Ectopic Pregnancies - Some Moral Questions

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Ectopic pregnancy is not a new question for discussion. However, because there have been differing views among Catholic moralists in the past, there is still some confusion about the proper moral procedures in the case of an ectopic pregnancy. Our Catholic tradition, embedded in the wisdom of Jesus’ approach to the application of the Mosaic law to individual practical cases, invites us to form a holistic approach to the human person.

What is an ectopic pregnancy?
The term itself tells us that this is a pregnancy developing outside the normal site, namely the womb. Ectopic pregnancies may be found in a number of places outside the womb, such as in the abdomen. Often the ectopic pregnancy is found in the fallopian tube where the trophoblast (placental tissue) has attached itself to the wall of the tube, creating a dangerous pathological condition for the woman as the foetus grows and takes its nourishment from the blood supply of the tube.

Traditional moral approaches for treating this pathological condition
Moralists have traditionally regarded the treatment of the condition caused by an ectopic pregnancy (or cancer of a pregnant uterus) as being an indirect abortion, coming under the principle of double effect. Thus, they would allow the removal of the cancerous but pregnant uterus or part of the tube in which the pregnancy is situated in order to cure the pathological condition that is dangerous to the woman’s health and life.

Some moralists have questioned the need to remove a part of the tube when the same result might be obtained by simply removing the trophoblast tissue that attached the foetus to the tube, which is causing the pathological condition, from the tube. In both cases, the foetus loses its life when separated from its life support and nourishment. Both the intention and the procedure are aimed at curing the pathological condition.

However, a few moralists would not approve this latter procedure, arguing that to remove the
trophoblast tissue with the foetus is a direct abortion. We leave aside here the clinical question as to which procedure is better in an individual case, considering trophoblast tissue left behind may grow again.

It seems to me that the moralists who call the removal of the trophoblast tissue from the tube, and consequently the foetus with it, a direct abortion have misunderstood what is happening medically. It is the trophoblast (placental) tissue that is causing the medical condition and this is what is first of all removed – unfortunately causing the death of the foetus.

The confusion is also caused by a misunderstanding of the nature of the “object” in moral theology. This can lead to an inappropriate application of the principle of double effect. Catholic moral theology is an objective theology. It is important to understand the meaning of “objective”.

Traditionally, Catholic moral theology has listed three “fonts” or basic facets for judging the morality of an act: the object, the end (purpose) and the circumstances. The three taken together help us to decide the morality of the action, be it internal or external.

At first glance, objectivity may seem to be a simple way of judging the morality of an action. It contrasts with the basically subjective approach of situation ethics. However, the very word “objective” has led to a misunderstanding of the process of judging what is morally good or bad. It has implied for some an almost complete emphasis on the external or physical act as the chief indicator of morality.

This is a far too crude approach to morality in the Catholic tradition. Unfortunately, it is common enough in the minds of some expositors of the moral process. The approach given above, whereby it is permitted to remove a part of the tube with the foetus inside, but not to remove the trophoblast tissue attached to the tube that is actually causing the pathological condition, is an example of the narrow application of “object”.1

The object

As we have just seen, the object is sometimes understood as the material or physical act. This is an over-simplification of what has been traditionally taught. Certainly, the physical or external act is part of the object; but the term object in moral theology means much more. It is not just the material object such as killing (it may be justified self-defence) or taking what belongs to another that decides the morality. The “object” is fundamentally your internal act – what you intend to do. This basically decides where you stand morally. At the same time, the external act is an important part of the object. Above all, we need to know exactly what we are intending and why. “If the intention is wrong, then the external act will be wrong. If the intention is right, then for the external act to be right it must be a ‘fitting’ or ‘appropriate’ expression of the intention. If it falls short, then, though the intention or internal act is right, the external act is wrong.”2 It is difficult to understand how the tradition became skewed. Perhaps it was a legalistic atmosphere that prevailed over the past 100 years or so.3
Methotrexate and the ectopic pregnancy

Following what has been said above, many moralists would see the use of the chemotherapy agent methotrexate as morally correct in treating the pathological condition caused by an ectopic pregnancy.

Briefly, methotrexate is a chemical that inhibits the growth of the trophoblast (placental tissue). Thus, its use is similar to the removal of the pathological tissue – either the tube itself or the trophoblast tissue – to which the ectopic pregnancy is attached, both of which procedures remove the life support for the pregnancy. Both procedures result in the loss of the pregnancy. “Methotrexate inhibits dehydrofolate reductase and hence stops trophoblastic cell growth.”

The object viewed internally, the intention, is clearly to bring an end to the pathological condition endangering the woman’s life. Viewed materially, the object of the treatment is directed immediately to the invasion of the blood vessels by the placental tissue that is out of place, and is appropriate to the foreseen double effect.

In a holistic approach to the case, one would say that the action is directed at curing the dangerous medical situation of the woman – to the preservation of her life. It is a reasonable, that is, according to reason, procedure because without it both may die, and there is no other procedure that would preserve the life of the foetus.

Ashley and O’Rourke make the important point that the foetus is not in the normal site, and most probably will die, along with the mother, if some action is not taken. This is a quite different situation from removing a foetus from its normal site in the womb. The foetus unfortunately loses its source of nurture and therefore its life, indirectly, as a result of the treatment, as it would with surgical methods of treatment. At present, there is no way of keeping the foetus alive outside the womb.

Whenever we engage in these difficult but practical moral cases, it helps to keep in mind the wisdom embodied in Jesus’ remarks to the scribes and Pharisees after their criticism of his interpretation of the law throughout chapter 23 of Matthew, lest we strain out a gnat and swallow a camel (Mt 23:23).

Sources Referenced:


2. Keenan, op.cit.

3. The well-respected manualist tradition theologian, Henry Noldin SJ, who was studied in seminaries up till Vatican II, sums up the long tradition: "All those things pertain to the object of the act that constitute its substance, viewed not physically but morally; furthermore, all those things constitute the substance of an act which are so essential and necessary to it that if something is lacking or added, the act is different. Thus, the object of theft is someone's property..."
Sources Referenced (Cont):

3. taken against his reasonable will; for if the thing is not someone else's, or is taken with the owner's consent or not against his reasonable opposition, it is not theft." (Cited and translated by Richard McCormick SJ in The Tablet, October 30, 1993).
