of one and the benefit of the other."⁷ Annie Dillard's book is a gold mine of hair-raising descriptions of parasitism, if one is interested in examples.

There is an insect order that consists entirely of parasitic insects called, singly and collectively, stylops, which is interesting because of the grotesquerie of its form and its effects. Stylops parasitize diverse other insects such as leaf hoppers, ants, bees, and wasps. The female spends her entire life inside the body of her host, with only the tip of her bean-shaped body protruding. She is a formless lump, having no wings, legs, eyes, or antennae; her vestigial mouth and anus are tiny, degenerate, and nonfunctional. She absorbs food — her host — through the skin of her abdomen, which is "inflated, white, and soft."⁸

Considering this and other like "natural" phenomena she is moved to ask: "Are my values then so diametrically opposed to those that nature preserves?" and "Is human culture with its values my only real home after all?"⁹

Perhaps the fetus in the mother's womb is just one more example of such parasitism. Why should we not picture it that way? The first thing which needs to be said is that we certainly can picture it that way. The second is that we need not do so. Nature provides us with countless examples of dependence. But nature's book must be read.

It is possible to think that some examples of dependence which nature presents us are corruptions or perversions of a principle which is rightly exemplified in others. Thus, the fact that the fetus lives off the mother while in her womb may be of enormous human significance and tell us much about what is appropriate to our natures. We may say with Marcel that "a family is not created or maintained as an entity without the exercise of a fundamental generosity."¹⁰ The fact that the parasite lives off the host demonstrates only that the principle of vicariousness can be distorted. Such an insight lay behind St. Augustine's privative theory of evil. When he says that evil has no independent existence and that it can exist only as a corruption of what is good, he is both giving us a reading of nature's book and asserting the priority of goodness.¹¹

Different Phenomena

From this perspective, while granting that the fetus is in some respects like a parasite, we may come to see that the two are nevertheless quite different phenomena. They are ordered toward different ends. The analogy of the fetus as parasite fails to take note of the fact that parasitism is not a method of procreation. Creatures which are parasites have other — sometimes asexual — means of reproduction. To construct an analogy which invites us to picture the fetus as a parasite is, therefore, to misplace the phenomenon. Parasitism is different from procreation of one's kind. Furthermore, the fetus in the

womb is moving toward a stage when it will attain a kind of independence relative to its earlier condition. But parasitism, on the other hand, "involves a gradual and progressive adaptation on the part of the parasite, and recovery of an independent status becomes increasingly difficult."¹² We may recall the stylops. The vicariousness of which the fetus provides a paradigm is strikingly creative — oriented not toward degenerative dependence but toward new life which will be able to give as it has received. Rightly ordered, vicariousness is meant to be creative and life-giving.

I have put the point in Augustinian terms. Augustine's belief, of course, had some theological roots. He knew and believed a story which spoke of nature as a good thing now corrupted. It gave him warrant, therefore, to expect that he might find in nature a relationship which could be exemplified in both good and bad ways. But we can put the matter in slightly less theological terms. That the parasite lives off its host and the child off its mother are both natural in the sense that observation and inspection find both in nature. But in that sense, of course, nothing can be unnatural; whatever upon inspection we find simply *is* exhibited as part of nature, and corruption cannot exist. However, when we read nature's book, it is possible to say that some acts or conditions exemplify vicariousness in its natural — i.e., rightly ordered — state. Some sorts of dependence are appropriate to the sorts of creatures we are, even as some are corruptions of our nature.

We acknowledge this to be the case when we say that the womb of the mother is the natural environment of the fetus. It is quite appropriate for our natures that we should find the fetus there. Indeed, we think it of great human significance. Now, how one proves to the skeptic that it *is* of great significance I am not at all sure. It is always possible to refuse to distinguish one example of vicariousness from another. It is possible to grant no significance to the fact that the dependence of the fetus is part of a creative act oriented toward new life. We certainly *can* think of individuals as isolated and refuse to grant that creation of new life has its origin in an act of self-spending which ought to be pronounced good. Therefore, I am uncertain how, in any strong sense, to prove what I have argued for. And yet, to think that it needs to be proven is already to imagine we can think of human beings in isolation, apart from this relationship of vicarious dependence. It is, in short, to imagine that we can think of them as other than human. We cannot, of course, prevent Thomson from adopting an angle of vision which pictures the fetus as if it were a parasite. But when she does this she is no longer discussing anything which we understand to be a human being. Hence, her analogy is subtly distorting. We cannot heed both it and her prior affirmation that she will grant from the outset that the fetus is a human being. The analogy

asks us to picture the fetus as a parasite, and, though we can do that, we cannot do it while simultaneously thinking of the fetus as a human being.

When we see the parasite living off its host, we see a corrupt imitation of something which in itself exhibits right order; namely, the dependence of the fetus on its mother and the vicarious character of human life to which it witnesses. That we should find both in a world in which, as Augustine put it, pride perversely copies the work of love, need not particularly surprise us. Thomson's picture of the fetus as parasite misses the human significance of vicarious dependence within love — and in so doing betrays the striking individualistic bias of her argument.

The Fetus as Mushroom

There is a later stage in Thomson's argument which also needs examination. In the course of broadening her defense of abortion to include within its scope many cases in which the mother willingly and knowingly risked pregnancy, she provides us with a new analogy. We are asked now to suppose that

people-seeds drift about in the air like pollen, and if you open your windows, one may drift in and take root in your carpets or upholstery. You don't want children, so you fix up your windows with fine mesh screens, the very best you can buy. As can happen, however, and on very, very rare occasions does happen, one of the screens is defective, and a seed drifts in and takes root (p. 59).

I label this picture "the fetus as mushroom" as a way of recalling that imagery is scarcely original with Thomson. In his *De Cive*, Thomas Hobbes suggests that we "consider men as if but even now sprung out of the earth, and suddenly, like mushrooms, come to full maturity, without all kind of engagement to each other."¹³ Part of the point of the analogy is to suggest that parents may or may not, as they wish, take responsibility for children resulting from contraceptive failure. However, if the opponent of abortion must wriggle a bit when claiming that cases of pregnancy resulting from rape differ in no special way from other pregnancies, surely we ought to wonder at least as much about an argument which suggests that pregnancy resulting from contraceptive failure is involuntary in a way similar to pregnancy resulting from rape. Thomson's position comes close to saying that we are responsible for no consequences of our actions except those we wanted to occur.

Of more concern is the fact that this analogy once again invites us to picture the fetus in a way which fails to capture the human significance of birth and motherhood. Parenthood is, of course, more than begetting, but it is not less. Near the end of her article Thomson

considers the possibility that someone might say (as indeed I am saying) that her analogies are irrelevant because they miss the fact of the special relationship between fetus and mother. In reply she refers us back to the section of her paper in which she has provided the "people-seed" analogy, hardly an adequate response. Then she offers a brief recapitulation of her view. It is, in effect, that we have no special responsibilities toward anyone unless we assume and acknowledge them. Until such time as parents "give" the child rights by accepting responsibility for it, the child has none.

A number of difficulties arise. Thomson has granted for the sake of argument that the fetus is a person. Can we have a person who is not the bearer of (at least some) rights? That is a rather strange concept of personhood. It is difficult to know how, in the course of an argument which purports to grant that the fetus is a person from the moment of conception, Thomson can imagine that it has no rights unless they are conferred. In fact, here she seems to draw a different line for the beginning of personhood — a line grounded in the parents' taking the child home and assuming responsibility for it. But, passing by that difficulty, why does Thomson think it so evident that, if the parents do this, they have granted the child rights or accepted obligations? At some future time when the child becomes especially burdensome (and they only become more burdensome post-partum, as any parent knows!) what is to prevent the parents from maintaining that their acts did not involve the taking on of such obligations? Thomson's argument evidently will have to involve some kind of tacit consent, though she does not say so. But why should any kind of consent bind forever? Where will Thomson get her principle of fidelity? It is doubtful whether, from her premises, it can be gotten at all. At the very least, we can say that she has failed to argue for it.

Forgetting these difficulties, however, I am most interested in the vision of the fetus as mushroom which the analogy invites us to adopt. In some ways, Thomson's analogies — the images she adopts — may be more important than her arguments. When the fetus is pictured as mushroom, the biological relationship between mother (or parents) and child is of no special significance. It does not involve us personally in any important way, and we are essentially individuals isolated from one another. This is, I think, just one example of the very disembodied concept of a person which floats around Thomson's essay. There are strange dualisms scattered around it, not least of which is the talk about the mother's body as a house which she owns. Indeed, we might say that here the analogies merge. Individualism and dualism feed one another as the fetus is conceived of both as parasite and mushroom.

Had Shakespeare known what Thomson knows we might have been bereft of some immortal lines. For, when Romeo creeps into Juliet's

courtyard and she comes onto the balcony, Shakespeare places into Juliet's mouth the philosophy of Thomson and Hobbes:

O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?
Deny thy father and refuse thy name!
Of if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
and I'll no longer be a Capulet.
.....
'Tis but thy name that is my enemy.
.....
... O, be some other name!¹⁴

But, of course, Shakespeare knows — and we are to know — full well that this philosophy is false. Juliet would have us pretend that we are “even now sprung out of the earth, and suddenly, like mushrooms come to full maturity, without all kind of engagement to each other.” It is not surprising that the story of one who believes that should be a tragedy. Romeo is a Montague and Juliet a Capulet. But is that not mere biology? Evidently not; for mere biology does not seem to have a part in the play. Romeo can no more deny his father or his name than Juliet can cease to be a Capulet. The name of each helps to fix their respective personal histories.

Thomson's picture of the fetus as mushroom would deny human, personal significance to a biological relationship which marks each of us. And here again we encounter the same problem in trying to adopt Thomson's angle of vision. We can think of creatures like these mushrooms which her analogy suggests. But we cannot think of them in the terms her argument purports to grant: as human beings. For she has abstracted them from one of the relationships which importantly characterize our humanity.

Conclusion

My purpose in this paper can, on the one hand, be construed very modestly indeed. I have merely tried to explain why it is that Thomson's defense of abortion appears to distort the issue almost beyond recognition. But, of course, the issues raised are really far from modest, and they involve questions beyond the scope of any single essay.

The burden of my concern is to ask, how are we to discuss this issue? Thomson does not seem to me to discuss it in the terms she says she will grant. One does not know how she pictures a human being or what she thinks a person is. At times it seems that one cannot be a person unless some other person (how identified?) confers that status upon him, at least tacitly. At other times it seems that a person is a kind of disembodied, volitional agent. To subscribe to either of these views is, I think, mistaken. But, then, how shall we discuss abortion? What shall we take Thomson to mean when she says she will assume

that the fetus is a person? Her analogies seem to suggest that persons are, in important ways, like parasites and mushrooms. Evidently she thinks it illuminating to conceive of human beings in that way. I confess that I do not. I emphasize once again that I have not tried to determine which, if any, abortions are morally permissible, nor have I tried to define when the fetus becomes a human being. I have only tried to suggest why, from at least certain perspectives, Thomson's argument must appear to be a sham, denying in its content what it purports to grant in its initial assumption and, thereby, subtly leading the discussion astray. ¹⁵

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11. *City of God*, XII, 3, 6.
12. "Parasitology," *op. cit.*, p. 628.
13. *De Cive*, VIII, 1. For similar imagery, cf. Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, V, 783-825.
14. *Romeo and Juliet*, II, ii, 35-38, 40, 44.
15. I am indebted for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper to: Paul Ramsey, Judy Meilaender, Baird Tipson, Marc Kellner, and John Whittaker.