

ETHICAL CONSEQUENCES OF PRENATAL AND PERINATAL PSYCHOLOGY

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Abstract

This contribution deals with the ethical issues directly related to prenatal and perinatal psychology that views human life as encounters, continuity and dialogue.

The success of the life of a newborn baby is already predetermined in the prenatal period, which depends primarily on the psychological state (mood) of the mother. Confucius was aware of this fact as early as the 6th century BC. Moreover, Aristotle dealt with the issue regarding the beginning of life (4th century BC.) followed by St. Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century. What is surprising is the extent to which their views correspond to our current knowledge. Of course, it depends on our point of view, whether we approach solving these issues in terms of philosophy, law, medicine, psychology or theology.

The author also deals with some of the modern issues associated with the current crisis of the family, as is the trend of more “singles”, falling marriage rates, the promiscuous behaviour of couples out of wedlock, denial of paternity, low birth rate, induced abortions, irresponsibility and lack of appropriate identification patterns in the family, and so forth. It draws attention to some of the possibilities and capacities of reproductive medicine, such as cryopreservation of sperm, oocytes and embryos, spare gestation, issues related to genetic engineering and consulting, gender selection and the like.

Key words: *prenatal and perinatal psychology; prenatal communication between mother and child and between partners; current crisis of the family; competence of reproductive medicine*

In my contribution, I pay attention to some ethical consequences that are directly related to prenatal and perinatal psychology.

We live in a time that is often referred to as postmodern, post-industrial, or as “post optimistic” (Halík 2005). Regardless of whether we consider these attributes to be adequate, today’s people are looking for their identity in a rather difficult situation. Indeed, they encounter a considerable pluralism of opinions, attitudes, lifestyles and alternative ways of thinking. They

often face the questioning (relativization) of values that were valid for centuries and thus were regarded as indisputable and unchangeable. This relativization of invariable truths often leads to boundless liberalism and individualism, where people easily succumb to the illusion that they actually do not have to take into account (except for themselves) virtually anything. It seems to them that there are no longer limits, everything is permitted, everything is possible and that no individual has to feel ashamed about

anything. But in today's society, people face difficulties with decision making (despite that there is a seemingly unlimited amount of options) and they can experience anything from uncertainty to anxiety (because of the plurality of views).

When we deal with the problems of contemporary societies, we cannot forget a fundamental question which is how we should actually perceive them. Are people just a mere set of functions (biological, psychological and social), or do we rather perceive them as a mystery over which we stand in awe. This "awe", according to Aristotle (Störig 2007), leads to philosophy?

While observing the problems of the contemporary world, I cannot help thinking that it would be appropriate (at least in some cases) to admit the validity of the famous adage which says: "An optimist is a man who misses important information." Are there any valid reasons for our sometimes excessive optimism? Doesn't our optimism resemble rather a sort of tacky trust (Halík 2005), when we naively believe that now everything will only get better? Don't we rely too much on the omnipotence of some people (i.e. politicians), or that everything will be solved by scientific and technical progress? After all, science provides answers to our questions, while creating and asking new questions. In any case, we still hope in the sense of our lives, even in situations where it does not seem too promising. Such an approach draws on the fundamentals of logotherapy (existential analysis) of V. E. Frankl (2006).

If someone really wants to make a positive change in their life, then they should start first of all, with themselves. Considerable space and considerable hope is offered to us by prenatal and perinatal psychology. Although it is a relatively young scientific discipline (evolving since the 70s of the 20th century), it has a clear interdisciplinary character, which allows meeting and interacting of different areas of science, not just medicine and psychology, but also biology, philosophy, theology, sociology, anthropology, law, education and even ecology. According to professor Fedor-Freybergh (2013), prenatal and perinatal psychology offers a unique opportunity to primary prevention of mental, emotional and somatic problems in our lives, because it sees the life as a meeting, continuity and dialogue.

If one dares to have a small personal recollection, I realize that when our first daughter was born, which was in 1972, there was not a trace of prenatal psychology. Actually, while studying psychology, I first came to terms with this field during a four-semester postgraduate study of counselling psychology at the Philosophical Faculty thanks to professor Matějčka. It was during this period when a well-known book was published that is still widely cited, and especially at that time considered a revolutionary book titled, "The Origins of our Mental Life", written by professor Matějček together with professor Langmeier (1986). This publication was obviously fundamentally influenced by the book "The hidden life of an unborn child", which was published in Toronto (Verny and Kelly 1981). Besides mediating many citations, within the book are also listed the very valuable results of a longitudinal research study conducted by professor Matějčka, which was focused on the long-term monitoring of the life success of a group called "unwanted children", compared to "wanted children" in the control group. Unfortunately, the major works by professor Fedor-Freybergh were not available at that time.

Therefore, I am glad that I came to terms with some issues that address current prenatal and perinatal psychology, paradoxically in the years 1968 to 1973, during my studies at the theological faculty, specifically in the theories of some ancient and medieval philosophers. If we speak today about the irreplaceable role of prenatal communication between mother and child in terms of the neurohormonal aspect (which is actually a physiological communication via blood through the placenta) and also in terms of sensory communication (voice of the mother, her touches – the so-called "prenatal bonding and attachment" etc.), and last but not least, in terms of emotional and intellectual attitudes of the mother to her child (the emotional feeling of how the mother of the child experiences existence – whether the child is wanted or unwanted), it is obvious that the mental health of the child is significantly influenced by the simple fact of how the mother perceives her pregnancy, which mood she has, and also by the quality of the relationship with her partner (the child's father). Therefore, current prenatal psychology places a great

deal of emphasis on the indispensability of the paternal role. Harmonious relationship with the husband (partner) gives a woman the much-needed sense of security and safety, which of course, is transferred to the child.

Today (among others, thanks to the knowledge obtained through new imaging techniques), there is no doubt that the child has senses in the prenatal period. The fetus can see, hear, taste, and when it experiences something and is able to learn at a certain level, and that even in this early period, the child begins to build its self-esteem. In other words, what the child perceives and feels during the prenatal period affects its future relationships (after birth) to itself and to the rest of the world. The source of all these formative influences (messages) comes from the mother. In this context, it is noteworthy that even in the 6th century BC., the famous Chinese philosopher Confucius, in accordance with his humanistic (human oriented) thinking, advised pregnant women to read philosophy to their unborn because it would make their children wiser (Störig 2007).

Prenatal and perinatal psychology is also directly linked to a crucial question regarding the beginning of human mental life. This problem was already solved in the 4th century BC. by Aristotle in his study about hylemorfism (the relationship between the substance and the form, or rather the soul and the body). View this study about the threefold soul and the gradual soul creation. On Aristotle's philosophy is based the medieval scholastic philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas, called in the 13th century (for the subtlety of his philosophy) "Doctor Angelicus". However, in this issue he diverges with his renowned teacher St. Albert the Great, called "Doctor Universalis", who was excellent not only in philosophy and theology, but especially in the sciences. He is also considered one of the architects of European learning. St. Albert thought that soul creation occurs immediately after conception. St. Thomas Aquinas, in his *Summa* against the pagans, however, adopts the so-called theory of gradual soul formation from Aristotle. According to this theory, the first stage is vegetative soul, then sensitive, and finally a rational human soul occupies the fetus. According to St. Thomas Aquinas, this process takes a total of 40 days, among males this time is 40 days and among females

80 days (of course, in the 13th century people could not have known that the essential gender is female, it means XX).

According to Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, we can talk about human beings beginning 40 days after conception. In this context, it is noteworthy that one of the current theories of prenatal psychology assumes the so-called "zero point of intelligence", the 33rd day after conception, despite the fact that we can capture brain activity (EEG) already in the 8th, respectively 9th week of pregnancy. Perhaps this information will also help us not to judge scholastic philosophy with the optics presented by the previous regime (that it dealt with the issue – how many angels can fit on the head of a pin), but as a remarkable period, which among other things, enriched the world's cultural heritage by two large European phenomena, which is the cathedral and the university – in the sense of "universitas magistrorum et scholarium". In the locations in which a cathedral was built and the bishop had his throne (department), there also arose a cathedral school and later a university, the bearer of education, the guardian of truth (the revelation and knowledge) and the freedom of research. This is evidenced, among other things, by the medieval matriculation formula: "Cognoscetis veritatem, et veritas vos liberabit" (know the truth and the truth shall make you free, John 8:32). Incidentally, the so-called "dark" Middle Ages are also connected with the adage "distinguo!" (distinguish!). Up to now, it has lost none of its topicality and should be followed especially by those who cannot cope with the ubiquitous diktat of the moment ("Do not commit yourself, let it all hang out").

And thus, how should we understand the origin of life and its meaning? I will not mention the existing dispute between creationists and evolutionists, but rather I want to point out that in history the approach to this fundamental question varied. It is important to say that it always depends on the point of our view (in terms of law, medicine, psychology, theology, philosophy, etc.). An elementary basis can be found with Peter Singer, who in his book "Practical Ethics" (2011) presents a dual possible interpretation: 1) if we understand human life as the equivalent of, "member of the species homo sapiens", which is given by the nature

of our chromosomes. Then human life begins at conception, which means passing the entire genetic information of a new human. A human being is formed by combining human gametes; 2) however, if we understand human life in the meaning of a “person”, which is characterized by the awareness of oneself, the own existence, identity, responsibility, social relations, finitude, etc., the situation is different. Those attributes are not really necessary for all members of the species “*homo sapiens*” (i.e. individuals with severe mental disabilities).

The law sees the beginning of human existence at the moment of birth. Then it talks about a “natural” person who acquires rights and obligations. Roman law defines an unborn child as “*pars vel portio viscerum matris*” (part of the mother’s body, or the viscera of the mother’s body). The Chart of Fundamental Human Rights and Freedoms, which forms a part of the Czech Constitution, head 2, article 6, paragraph 1 says: “*Everyone has the right to life. Human life is worthy of protection even before birth.*” But in terms of the law, it is rather an ethical goal to which the society should aspire. It does not use legal terms within the meaning of “is obliged” or “must”. Indeed, paragraph 1) of the Chart of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms is followed by paragraph 4), which states: “*Contravention of law according to this article is not when somebody is deprived of their life in due to an action which is not criminal according to law.*” This supplement exists in all developed countries where the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms forms a part of the constitutional order and where it is also a part of the legislation codes of abortion law (the possibility of termination of pregnancy, abortion), or the death penalty.

Regarding medicine, in terms of ethics is widely known through the Hippocratic Oath, which does not allow expelling the fetus from the mother’s body. Today’s medicine respects the provisions of the Charter of Fundamental

Rights and Freedoms in terms of law (see above). However, the Code of Ethics of the World Medical Association even a few decades ago stated that, “*the doctor will have unconditional respect for human life from the moment of fertilization*”. This was at a time when most countries had already permitted abortion through legislation. The law in this case actually became contradictory to medical ethics. Therefore, the association suggested changes to the formula, which resulted in the following, “*the doctor will unconditionally respect for human life from its beginning*”. But the beginning of human life was not specified by the Code. At the beginning of the 21st century, there was a latest alteration, which now has a more general meaning: “*The doctor will have an unconditional respect for human life*” (Kuře et al. 2010, p. 127).

Current prenatal psychology, as I have mentioned above, determines the prime point of intelligence on the 33rd day after conception. However, an extremely important fact is that the human being itself (i.e. awareness of oneself, the own existence, identity, responsibility, social relations, but also the finality etc.) begins to appear and be shaped during the prenatal period (Verny and Kelly 1981, Matějček and Langmaier 1986, Fedor-Freybergh 2013). This leads to a significant influence on the quality of life, “*pro futuro*”, at the time of birth. As already indicated above, this especially means what kind of relationship a person will have with themselves and the outside world, whether they become integral or autonomous personalities. This is of course closely related to the holistic concept of human personality as a bio-psycho-socio-spiritual being, or rather integrity. Above all, people performing in the so called helping professions (regardless of whether they deal with the mental or psychosocial level) should always see a person as a whole (integral unity) considering all layers of their personality, as a “physically mentally spiritual totality” (Frankl 2006).

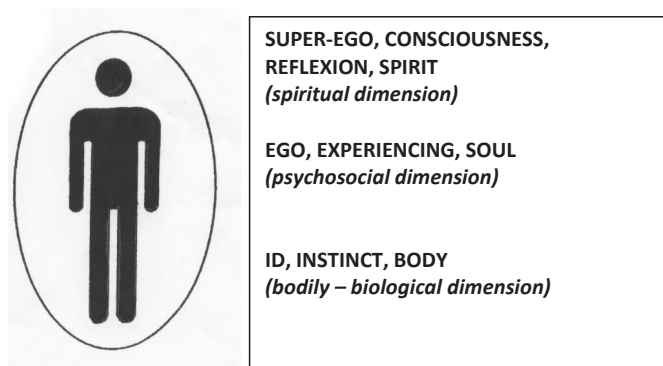


Fig. 1. Holistic perception of human personalities

The beginning of human life, is naturally related to the very sensitive issue of abortion, or induced abortions. A positive development can be the fact that after the political changes in 1989, the total number of induced abortions and miscarriages decreased and abortion is no longer seen as a standard “instrument for regulating fertility”. Yet there are still around 37,000 a year (in terms of inhabitants a relatively large district town). Also the abortion index, I am referring to the number of abortions per 100 live births (especially in some regions), is not particularly favourable (see the relevant statistical yearbook). We can also add the legal use of the so-called “abortion pill” RU-486, which can be used within approximately 49 days after conception. CR legislation (Act No. 66/1986 Coll.) lets the woman decide whether she wants or does not want the child. However, I think that it is a significant ethical issue whether to leave such a major, life dilemma up to a girl at the age of 16, referring to the fact that girls aged 16 to 18 are allowed by our legislation (Decree no. 75/1986 Coll., § 6, paragraph 3) to do so, while the parents of the girls are informed about the abortion after the procedure. At least a bit absurd is also the title of this decree which talks about artificial “interruption” of the pregnancy, although it is obviously dealing with its termination. Basically, this is a typical example of the confusion of terms, which was quite normal before 1989. It should be noted that as early as the 5th century BC, Socrates warned against this nuisance (therefore he also instituted a precise definition of each term), but also the above mentioned Confucius, who

thought obfuscation as one of the biggest and most dangerous social evils, which then resulted in high criminal penalties.

Today, prenatal psychology talks about the renaissance (importance and necessity) of paternal role, which is reflected, among other things, in the possibility of the father being present at the birth of their child. Professor Fedor-Freybergh says (2013), that the dialogue between the mother and the unborn child is also enriched by the dialogue between the mother and the father. It is obvious that what a man feels for his wife and for the child, whose birth is expected, has a significant effect on the (successful) course of the pregnancy. If this message is favourable (the woman is cool, has a sense of security and safety), this feeling is transmitted to the unborn child. However, transmission (communication between mother and child), takes place even in a situation when the mother is under stress, and is in a desperate situation where she is unsure about the identity of the father of the child whose birth is soon expected, and so on. Uncertainty, anxiety and stress have disastrous consequences for the further development of an unborn child.

In this context, I ask the question of how the foregoing facts correspond to today’s trend of “singles”, whose popularity in the Euro-Atlantic civilization continues to grow? Is it just one of the manifestations of narcissistic behaviour by the current generation – or is this a result of moral decay when the people refuse to take any responsibility for something (or someone)? The outlined problem is undoubtedly also related to the apparent

decline in marriage. Marriage is still seen as a liability, which has a legislative framework and cannot work without the responsibility of both partners. Moreover, it is known that marriage is a very good test of personal maturity and the integrity of people who entered it. Today, however, it is quite common that partners (whether sexual or life) are often referred to as a “boyfriend” or “girlfriend”. An “advantage” of such a relationship is considered to be non-binding. It is possible to leave a friend quite easily (unlike a husband) at any time, or simply just change the relationship. It’s just another absurdity of our present and also the degradation of the original content of the noble concept of friendship.

With the loosening of intimate relationships, that involves today’s normal changing of sexual partners (promiscuity), is also related the finding of the Constitutional Court of the Czech Republic dated 31/12/2011. The provisions of § 57 par. 1) of the Family Code was abolished. The amended Act no. 84/2012 Coll. in § 57 amends the conditions for denial of paternity in a way that the six-month period for denial of paternity is not measured any more from the date of birth of the child, but rather from the moment the father receives information that calls into question his biological fatherhood, and the law provides him time within 3 years after birth of the child to determine paternity. According to the data from genetic laboratories, such requests are submitted in the Czech Republic every year by more than 10,000 individuals and others are submitted directly by the courts. It’s not very positive that the findings of paternity tests excluded 75% of those being tested. The media has recently spread information that in Europe approximately 10% of children have a different biological father from the one that appears on their birth certificate. It is not a crucial discovery, but it points out the irresponsible behaviours of contemporary people in relationships.

The mass media have recently published data about, I apologize for the somewhat expressive terms, the current “boomerang kids” living in the so-called “mamahotels”. In essence, this is another trend typical of our present times, in which young people are reluctant to become independent and leave their parents homes. This applies to 50% of thirty year old men and nearly 30% of women

of the same age in the Czech Republic. These are young people who stubbornly refuse to finally “stand on their own feet” and begin to behave in a responsible manner. Is this trend really just a consequence of the much heralded “economic non prosperity”, or is it a more serious problem? Indeed, despite the fact that for several years we have been talking about economic stagnation, but at which time was our society doing as well economically as it is now? Isn’t this phenomenon rather the result of the fear of responsibility, a manifestation of indolence and an exaggerated expression of hedonism by these people? Isn’t it the lack of appropriate identification patterns, where many families lack suitable role models that boys can identify with, and the same holds true of girls, whose identification patterns are with their mothers, who are self sufficient in family life without the need for the children’s father? Yes, we are talking about the crisis of contemporary families, which manifests itself, in addition to above mentioned social phenomena, but also (according to statistics) by low birth rates, (i.e. low fertility index), which for several years oscillates between 1.15 to 1.2 children per mother, while there is an increasing number of children born out of wedlock (currently 42%). However, the crisis of contemporary family is also related to the trend of more and more women who postpone children until later in life, or rather for a “more suitable” period. In this way women actually solve the ethical dilemma between building their careers on one hand, and starting a family on the other hand, because they usually cannot combine both roles (labour and maternal). Is it possible to believe that the failure in the birth rate will actually decrease and the aging of the population in the Czech Republic will be solved by the arrival of immigrants? The problem is much more complex (view e.g. a known book by Samuel Huntington “Clash of Civilizations”, 2001), or the views of Francis Fukuyama – about “heading to liberal democracy”? And what about other serious ethical issues such as the use of spare gestation (surrogate motherhood), or cryopreservation of sperm, oocytes and embryos? In these cases, when we touch the competencies of reproductive medicine, it is appropriate from an ethical and legal perspective to distinguish whether it is “homologous” through artificial insemination

(spouse, partner), or “heterologous” (anonymous donor). Similarly, if the reason for oocyte cryopreservation is because of a malignant disease of the woman, when there is a damage to the ovaries due to a difficult therapy, or whether it is a condition when a woman chooses to live alone (single), build her career and decides for motherhood (for various reasons) after forty, whereas she intends to remain single.

I do not know whether these few examples, that I have indicated, raise relevant grounds for greater optimism. No doubt it depends primarily on our unique point of view. Without the need to dramatize the situation, however, I think that the fundamental ethical basis is still valid, namely that human “being there” is to be primarily responsible – for one’s self, for others and for the rules of existence which transcends us. If our society should truly prosper and grow even further, then it should respect the fundamental ethical imperative that not everything that one is able to do is also permitted by law! However, I do not mean just the fact that humanity has the means to destroy the planet (weapons of mass destruction), but especially the problems outlined above and the very subtle ethical issues, e.g. with the decoding of the human genome, with its modifying (eugenics), with the possibilities of genetic engineering (gene technology) and so on. In this context, I legitimately ask the question, whether a person has the right to manipulate its genetic foundation (to be what they want to be, not what they really are)? Regarding the options

dealing with prenatal diagnosis, are also related issues dealing with the right to life of children with high probability of congenital disabilities. During 20 years of working in the ARPIDA centre, I have heard a number of such stories. A serious problem is also the possibility of selecting the newborn’s gender, and so on.

Eventually, returning to the end of the Middle Ages and scholasticism, the era of building cathedrals and universities, we also cannot forget to mention the cathedral in Chartres, France, which is regarded as the “mother of all cathedrals”. It is built on an ancient cult site where the field lines diverge (the so called “Dragon Veins”) throughout Europe on which new temples were built. Medieval cathedrals represented the pinnacle of all knowledge and the way of thinking of that time. Everything that is part of them has a clear purpose, over which a man from the 12th century often remains in awe, in that awe that according to Aristotle (as I have written above) leads to philosophy. And so we can find there in Chartres, within the excess of a variety of communications, images and symbols, a remarkable inscription: “*Magna cum reverentia creavit Deus hominem*” (God created man with great respect). In other words, the medieval man was able to reflect on his dignity unfolding from the creation as the image of God. The point is that today’s man should be aware of their own dignity (although probably in other contexts).

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