**Mother Knows Best: Pregnancy, Applied Ethics and Epistemically Transformative Experiences[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Abstract**

“A philosopher has been interested in the ethics of abortion for many years. She falls pregnant. Most of the philosophical literature suddenly appears cold, bloodless; it does not reflect what pregnancy is like.”

The experience of pregnancy provides access to new knowledge that is crucial for adequate debate on the ethics of abortion. A pregnant woman can acquire new knowledge about what it is like to be pregnant and the value of a human foetus. Moreover, pregnancy is not just one way of acquiring this crucial knowledge. It is difficult, if not impossible, to convey the knowledge that can be gained through pregnancy to those who have not been pregnant. Thus pregnancy significantly transforms the subject’s epistemic status. We should recognise this as an epistemically transformativeWIDE experience. If this knowledge is crucial for adequate debate on abortion, but inaccessible to those who have not been pregnant, those who have not been pregnant may not be able to contribute to this important area of applied ethics. Indeed, there are wider implications for it seems that there may be similar missing information in debates on famine relief, just war theory, etc. At worst, our ability to do applied ethics adequately is threatened. I am, however, cautiously optimistic: I argue that two methods (engaging with literature and dialogue with epistemic humility) may allow those who have not been pregnant a sufficient grasp of this knowledge to enable them to adequately engage with the ethics of abortion. Nonetheless, there is an inevitable gap: some of the relevant knowledge cannot be conveyed to those who have not been pregnant. Thus pregnancy is also an epistemically transformative experience in the narrow sense discussed by L.A. Paul. I show how the methods of applied ethics must be adapted to respond to this.

“How do we find some meaningful understanding of one of the most thrilling, challenging and alien experiences of all? To describe what it really feels like to grow a person within a person? To tell the curiously silenced story of how every single one of us began?”[[2]](#footnote-2)

***Introduction***

Despite a longstanding interest in the philosophical issues surrounding abortion, after experiencing pregnancy I found most existing literature dissatisfying. It fails to reflect what pregnancy is like. Indeed it fails to even try to engage with what pregnancy is like. It gives the impression that human reproduction involves the mother lying in a clean, white bed for 9 months with a small tube connecting her to a small version of an adult human whom she supports without noticeable change to her own body.[[3]](#footnote-3) Pregnancy is not like this. After first hand experience with pregnancy, the literature’s understanding of what it is to require someone to remain pregnant and of the value of a human foetus –crucial issues for understanding the ethics of abortion– now appeared woefully inadequate.[[4]](#footnote-4) At the same time, I noticed that it was extremely difficult to explain my new understanding of these issues to anyone who had not been pregnant. There was a sense of not being fully understood.

I argue that the experience of pregnancy can provide new knowledge that is crucial for adequate debate on the ethics of abortion. Most obviously, a pregnant woman\*[[5]](#footnote-5) can acquire knowledge about what it is like to be pregnant. I suggest that she\* can also gain knowledge about the value of a human foetus, although I do not fully defend this suggestion here. Moreover, pregnancy is not just one way of acquiring this crucial knowledge. There are significant barriers that make it difficult, if not impossible, to convey the knowledge that can be gained through pregnancy to those who have not been pregnant.

If the knowledge that can be gained in pregnancy is both crucial for adequate debate on the ethics of abortion and inaccessible to those who have not been pregnant, people who have not been pregnant are unable to adequately address the ethics of abortion. There are wider implications. Might something similar be happening in other areas of Applied Ethics? Perhaps, for example, being a soldier or a civilian caught up in war provides knowledge necessary to assess the principles governing conduct in war that is difficult if not impossible to acquire without that experience?

If understanding such experiences is crucial for adequate ethical debate – and impossible without the appropriate experience – then the adequacy of Applied Ethics is under serious threat. More optimistically, if knowledge about these experiences without undergoing them is possible, then an account of the importance of, and necessary conditions for, such knowledge would lead to significant improvements in philosophers’ approach to philosophical debate about abortion in particular and to Applied Ethics more generally.

This discussion connects to a phenomenon that has recently received a lot of attention in practical philosophy. L.A. Paul defines an ‘epistemically transformative’ experience as an experience that brings you knowledge that you could not have acquired without having the experience. She argues that many of our most important decisions, such as whether or not to become a parent, are epistemically transformative and that this has important ramifications for our understanding of rational decision-making.[[6]](#footnote-6) I argue that thinking about the pregnancy as an epistemically transformative experience has important ramifications for applied ethics.

The discussion also connects to work in Feminist Standpoint Theory. According to Feminist Standpoint theory, there is some knowledge that is available only from the standpoint of an oppressed person. In particular, the oppressed are in a privileged epistemic position when it comes to recognising possibilities that are not available within the dominant discourse. Feminist Standpoint Theory argues that this requires substantial modifications to traditional scientific methods. My work draws on this work in Feminist Standpoint Theory – particularly the debate between Sandra Harding and Helen Longino about whether it is possible to take up someone else’s standpoint. However, there are significant differences: first, my focus is on the epistemic effects of certain experiences rather than on epistemic privilege associated with certain positions within systems of oppression; second, I am interested in the implications of epistemic transformation for applied ethics, while work in Standpoint Theory has typically focused on the natural and social sciences and politics.

I begin by exploring the concept of an epistemically transformative experience. I argue that consideration of the epistemic effects of pregnancy may suggest expanding the definition of an epistemically transformative experience. Some experiences are epistemically transformative because they give you a special epistemic status with respect to some knowledge, whether or not you thereby acquire knowledge that would otherwise be inaccessible. I then argue that being pregnant can provide knowledge that is crucial for adequate debate about the ethics of abortion. I then argue that this knowledge is extremely difficult to convey to those who have not been pregnant: pregnancy is an epistemically transformative experience in the expanded sense. Next, I outline two methods that may allow someone who has not been pregnant to partially grasp the knowledge gained in pregnancy: engaging with appropriate literature and dialogue with epistemic humility with those who have been pregnant. However, I show that pregnancy also counts as an epistemically transformative experience in Paul’s narrow sense. This is because the suggested methods leave an inevitable gap between the understanding acquired through such methods and the understanding of the pregnant woman. Those who have not been pregnant cannot fully grasp the knowledge that can be gained in pregnancy. In my final section, I show that the epistemically transformative nature of pregnancy has significant implications for the debate about the ethics of abortion, and for applied ethics more generally. Engaging with literature and dialogue with epistemic humility can allow those who have not been pregnant to obtain a sufficient grasp of the knowledge that can be gained in pregnancy to adequately engage with the ethics of abortion. Nonetheless, awareness that they may not be able to fully grasp some morally relevant knowledge must be built into the way in which those who have not been pregnant engage with debates about the ethics of abortion. More widely, awareness of epistemically transformative experiences must be built into the methods of applied ethics.

***The Concept of an Epistemically Transformative Experience***

The term ‘epistemically transformative experience’ was brought to prominence by L.A. Paul in a paper that was toured extensively in the early 2010’s (coincidentally just as I returned from maternity leave after having my first child). The paper was published in *Res Philosophica* in 2015, leapfrogged by a book length treatment, which came out in 2014.[[7]](#footnote-7) Paul states:

When a person has a new and different kind of experience, a kind of experience that teaches her something that she could not have learned without having that kind of experience, she has an epistemic transformation.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Experiences can also be personally transformative: an experience is personally transformative when it leads to a fundamental change in your core preferences.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Paul argues that becoming a parent is both epistemically and personally transformative and that this has important ramifications for the rationality of deliberation about becoming a parent. We imagine that rational deliberation about parenthood would involve comparing what your life would be like if you had a child to what your life would be like if you did not have a child and choosing the best option. Paul argues that because becoming a parent is both epistemically and personally transformative, we just can’t weigh up the options in this way. Because becoming a parent is both epistemically and personally transformative, we cannot know beforehand what having a child will be like for us nor is there a common set of values by which we can assess outcomes.

Paul is interested in the relevance of transformative experiences to rational choice. She argues that even if it is possible to gain knowledge of general experiences of parenthood without becoming a parent, until I become a parent I cannot know what parenthood will be like for me. It is this latter knowledge that Paul argues is relevant to the personal choice to become a parent. But epistemically transformative experiences might raise problems even at the more general level that is relevant for Applied Ethics: Knowledge about what pregnancy is like in general is difficult to grasp without experiencing pregnancy.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Paul’s focus is on experiences that are both epistemically and personally transformative. These ‘transformative experiences’ change both what you know and who you are. However, an experience might be epistemically transformative without being personally transformative. It is also worth stressing that the knowledge gained through an epistemically transformative experience does not need to be knowledge gained about or through changes to your identity or values, even if that experience is personally transformative. Just as often, when an experience is both epistemically and personally transformative, the epistemic transformation is prior and personal transformative takes place because of the new knowledge we have gained about something other than ourselves.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Throughout the book, Paul is clear that the types of epistemically transformative experience that she discusses give the subject knowledge that she could not have had without having the experience.[[12]](#footnote-12) Thus Paul’s definition of an epistemically transformative experience is:

Narrow Epistemic Transformation: An experience is epistemically transformativenarrow iff the experience gives the subject access to knowledge that she could not have if she had not had the experience.[[13]](#footnote-13)

However, I suggest that considering the epistemic effects of pregnancy may support expanding the definition of ‘epistemically transformative experience’. If I am right, experiences like pregnancy have two interesting feature. First, they are experiences that can provide knowledge that cannot be acquired through observation. You cannot know what it is like to be pregnant simply by watching a pregnant person. If knowledge of what it is like to be pregnant is possible at all, it is possible only through the testimony of those who have been pregnant.[[14]](#footnote-14) Thus even if it were possible to convey what it is like to be pregnant to someone who has not been pregnant, being pregnant would still put you in a significantly different epistemic position – an epistemic position that you could not have been in without having the experience. You are now in a position of epistemic authority with respect to that knowledge.

Second, there are significant barriers to understanding what pregnancy is like if you have not been pregnant. Pregnancy involves a complex interaction between elements of experience, each of which is very different from anything that most people who have not been pregnant have experienced. It is thus extremely difficult to convey knowledge of what pregnancy is like to those who have not been pregnant.

One might suggest that this combination of features is enough for pregnancy to count as an epistemically transformative experience whether or not the knowledge acquired is accessible to those who have not been pregnant – after all, after the experience, the subject is in a *significantly* different epistemic position than she could be in without having the experience: she is now an epistemic authority on knowledge which, if accessible to others at all, can only be acquired through pregnancy; in addition, there are significant barriers to those who have not been pregnant acquiring the knowledge. This might support the following definition:

Wide epistemic transformation: An experience is *epistemically transformative*wide iff after the experience, the subject is in a *significantly* different epistemic position than she could be in without having the experience, with access to knowledge that there are significant barriers to acquiring without the experience.

This would be an expansion of Paul’s understanding of an epistemically transformative experience. Nonetheless, the expanded concept picks out a category of experiences that raise similar issues in moral and practical deliberation to those discussed by Paul. In both cases, we must work out how to deliberate when our deliberations require access to information that it is difficult, if not impossible, for us to acquire.

Nonetheless, as I will argue, whichever definition we choose, (a) pregnancy is normally an epistemically transformative experience and (b) the epistemically transformative nature of pregnancy has significant implications for the debate about the ethics of abortion. Some of the knowledge accessible through pregnancy is crucial to adequate debate on the ethics of abortion. I will discuss some promising methods that may allow someone who has not been pregnant to grasp this knowledge sufficiently to engage effectively in moral debate about abortion. However, I will argue that the suggested methods leave an inevitable gap between the understanding acquired through such methods and the understanding available to the pregnant woman. This gap means that even under the narrowest definition of epistemically transformative experience, pregnancy qualifies. In addition, I will argue that awareness of this gap must be built into the way in which those who have not been pregnant engage with debates about the ethics of abortion.

**Knowledge Acquired Through Pregnancy and its relevance to the Ethics of Abortion**

The abortion debate is characterised by two main strands: the first focuses on the status of the foetus;[[15]](#footnote-15) the other takes for granted that the foetus has significant moral status, and then focuses on the pregnant woman’s duties to sustain the foetus.[[16]](#footnote-16) The knowledge accessible through pregnancy transforms both strands of the abortion debate, not by providing an easy or obvious solution, but making the debate more complex.

*i. What it is like to be pregnant and The Pregnant Woman\*’s Duty to Sustain The Foetus*

The most obvious knowledge accessible through pregnancy is knowledge of what it is like to be pregnant. This knowledge is crucial for adequate debate about whether the pregnant woman\* has a duty to sustain the foetus. Margaret Little has argued eloquently that this debate has failed to pay sufficient attention to the nature of pregnancy: “reading some articles, the fetus might as well be a stranger attacked on the street or subsisting ex utero in a lab.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Little is correct. Consider the analogies within this debate: Thomson’s agent lying on a bed with the violinist ‘plugged into’ her[[18]](#footnote-18); Gensler’s analogy between a duty to gestate and a motorist’s duty to help someone he has injured in an accident.[[19]](#footnote-19) Such discussions, in ignoring what pregnancy is like, do not adequately address whether this could be something that is demanded of a woman.

Most discussion of abortion downplays the physical burdens of pregnancy. The discussion typically ignores the fact that significant pain and discomfort come as standard in pregnancy and that there are non-negligible risks of serious injury or even death.[[20]](#footnote-20) Pregnancy sickness does not make an appearance: Little describes her sister’s pregnancy sickness as “gut-wrenching dry heaves every 20-minutes and three hospitalizations … the equal of many an experience of chemotherapy.”[[21]](#footnote-21). Serious illnesses like pre-eclampsia and gestational diabetes go unconsidered. Birth, requiring major abdominal surgery or hours or even days of intense pain, is not mentioned. In addition (and this is Little’s main point), the distinctive intimacy of pregnancy is ignored. As Little argues, “To be asked to gestate is to be asked to share one’s very body – and likely, by the end, one’s heart. To gestate is to be engaged in an *intimacy* of deep proportions.” (305)

As Little and others have pointed out, insofar as it ignores the distinctive nature of pregnancy, the debate on abortion is seriously inadequate. But it might be thought that this does not require knowledge that is primarily accessible through being pregnant. After all, a moment’s thought or a glance at a biology book should show that gestation is different from calling an ambulance or writing a cheque.[[22]](#footnote-22) This may undercut my claim that the knowledge accessible through pregnancy is relevant to applied ethics.

It seems to me possible that one might reach the conclusion that abortion must be permissible without appealing to knowledge that is primarily accessible through pregnancy. The biological facts and statistics may be enough to warrant this conclusion. However, I do not think that one can reach the conclusion that abortion is impermissible without attending to the knowledge accessible through pregnancy, unless one has compelling arguments that it does not matter what costs being forced to continue a pregnancy places on the woman.[[23]](#footnote-23) To reach the conclusion that abortion is impermissible without consulting knowledge acquired through pregnancy is to risk the charge that one’s assessment of the costs of forced pregnancy is inadequate. Moreover, anyone arguing for the permissibility of abortion may wish to argue that their opponents underestimate the costs of forced pregnancy. Thus the knowledge acquired through pregnancy of what it is like to be pregnant will be relevant for both sides of the debate.

Pregnancy often contains good aspects as well as bad aspects. I will argue that both the good and bad aspects are difficult to convey to those who have not been pregnant. I do not want to suggest that the relevant question for the ethics of abortion is whether the good aspects in a voluntary pregnancy outweigh the bad. As Little notes, the fact that some women find their pregnancies ‘wonderful’ does not imply that requiring someone to remain pregnant is not bad for them, anymore than recognizing that consensual sex can be wonderful implies that rape is not harmful.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Those who feel the force of this point may wonder whether, in fact, undergoing a voluntary pregnancy does give one a grasp of ‘what pregnancy is like’ that is relevant to the ethics of abortion. The experience of pregnancy varies widely from woman to woman. This might lead us to wonder whether it makes sense to talk about knowledge about ‘what pregnancy is like’. More specifically, the experience of unwanted pregnancy may be drastically different from voluntary pregnancy. Surely it is knowledge of the latter that is relevant to abortion.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Let me first discuss the question of whether it makes sense to talk about what pregnancy is like given the wide variety of experiences of pregnancy. When I claim that pregnancy can provide access to knowledge about what pregnancy is like, I don’t mean to suggest that anyone who has been pregnant can fully grasp what each other pregnancy is like. Two obvious ways that pregnancies can vary are by severity of physical symptoms and by social situation. For example, about 2% of pregnant women\* suffer from extreme pregnancy sickness or hyperemesis gravidarum (HG). This can involve life-threatening levels of sickness, which may even become so intolerable that a woman\* feels compelled to terminate a much-wanted pregnancy. Women\* with HG often say that those who have not experienced the condition cannot understand what it is like: indeed, that people falsely assuming they do understand is deeply damaging.[[26]](#footnote-26) Similarly, I suspect that it is not possible for white women\* to fully understand how the pregnancies of women\* of colour are situated within a structure of racism, or for a cis-woman to fully grasp what it is like for a transman to be pregnant. Moreover, these are not simply ‘add-ons’ to the experience of pregnancy that leave the rest of it unchanged: instead they permeate the whole of pregnancy, leaving their mark on every other element. Thus white women\*, for example, will not fully grasp even what it is to have pregnancy sickness as a black woman\*. In addition to these more obvious physiological and social differences, there can be unpredictable, internal differences between how women\* experience pregnancy. For example, even two women\* who are in very similar circumstances, who had similar attitudes towards pregnancy before becoming pregnant and who appear to suffer similar physical symptoms of pregnancy may differ in whether, and to what extent, they experience pregnancy as a involving a loss of control over their body that challenges their autonomy. Someone who has not experienced pregnancy as a challenge to autonomy may struggle to understand what pregnancy is like for someone who does, and vice versa. Finally, what it is like to be pregnant may vary significant between cultures, depending on factors such as the social meaning of pregnancy[[27]](#footnote-27) and to the importance placed on autonomy within the culture[[28]](#footnote-28).

Miranda Fricker responds to a similar worry concerning Feminist Standpoint Theory. Feminist Standpoint Theory argues that there may be some knowledge that is primarily available from the standpoint of women. It is commonly objected that this relies on an implausible essentialism about women, ignoring the variety in women’s experiences.[[29]](#footnote-29) Fricker argues that Feminist Standpoint Theory does not need to claim that there is any isolable component of experience which all women share. Instead of claiming that all women share the *same* experience in virtue of being women, we can appeal to *similarities* between women’s experiences in virtue of their subjects’ being women. “There will be a similarity between two different people's experiences of, say, sexual discrimination, if there is - as there must be - a description (how- ever thin and incomplete) of these experiences that is true across difference.”[[30]](#footnote-30) There are certainly high-level descriptions which are both universally true of pregnancy and which pick out experiences sufficiently different from the experiences of most people who have not been pregnant to make it very difficult for most people who have not been pregnant to fully grasp what it means for those descriptions to be true: a very simple example would be "having a foetus growing inside your body". Nonetheless, Fricker’s approach will not work for my purposes. My claim is that pregnant women\* acquire a grasp of what it is like to be pregnant which goes beyond what can be easily conveyed to those who have not been pregnant. It should not be difficult to convey to those who have not been pregnant that a given description is true of pregnant women\*. If I am to claim that I have a better grasp of what it is like for another woman\* to be pregnant than those who have not been pregnant, then I need to know more than that we simply fall under the same high level description. What it is like for each of us to be pregnant must be importantly similar in ways that give me a deeper insight into her experience.

I suggest that a woman\* who has been pregnant will often, but not always, meet this condition with respect to another woman\*’s pregnancy. Although we should not underestimate the variety among ways it can be like to be pregnant, we should also not underestimate how much different women\*’s experiences of pregnancy can have in common. Even if two pregnant women\* differ in their precise physical symptoms, they are likely to both, for example, experience rapid, significant and unexpected changes to their bodies in the process of pregnancy. These experiences are dramatically different from the experiences of most people who have not been pregnant. Often, the differences between two pregnancies will be dwarfed by the difference between those pregnancies and other experiences, so that it is still easier for someone who has been pregnant to understand another’s pregnancy even if there are significant differences. Nonetheless, sometimes the differences between two pregnancies may be such that the two women\* do not have any better grasp of what the other’s pregnancy was like.

My claim that being pregnant gives access to knowledge of what pregnancy is like should be understood in a way that reflects this picture. We might think of possible experiences of pregnancy as points in a ‘similarity space’: some experiences will be very similar and thus very close; other will be very different and thus further apart.[[31]](#footnote-31) Through pregnancy a woman\* acquires a very detailed understanding of one point in the similarity space (matching her own experience of pregnancy). She thus acquires a grasp of what pregnancy can be like. Even if most other pregnancies are so very different to her\* pregnancy that she is in no better position to understand them than someone who has never been pregnant, she\* still possesses important knowledge about what it means to require women\* to go through pregnancy. Unless her\* pregnancy is very unusual, there will be a cluster of other possible experiences of pregnancies close to her\* own in the similarity space. She\* will be easily able to grasp what these pregnancies are like – and thus may have a good grasp of what pregnancy is often like. It will be harder – and sometimes impossible – for her\* to grasp what pregnancies that are far away in the similarity space are like.[[32]](#footnote-32)

This leads to three important points: (1) being pregnant does not automatically give one knowledge about what it is like to be pregnant – at the very least work needs to be done to understand how one’s own experience relates to other possible experiences; (2) which experiences of pregnancy a woman\* can grasp will depend upon the position of her\* own experience in the similarity space; (3) we will need to draw on the knowledge from a range of pregnancies for a full understanding of what it is like to be pregnant.

I now turn to the more specific objection that what it like to be pregnant against one’s will is vastly different from what it is like to be pregnant voluntarily and that it is the later which is relevant to the ethics of abortion. It may be true that some voluntary pregnancies may be so different from unwanted pregnancies that going through such a pregnancy does not allow a woman\* to grasp what an unwanted pregnancy might be like. However, I suggest that normally a woman\* who has undergone a voluntary pregnancy is in many ways in a better position than someone who has never been pregnant to understand what it is to ask someone to remain pregnant against her\* will.[[33]](#footnote-33) First, she\* will be aware of the ways in which pregnancy was difficult for her\*. Understanding the burdens involved in a voluntary pregnancy, may allow her\* to grasp what it is to ask someone to take on these burdens against their will. But her\* understanding of the ways in which pregnancy was wonderful for her\* will also be relevant. Some of the very features that make voluntary pregnancy so wonderful (the incredible intimacy, the changes to identity) might be the things that make forced pregnancy bad. So long as women\* who have undergone voluntary pregnancies are sufficiently reflective to consider the effects that involuntariness might have on the experience of pregnancy, their experience still provides insight into what it is like to be pregnant and thus what is at stake for the pregnant woman\* in abortion.

The claim that women\* who have been pregnant have special access to some knowledge that is relevant to the ethics of abortion is not meant to imply that no other group has special access to knowledge that is relevant to the ethics of abortion. One obvious example is the group of people who have experienced the way in which fear of pregnancy can structure a woman\*’s life and choices. Almost all women\*, whether they have been pregnant or not, will fall into this group.[[34]](#footnote-34) Those who have experienced the threat of pregnancy in a context of restricted access to abortion have particularly valuable insight. In addition, those who have experience miscarriage and infertility may have special access to relevant knowledge.

*(ii) Fragility, Investment and The Moral Status of the Foetus*

I suggest that, through pregnancy, the pregnant woman\* also gains knowledge about the value of a human foetus. This knowledge is intimately related to, but distinct from, the knowledge about what it is like to be pregnant. In the debate about foetal status, there are three influential positions: the view that the foetus has the moral status of a person from conception[[35]](#footnote-35); the view that the foetus has no significant moral status[[36]](#footnote-36); and the view that the foetus has no significant moral status until it becomes sentient sometime in the 2nd trimester of pregnancy[[37]](#footnote-37). I suggest that the pregnant woman\* gains knowledge about the value of a human foetus which is clearly relevant to the debate on the moral status of the foetus. Indeed, I suggest that the knowledge gained by the pregnant woman\* may challenge each of the three main approaches to foetal moral status.[[38]](#footnote-38)

One element in the knowledge gained about the value of the foetus is that knowing what it is like to be pregnant reveals just how much goes into the development of the foetus from the very beginning. Whatever its intrinsic value, the foetus represents a significant investment, physical and emotional, from the pregnant woman\*. Pregnancy gives one an intense understanding of this investment.

In addition, to go through pregnancy is to be vividly aware of the fragility of early human life. Most conceptions do not result in live births. Mukherjee et al summarise the data on miscarriage: “Approximately 10%–15% of clinically identified pregnancies end in recognized miscarriage, a pregnancy loss before completion of 20 weeks’ gestation. More than a third of all conceptions that can be identified hormonally may end in loss when taking into account unrecognized pregnancies.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Many modern women\* will have read such statistics and anxiously tracked the decreasing risk as each week passes. I suggest that, even if their knowledge of foetal fragility is mediated by the statistics, the experience (the anxious tracking, the efforts at protection, the relief each time a healthy heart beat is heard) provides additional knowledge. It provides a sense of what the statistics mean. We should also note that pregnant women\* have had a sense of the fragility of early human life long before the scientific studies.

Someone might worry that these experiences do not indicate anything about the moral status of the foetus: they may think that all that anxiety or relief shows is that the foetus means a lot to the pregnant woman\* and that this can only show that it has derivative value, not that it is valuable in its own right. But my claim is not (just) that these feeling of anxiety and relief show the pregnant woman\* how much the foetus means to her\*. I claim that this experience allows her\* to understand how fragile the foetus is in a way that it is difficult to grasp without the experience.[[40]](#footnote-40) I suggest that understanding the fragility of the foetus may have implications for the moral status of the foetus, not just for its derivative value. The moral implications of that fragility are not simple. Recognising fragility will in some ways tend to make one attribute less moral status to the foetus, because it will emphasise the differences between a foetus and a newborn baby. On the other hand, we may also be inclined to see the foetus as valuable because it is fragile and because it has already survived against the odds.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Similarly, I take it that the investment involved in pregnancy has implications for the foetus’ moral status and not just for its derivative value. Again, the implications for moral status will not be straightforward. We may see the fact that the foetus requires significant additional investment in order to make it to birth as speaking against equating the foetus with a newborn baby. On the other hand, the investment that has already taken place may be reason to value the foetus. We do often see the fact that something was extremely difficult to create as making it valuable not just derivatively but for its own sake.

But I do not think that the pregnant woman\* acquires knowledge of the value of the foetus solely through a clearer understanding of the process from conception to birth. Although I will not argue for this here, I suggest that the pregnant woman\* also acquires new knowledge about the value of the foetus in virtue of her relationship with it. It is often suggested that certain types of aesthetic knowledge can only be acquired by direct acquaintance. It is typically thought that I gain new knowledge the first time I look at a painting such as the Mona Lisa. Looking at the Mona Lisa gives me knowledge of its aesthetic value which is difficult, if not impossible, to acquire any other way.[[42]](#footnote-42) I suggest that something similar occurs during pregnancy.[[43]](#footnote-43) I suggest the pregnant woman\* acquires knowledge by acquaintance of the foetus. Again, I am inclined to think that the knowledge of foetal value that the pregnant woman\* gains through acquaintance with the foetus will challenge each of the standard views about the moral status of the foetus. The acquaintance with the foetus during pregnancy may reveal it as something extremely precious: precious in its own right and in way that requires moral recognition but in a way that is not captured by regarding the foetus as a person, bearing all the rights of a person.

***Pregnancy as an Epistemically TransformativeWIDE Experience***

I will now argue that pregnancy is an epistemically transformativeWIDE experience: someone who has been pregnant is in a *significantly* different epistemic position than she\* could be in without having been pregnant, with knowledge that there are significant barriers to acquiring for those who have not been pregnant.

Before we begin, it is worth distinguishing between two different ways in which an agent might know what it is like to be pregnant. First, they might know that certain descriptions are true of those who are pregnant. For example, someone who has not been pregnant can know that pregnant women\* suffer pregnancy sickness in the sense that they can know that the description ‘suffers pregnancy sickness’ is true of many pregnant women\*. Let us call this kind of knowledge ‘information’: so we will say that someone who knows that pregnant women\* suffer pregnancy sickness ‘has the information that pregnant women\* suffer pregnancy sickness.’ However, this is not the (only) kind of knowledge about what it is like to be pregnant that is relevant for applied ethics. For someone might have this kind of knowledge while lacking (a) a grasp of what it means for the description to be true i.e. what it means to have pregnancy sickness and (b) an understanding of how the different descriptions that are true of a pregnant woman\* interact i.e. what it means to have pregnancy sickness while experiencing rapid changes in your body. I will call this type of knowledge, ‘grasp’: someone who knows that pregnant women\* suffer knowledge in this deeper sense ‘grasps that pregnant women\* suffer pregnancy sickness’ or ‘grasps what it is like to be pregnant’.

I’ll try to illustrate this with a non-pregnancy related example. On September 11th 2001, I was a university student at home for the summer holidays, enjoying a long lie in. When my mother rushed into the room to tell me that a plane had flown into the Twin Towers, my main reaction was mild annoyance at having been woken up. I also felt pity and sadness, but I didn’t realise that it was any different than the motor way pile ups or train crashes that I heard about regularly about on the news. I had the information: I knew it was true that the Twin Towers had fallen, but I utterly failed to grasp what this meant. I had no sense of how many people were in those towers, of the significance of the towers for Americans, or of how the first foreign terrorist attack on mainland American would change the world. (I am aware that this example casts my younger self in a very bad light. I think I am less insulated now.)

Note that while information appears to be binary – either one knows that the description is true or one does not – grasp is a matter of degree. One can fully or partially grasp what it means to have pregnancy sickness and how pregnancy sickness interacts with other elements of pregnancy.

Paul draws a distinction between two different ways you can regard the outcome of an act you will perform. She argues that you can either regard the outcome “in descriptive, causal terms, described from a third, personal, tenseless perspective” or “in a first-personal way” in which “you can assign a subjective value to the outcome.”(p. 109) For Paul, subjective values: “capture the rich, complex nature of lived experiences resulting from our sensory as well as our non-sensory cognitive phenomenology” (p. 12). Paul argues that “The first-personal way that you know you will have the property of hearing sound involves knowing this in a way that only someone who has had experiences resembling your experience can know” (p. 109).

Paul’s distinction between first personal and third personal perspectives has something in common with my distinction between grasp and information. Successfully taking the first-personal perspective requires a grasp of, rather than mere information about, the situation. Nonetheless, the two are not quite the same. For example, Black, Morris and Bryce argue that more than 10 million children die each year, mostly from preventable causes.[[44]](#footnote-44) Despite having this information, I must admit that I find it extremely difficult to grasp. This is not simply a matter of grasping what it is like for a child to die or to have a loved one die or to fail to prevent death. It is a matter of understanding the significance of those very large numbers.[[45]](#footnote-45)

I suggest that to do applied ethics adequately, we need both information and grasp. In order to assess the ethics of, for example, abortion, we need to know not just that the description ‘‘suffers pregnancy sickness’ is true of many pregnant women\*. We need to know what this means and how it interacts with the other aspects of pregnancy.[[46]](#footnote-46) I suggest that there are problems with both information and grasp when it comes to conveying the knowledge gained through pregnancy to those who have not been pregnant.

Let’s start with the knowledge about what it is like to be pregnant. The knowledge about what pregnancy is like is doubly difficult to acquire without experience because it is a complex set of interacting experiences each of which is utterly different from experiences commonly had by people who have not been pregnant.

We can convey the information that pregnant women\* suffer pregnancy sickness to someone who has not been pregnant. However, even acquiring all relevant mere information may be a challenge for those who have not been pregnant. The sheer number of ways in which pregnancy affects one mean that it is difficult for those who have not been pregnant simply to acquire the ‘facts’ about pregnancy, even if we focus solely on the physical changes to one’s body. These can include many small things, changes in eyesight, excess of saliva leading to uncontrollable drooling, suddenly finding that your shoes no longer fit.

Even if someone who has not been pregnant can acquire information about some aspects of pregnancy, for example, even if we can tell them that pregnant women\* suffer morning sickness, acquiring a grasp of these facts is difficult. Pregnant women\* often suffer 4 months (or more or less) of what is commonly known, with almost comic inaccuracy, as ‘morning sickness’ and properly called pregnancy sickness. One might attempt to convey something of what pregnancy sickness is like to someone who has not been pregnant by asking them to imagine their worst ever hangover, lasting 4 months. But even this stretches the imagination: for if you have not experienced pregnancy or long-term illness, it is difficult to grasp the sheer relentlessness of months of unremitting vomiting or nausea. In the UK at least, pregnancy sickness normally takes place in secret, bound by the fear of miscarriage, most people do not “tell” until after the 12 week scan. Thus pregnancy sickness involves weeks of secret suffering, staggering from toilet bowl to computer screen pretending not to be sick.

Suppose that your listener makes the imaginative leap and manages to comprehend what it might be like to work through 4 months of sickness. To grasp what it is like to be pregnant, or even what it is like to have pregnancy sickness, they must understand what this is like in conjunction with the other aspects of pregnancy. They have to understand the way in which pregnancy sickness interacts with all the other physical changes. Each of these on their own may be trivial but together they may add up to a sense that one has lost control of one’s body. The physical symptoms occur in conjunction with a storm of emotions, driven by hormones, by the ever-present fear that something might go wrong, by unexpected resentment at the way in which one’s entire body appears to have redirected itself to the needs of the all-engulfing, unceasing presence within.

The inability to grasp the complex interaction of a large number of different aspects of pregnancy presents a significant challenge to the ability of those who have not been pregnant to grasp any of its aspects. There is an influential account of knowledge of other minds that holds we can understand the feelings of others by trying to imagine how we would feel if we were in their shoes. Heidi L. Maibon argues against this view. She draws on an extensive range of empirical studies to show that we are much, much worse than we tend to think at forecasting how we would feel in a given situation.[[47]](#footnote-47) One issue that Maibon picks out is “Focalism”, “the tendency to focus exclusively on a central event, or the most obvious features of a situation.” To illustrate the way in which this can cause problems, Maibon cites a study in which students were asked to predict how much they would enjoy a plate of spaghetti with meat sauce. Students tended to say that they would enjoy it equally in the morning or the evening when, in fact, most enjoy it more in the evening than in the morning. “If you just imagine eating a nice plate of spaghetti and not the conditions under which you do so, you are apt to make mistakes about how much you’d like it and so on.”[[48]](#footnote-48) Similarly, if you are trying to work out what it would be like to have pregnancy sickness through imagination alone, you are likely to focus only on the most obvious facts – that you will be vomiting – and not on how this will interact with the other aspects of pregnancy, and indeed with other aspects of your daily life. This is likely to lead to a failure to adequately understand pregnancy sickness.

This is not meant to be a litany of complaint. It is perhaps tempting to focus on the bad experiences of pregnancy, in part because those that are often good are, if anything, even more difficult to convey: the wordless intimacy with a being that you are in continuous contact with but can only see through the intermediary of technology; the amazement of ‘quickening’; new awareness of yourself as embodied and of your body as mammalian. Both the bad, and the good, experiences of pregnancy are hard to put into words – or at least to put into words that are anything more than trite euphemisms. As author, Chitra Ramaswamy, notes in her fascinating, lyrical account of her journey through pregnancy: “So much in pregnancy had been obscured by euphemism and it had happened over centuries. It was an experience that despite (or perhaps because) of being so unspeakable, has always been loaded with verbiage.”[[49]](#footnote-49) I argued above that the pregnant woman\*’s knowledge about both the ways in which pregnancy can be wonderful and the ways in which pregnancy can be terrible is relevant to debate on the ethics of abortion. As noted, this need not imply that it is simply a mater of knowing whether, in a voluntary pregnancy the good aspects of pregnancy outweigh the bad. Some of the very features that make voluntary pregnancy so wonderful (the incredible intimacy, the changes to identity) might be the things that make forced pregnancy bad.

The pregnant woman\*’s knowledge about the value of the foetus is also likely to be difficult to convey to those who have not been pregnant. I argued that the pregnant woman\* gains knowledge of the value of the foetus through (a) her grasp of the physical and emotional investment the foetus represents; (b) her grasp of the fragility of early human life and (c) her acquaintance with the foetus. Insofar as those who have not been pregnant struggle to grasp what it is like to be pregnant, they will struggle to grasp the physical and emotional investment the foetus represents. Similarly, I suggest that the experience of many pregnancies (the anxious tracking of the decreasing risk of miscarriage as each week passes, the efforts at protection, the relief each time a healthy heart beat is heard) puts the pregnant woman\* face to face with the fragility of early human life. Although, someone who has not been pregnant can have information about the probabilities of miscarriage, I suggest that going through these experiences gives one a new grasp of the fragility of human life. It gives a sense of what the probabilities mean. It is extremely difficult to acquire this without going through a pregnancy. Finally, if I am right that the pregnant woma\*n gains knowledge by acquaintance of the moral value of the foetus that is analogous to the knowledge by acquaintance one gains of the aesthetic value of a painting, then one might expect this knowledge to be difficult, if not impossible, to grasp without the same acquaintance. Although I can convey information about the aesthetic value of the Mona Lisa to someone who has not seen the painting, many aestheticians agree that there is some knowledge about its aesthetic value that can only be obtained by seeing it. In my terms, the person who has not seen the painting lacks a full grasp of its aesthetic value.[[50]](#footnote-50) Similarly, I suggest that it may be difficult to fully grasp the moral value of the foetus without acquaintance with a foetus.

There are some people who have never been pregnant but who could be described as having ‘experienced a pregnancy’ or ‘gone through a pregnancy’. For example, a pregnant woman\*’s partner may have been deeply involved in her\* pregnancy with their child. I suggest that this vicarious experience of pregnancy is also an epistemically transformative experience. Someone who is deeply involved with a pregnancy in this way gains knowledge that it is very difficult to acquire without having a similar involvement with pregnancy. They gain knowledge about what it is like to be pregnant and about the investment the human foetus represents. They acquire such knowledge by living with the pregnant woman\* and seeing the effects of her\* pregnancy day by day. Non-gestating parents can also experience anxiety and relief that gives them a vivid understanding of the fragility of human life. They may also gain knowledge by acquaintance of the moral value of the foetus. However, in at least most of these cases, there remains at least some gap between the knowledge of the pregnant woman\* and the knowledge of the person who has experienced pregnancy vicariously. For example, it can be hard to explain, even to one’s partner, the constant presence of pregnancy and the way in which it permeates every aspect of one’s life.

Thus I suggest that pregnancy is an *epistemically transformative*WIDE experience: after the experience, the subject is in a *significantly* different epistemic position than she\* could be in without having the experience, with knowledge that there are significant barriers to acquiring without the experience. I will now discuss some methods that might be used to overcome these barriers. I will suggest that although some methods can help those who have not been pregnant to obtain enough of a grasp of pregnancy to engage adequately in debate about the ethics of abortion, there remains an inevitable gap between the knowledge possessed by those who have been pregnant and those who have not. Thus pregnancy is also an *epistemically transformative*NARROW experience.

**Reading All About It: Can Literature Help?**

Martha Nussbaum argues that narrative can allow us to grasp the experiences of others. For Nussbaum, this ability to help us grasp the lives of others, and thus to move beyond the bounds of our own all too narrow set of experiences, means that literature plays a vital role in ethics. “Our experience is, without fiction, too confined and too parochial. Literature extends it, making us reflect and feel what might otherwise be too distant for feeling.”[[51]](#footnote-51) As Nancy Jecker comments, “The point, for Nussbaum, is not that we use stories to illustrate moral problems, but rather we use them to share basic experiences, feelings, and understandings associated with our values.”[[52]](#footnote-52) On this account, through reading literature about, or written from the point of view of, a pregnant women\*, even someone who has not experienced pregnancy may come to feel what it is like to be pregnant.

I have already mentioned Chitra Ramaswamy’s lyrical account of pregnancy, *Expecting: The Inner Life of Pregnancy*. Ramaswamy describes vividly and richly what she is feeling and how her body is changing, month by month. She draws on novels, art, poetry and film, about pregnancy, or about other topics. For example, she describes the first time she feels the baby move:

“I started to feel a series of quickenings in my utertus. I say a series, because they felt multiple. This was no defined kick, tap, flutter, hunger pang or bubble of gas… And yet, something electrical, like the fusing of wires. A string of lights flickering, then turning on…I thought of these early movements as the Quickenings as if they were a band of independent creatures bombing against my womb, rubbing feathery backs across its arches as they scuttled back and forth, stomping tiny feet across spongy surfaces…I recalled the poet Kate Clanchy’s description of her baby’s first movements feeling like ‘… an eager, even overfamiliar/ uncle-ish hard tweak at my waist.’ There really was something cheeky about it. These Quickenings had personality.”[[53]](#footnote-53)

Although it is non-fiction, this seems to be the kind of literature that Nussbaum has in mind. Turning the last page, you feel as if you have walked with Ramaswamy through her journey, perhaps even that you have stood in her shoes.

Narrative literature can help us to overcome some of the obstacles that those who have not been pregnant face in grasping the knowledge gained through pregnancy. Above I argued that it is difficult for those who have not been pregnant to grasp what pregnancy is like. Pregnancy involves a complex set of interacting experiences each of which is utterly different from experiences commonly had by people who have not been pregnant. Even if someone who has not been pregnant manages to go some way towards grasping one aspect of pregnancy, say, pregnancy sickness, they will not have understood what pregnancy is like until they have understood all the many other aspects of pregnancy. Moreover, because the different aspects of pregnancy affect each other, they will not have really understood what pregnancy sickness is like until they have understood how it interacts with other elements of pregnancy. As Maibon notes, attempts to imagine ourselves in alternative situations often suffer from focalism: we tend to focus on the most obvious aspects of a situation, ignoring less obvious details which may nonetheless has significant implications.[[54]](#footnote-54)

Literature offers some help here. A good narrative account of pregnancy sickness will situate it within the overall context of pregnancy, describing or at least invoking details beyond the obvious. Good literature has the ability to present a holistic account of experience, integrating the different features and showing how they interact. Using metaphor, imagery and stylistic tools, literature is able to take our understanding beyond the literal meaning of words. In addition, narratives such as *Expecting* provide a sense of time. This is in part because we spend time reading literature, but also because narratives have their own internal time frame.[[55]](#footnote-55) The nature of pregnancy over time can be one of the hardest aspects to convey to those who have not been pregnant. Often it seems as if those who underestimate the costs of pregnancy do so because they fail to grasp what it means for pregnancy to last nine months, without a break. But there are subtler issues: to understand what it is like to be pregnant, one must understand it as something that occurs over time and that affects one’s sense of time, seeming simultaneously interminable and rapid.

As Nussbaum points out, narratives engage us in a way that other forms of writing do not.[[56]](#footnote-56) We can come to care for the characters. This emotional engagement can help us to move beyond mere information about the facts to a grasp of what those facts mean. When we read *Expecting*, we share Ramaswamy’s journey. We walk in her footsteps. We care about the things she cares about. This provides a much more vivid sense of what it is to be pregnant than a simple list of features of pregnancy.[[57]](#footnote-57)

Nussbaum holds that direct encounter with the literature itself is vital: it is not enough to read a summary or to explore thought-examples of the kind beloved by philosophers. “Schematic philosophers’ examples almost always lack the particularity, the emotive appeal, the absorbing plottedness, the variety and indeterminacy, of good fiction; they lack too, good fiction’s way of making the reader a participant and a friend; and we have argued that it is precisely in virtue of these structural characteristics that fiction can play the role it does in our reflective lives… If the examples do have these features they will, themselves, be works of literature.”[[58]](#footnote-58).

One might worry that literature gives us not an understanding of what an experience is like, but an understanding of what an author, who may be relying on the power of her own imagination, thinks that it is like. Nussbaum notes: “novels do not function, inside this account, as pieces of ‘raw’ life: they are a close and careful interpretative description.”[[59]](#footnote-59) Nonetheless, she does not see this as undermining the value of literature. Indeed, she appears to argue that knowledge obtained through fiction is in some ways superior to that obtained through ordinary lived experience: “All living is interpreting; all action requires seeing the world *as* something. So in this sense no life is ‘raw,’ and (as James and Proust insist) throughout our living we are in a sense makers of fictions. The point is that in the activity of literary imagining we are led to imagine and describe with greater precision, focusing our attention on each word, feeling each event more keenly – whereas much of actual life goes by without that heightened awareness, and, is thus, in a certain sense, not fully or thoroughly lived… So literature is an extension of life not only horizontally, bringing the reader into contact with events or locations or persons or problems he or she has not otherwise met, but also, so to speak, vertically, giving the reader experience that is deeper, sharper, and more precise than much of what takes place in life.”[[60]](#footnote-60)

There are a few caveats and conditions worth noting here. Not all literature in which pregnancy is discussed can give us a grasp of what pregnancy is like. Nussbaum explicitly notes that she is interested in what good literature can do. It is indeed a mark of good literature to be able to truly convey an experience such as pregnancy. But literature can be good without the experiences described being veridical in the sense we are interested in for applied ethics. We do not want to know what pregnancy is like in the fictional world, but what it is really like. This leads to a puzzle: How can a work of literature convey what pregnancy is like unless its author understands what pregnancy is like? Ramaswamy and many of the artists she discusses seem trustworthy in part because they have themselves been pregnant. Tolstoy, has intimate second-hand experience of pregnancy, as well as being, in Ramaswamy’s words, “a writer so attuned to the condition of being alive that he was even able, in his masterpiece *Anna Karenina*, to enter the mind of a dog.”[[61]](#footnote-61)

The possibility of bad or unreliable representations of pregnancy should lead us to be careful. For bad representations can have a wholly pernicious effect. Consider the Hollywood cliché of the pregnant woman who seems to vomit once, and only once, delicately into the waste-paper basket at work, who spends the following 8 months with a flattering neat but visible bump and who knows that she has gone into labour because her waters break dramatically, and who lies in bed with her legs strapped in the air, before pushing out her baby with a few minutes of swearing after breaking the father’s hand by squeezing it too tight. Many, if not most, people know that this is utterly inaccurate and yet it still has a powerful influence over our images of pregnancy.

Secondly, *Expecting* gives a vivid account of what Ramaswamy’s pregnancy was like. However, as antenatal teachers are fond of reminding us, every pregnancy is different. Thus simply reading this single book will not give one a good sense of what pregnancy in general is like. Of course, this is an issue faced by those who have been pregnant too. I suggested earlier that despite the wide varieties in the experience of pregnancy, two pregnancies will often share significant similarities. Pregnant women\* naturally come to have some sense of what is unique about their pregnancies and what is common to many pregnancies by talking to other pregnant women\* and discovering shared experiences. Those who have not been pregnant will need to read books describing a variety of experiences of pregnancy.

I suggest that literature can help us to move beyond merely having information about what pregnancy is like. Through reading good narratives, we can come not just to know that certain descriptive facts are true of women in pregnancy, but also to have some grasp of what this means. However, literature cannot, and should not, be the only method used to try to understand epistemically transformativeWIDE experiences like pregnancy for the purposes of applied ethics. First, applied ethics may require us to understand experiences where no adequate narrative literature exists. Second, as I will argue, the inevitable gap between what can be conveyed through narrative and what the pregnant woman\* knows, means that narrative literature must always be used in conjunction with dialogue with people who have had the experience.

**Dialogue and the Virtue of Epistemic Humility**

I argued above that it is difficult to convey the knowledge gained through pregnancy to those who have not been pregnant. For example, it is difficult for those who have not been pregnant to grasp what it is like to be pregnant because pregnancy is a complex set of interacting experiences, each of which is radically different from the experiences that we might expect someone who has not been pregnant to have. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that those who have not been pregnant may fail to recognize these barriers and falsely think that they have grasped what it is like to be pregnant.[[62]](#footnote-62)

There are two pitfalls that seem to me to be common: ‘focalism’ (discussed above) and false empathy. Suppose that testimony is offered about what it is like to be pregnant, for example, “I had terrible pregnancy sickness and vomited at twenty minute intervals for large parts of the day for 3 months.” Focalism occurs when the listener tries to imagine what pregnancy sickness is like without considering how this aspect of pregnancy might interact with any of the other effects of pregnancy or with the pregnant woman\*’s daily life. This can arise from sheer lack of information about the many aspects of what it is like to be pregnant. It can also arise from our tendency to think only about the most obvious features of a situation when projecting. False Empathy occurs when the listener wrongly assumes that they have grasped what, for example, pregnancy sickness is like because they falsely assume that it is equivalent to one of their own experiences. For example, the listener might equate pregnancy sickness to a bad tummy bug or a hangover but fail to understand that the extended nature and context of pregnancy makes a difference.

Avoiding these pitfalls requires the listener to develop the virtue of epistemic humility: appropriate responsiveness to one’s own epistemic limitations.[[63]](#footnote-63) Awareness of the barriers to understanding what pregnancy is like should inform the dialogue. The listener should not assume that they have grasped what the person who has been pregnant is reporting. Instead, they should further explore each statement, in order to acquire both a sense of the additional information that is relevant and to go beyond information and acquire a grasp of what the person experienced. Appropriate use of somewhat similar experiences can be used to build understanding. However, instead of assuming that this similar experience gives them a good grasp of what the pregnancy has been like, the listener should put forward this experience to use as a starting point, so that both similarities and differences can be revealed.

Such exploration will take time. Trying to grasp an experience such as pregnancy, which is fundamentally different from any experience with which the listener is likely to be familiar, will not be achieved quickly. Thus epistemic humility will have to be combined with patience.

Moreover, the process of trying to grasp the knowledge gained through pregnancy through discussion with those who have been pregnant should be understood as an ongoing dialogue rather than as a one-off testimony. Input should be sought from those who have been pregnant before, during *and* after the formation of arguments about the ethics of abortion. When someone who has not been pregnant has developed an argument about the ethics of abortion, they should discuss these arguments with those who have been pregnant. This will allow them to check whether their arguments suffer from a failure to fully grasp some of the knowledge gained through pregnancy.

**Pregnancy as an Epistemically TransformativeNARROW Experience**

I suggest that both literature and dialogue with epistemic humility can do something to overcome the barriers that those who have not been pregnant face in acquiring the knowledge gained in pregnancy. Nonetheless, I suggest that these barriers cannot be completely overcome. There remains an inevitable gap between what it known by those who have been pregnant and what can be conveyed to those who have not been pregnant.

There are four reasons that it is not possible to fully convey the knowledge gained in pregnancy. The first problem is that experience is richer than either testimony or narrative: it is inevitable that some details will be left out. Even if each individual detail could in principle be conveyed, there are too many details to convey in a finite time.[[64]](#footnote-64) These missing details mean that someone who has not been pregnant will inevitably lack a full sense of what pregnancy is like overall. As Nancy Jecker argues:

“…. empirical adequacy requires not only empirical breadth, or the ability to take into account a broad range of viewpoints, but also empirical depth, or the ability to show fidelity to the richness of specific situated experiences. Reading about the lives of disabled people, or other oppressed groups, may give a person more awareness, but perhaps not sufficient depth of understanding. Clearly, it cannot enable a person to have the same experience and understanding as the person who lives with a disability. This gap between the person who is oppressed and the person who is moved by a narrative about oppression cannot be filled by simply reading more stories.”[[65]](#footnote-65)

In addition, because of the holistic nature of experience, missing one detail is likely to mean that one has not fully understood other elements of the experience. As I have argued, to understand what pregnancy sickness is like, we need to understand how this interacts with the other changes experienced in pregnancy. Because there are too many such changes to convey to someone who has not been pregnant in a finite time, this means that neither literature nor testimony can provide a full grasp of what it is like to have pregnancy sickness.

In addition, there may be some elements of pregnancy that are just *so* different from any other experience that they are impossible to fully grasp without the experience. Consider, for example, the experience of having what will become another person growing inside one’s body and of the way this blurs one’s bodily boundaries and perhaps changes one’s very identity. Literature can do something to help us understand what this is like. Ramaswary’s lyrical account of her struggles with identity, emotion and anger convey some of the implications of the experience. Nonetheless, there may remain something that cannot be put into words.[[66]](#footnote-66)

Finally, contra Nussbaum, the experience of pregnancy itself has a vividness, an immediacy, that even extraordinary writing like Ramaswamy’s cannot acquire. Nussbaum cannot convince me that I felt Ramaswamy’s frustration, surprise or labour pains more keenly than I felt my own. The vividness of experience in pregnancy is crucial for gaining not just information that certain descriptions are true of pregnant women\* or of the foetus, but a full grasp of what this means. Because they understand these thing less vividly, those who have not been pregnant do not fully grasp the knowledge gained in pregnancy.

**The Implications for Applied Ethics**

As noted above, grasp is a matter of degree. Our grasp of some knowledge can be more or less complete. I have argued that pregnancy is an epistemically transformativeNARROW experience: there is some knowledge gained through pregnancy that cannot be acquired without the experience. Without being pregnant, you cannot fully grasp what it is like to be pregnant or the value of the foetus. Nonetheless, I suggest that a combination of literature and dialogue with epistemic humility can allow someone who has not been pregnant to obtain a sufficient grasp of these things. By a sufficient grasp, I mean enough of a grasp to be able to adequately engage in debate about the ethics of abortion.

There are two elements to my argument that the knowledge gained through these methods is sufficient to adequately engage with applied ethics. First, those who have not been pregnant are able to form some kind of a picture of what it is like to be pregnant. Indeed, contra Paul, I suggest that they can take the first-personal perspective. Using the tools described above, they can imaginatively project themselves into the perspective of a pregnant woman\*. Although this projection is far from perfect, it is still recognisably a first-personal representation of what it is like to be pregnant, based on the subject’s (imperfect) understanding of the different aspects of pregnancy. Thus, I suggest, those who have not been pregnant can have some kind of grasp of what it is to be pregnant.

The question therefore is whether this grasp is sufficient to be able to do applied ethics adequately. I suggest that it is, because it has to be. Abortion is one of the most complex, controversial and important ethical issues: the accessibility or inaccessibility of safe and legal abortion has dramatic implications for women\*’s autonomy and well-being; on the other hand, many reasonable people believe that abortion is morally equivalent to murder, leaving widespread state sanctioned abortion as an unrecognised genocide. To refuse to engage in this question is to risk complicity in a deep injustice, whichever way the law currently stands. To say that it is a ‘personal choice’, something that each woman\* must decide, is already to make a moral judgment.[[67]](#footnote-67) So, even those who have not been pregnant must engage with the ethics of abortions. In addition, because pregnancy is merely one example of an epistemically transformative experience that is relevant to applied ethics, the implications of refusal to engage in such cases would amount to a widespread withdrawal from ethical decision-making.

Moreover, ethical judgment has a peculiar feature. Ideally, ethical judgments should not be made based solely on appeal to authority. Thus those who have not been pregnant cannot without cost outsource ethical judgment about abortion to those who have been pregnant. It is certainly possible to draw on the knowledge and judgments of others. I will argue that ethical judgment can be co-operative, and indeed, must be cooperative in cases involving epistemically transformative experiences. Nonetheless, there is something worrying about forming an ethical judgement about the ethics of abortion by simply asking someone who has been pregnant whether abortion is permissible and whether states have duty to provide safe access to abortion.[[68]](#footnote-68) Moreover, as noted, there are likely to be many cases in which epistemically transformative experiences are relevant to applied ethics. As argued above, the implications of refusal to engage in such cases would amount to a widespread withdrawal from ethical decision-making. Thus even if we agree that it is acceptable to rely on moral testimony in rare cases, we cannot do so in all cases involving epistemically transformative experience. We need to be able to engage in ethical debate about issues like abortion, even if we lack the relevant epistemically transformative experiences.

I suggest that it is possible for those who have not been pregnant to gain an adequate grasp of pregnancy to engage with the ethics of abortion because it has to be. How could this work? What we need or want to do does not normally determine what it is possible for us to do. This is not a sleight of hand. Instead, I claim that our standards for what counts as an adequate grasp of pregnancy to engage in debate about the ethics of abortion need to adjust. Because engagement with the ethics of abortion is necessary, and because some grasp of pregnancy is possible, whatever this grasp is will count as ‘adequate’.

Nonetheless, the standards of adequacy for debate about the ethics of abortion must be responsive to the epistemically transformative nature of pregnancy. Those who have not been pregnant cannot engage with the ethics of abortion on their own.[[69]](#footnote-69) They must enter into an ongoing dialogue with those who have experienced pregnancy, not just in developing their views but also in checking that their views on abortion do not go astray because of failure to grasp some knowledge acquired in pregnancy. This is particularly urgent because pregnancy is an epistemically transformativeNARROW experience: there is an inevitable gap between what it known by someone who has been pregnant and what can be conveyed to someone who has not been pregnant. Awareness of this gap means that those who have not been pregnant need to be open to corrective testimony from those who have been pregnant. The same goes for other areas of applied ethics that involve epistemically transformative experiences. When epistemically transformative experiences are relevant, applied ethics should be a cooperative enterprise.

In fact, applied ethics as practised by professional philosophers generally is a cooperative enterprise. We assume that we will share our papers with others at seminars and conferences and our arguments will be rigorously tested by being subjected to as many objections as our audience can throw at us. The peer review process itself is designed to be the final part of this process. What I suggest has generally been missing up to now, is (a) appropriate input from relevant literature and dialogue with epistemic humility with those with the relevant epistemically transformative experiences before the philosophical positions are developed; (b) consideration of whether there are (enough) people with the relevant epistemically transformative experiences engaged in the refinement process.

**Objections**

I will finish by responding to some objections. The first two objections challenge my claim that epistemically transformative experiences present a problem for applied ethics. The first objection suggests that although what it is like to be pregnant is relevant to the ethics of abortion, all that is needed is an overall assessment of how much of a burden pregnancy is – and that this can be conveyed to someone who has not been pregnant. The second objection suggests that, in at least some cases, too vivid an understanding of what a certain experience would be like is unhelpful for making ethical judgments because overemotional judgments may lead us astray. The third objection challenges my proposed solution. Based on an objection from the debate in Feminist Standpoint Theory about whether you can take up another person’s standpoint, it suggests that we can never know whether we have adequately understood the knowledge gained through an epistemically transformative experience.

*Objection 1: Don’t bore me with the details*

I have argued that there is an inevitable gap between experience and testimony. Those who have not been pregnant cannot fully grasp the knowledge about what pregnancy is like gained through being pregnant. It might be thought that this gap is not relevant for applied ethics. It might be though that all we need to know to assess the ethics of abortion is how much of a burden pregnancy inflicts. The pregnant woman\* can tell us this, even if there will be elements of exactly what it is like to be pregnant that we cannot understand.[[70]](#footnote-70)

This response will not work. First, the language of ‘burdens’ may be inappropriate, insofar as it appears to assume that all costs are homogenous.[[71]](#footnote-71) It may matter morally not just ‘how much’ a requirement ‘burdens’ me but also how. The fact that pregnancy requires extreme intimacy and inescapable proximity has different moral import than the fact that it involves pain and discomfort. This response does not require a belief in the radical incommensurability of goods, but merely that the values of bodily autonomy and freedom from pain are interestingly different and that work is needed to show how they relate.[[72]](#footnote-72) Relatedly, the task of assessing the ethical import of what is being asked of someone by requiring them to remain pregnant is part of applied ethics. Working this out involves makes substantive judgments about the ethical importance of bodily autonomy, of pain and discomfort, of changes to one’s body and identity. It thus does not seem to be the kind of thing that a responsible moral agent can simply take on authority. As I argued above, we normally think of moral judgments as something that we must make for ourselves. The idea of simply asking pregnant women to tell us how much of a burden pregnancy is, while we lack a full understanding of what that burden involves, seems to fall foul of the constraint on moral deference.

*Objection 2: Got to keep a clear head.*

The second objection challenges my claim that having undergone an epistemically transformative experience puts one at an advantage when it comes to making moral judgments by giving one a fuller grasp of what the relevant experiences are like. Someone might think that there are cases in which having a vivid grasp of what it is like to be in a given situation would be unhelpful in making moral judgments because it might make us overly emotional.[[73]](#footnote-73)

Thomas D. Sullivan memorably argues that emotional responses to the suffering of the dying are potentially misleading when it comes to the morality of euthanasia. “I fully realise that there are times when those who have the noble duty to tend the sick and the dying are deeply moved by the sufferings of their patients, especially of the very young and the very old, and desperately wish they could do more than comfort and companion them. Then, perhaps, it seems that universal moral principles are mere abstractions having little to do with the agony of the dying. But of course we do not see best when our eyes are filled with tears.”[[74]](#footnote-74)

I am inclined to think that Sullivan is wrong in the case of euthanasia. Here it seems to me that tears enhance rather than blur our moral vision, for they reflect the deeply problematic nature of refusing to prevent such suffering. But there are other cases that I find more convincing. Consider, for example, Stanford student Brock Turner who received a jail sentence of a mere 6 months after being found guilty of serious sexual assault: digitally penetrating an unconscious woman behind a dumpster. The judge was widely criticised for focusing too much on the potential effects on Turner. This seems to be a case in which the wrong judgment was reached due to a too vivid understanding of what it would be like for a young man with such a promising future to be convicted of a serious crime.

I hold that a full grasp of what it is like for those involved is almost always relevant to moral judgments. The effects of our behaviour matter. Nonetheless, I admit that sometimes an overly vivid sense of what it will be like for one of the participants can have a distorting effect. I suggest that this occurs when it leads us to neglect other morally relevant factors. In the Turner case, the judge’s focus on what it would be like for Turner led him to neglect both the effect on the victim and the moral significance of Turner’s guilt.

The Turner case provides a salutary message: care must be taken in moral judgment to ensure that our empathy for one person is not making us ignore other relevant factors. In the Turner case, I suspect that the judge’s mistake could have been corrected by a genuine effort to grasp of what it would be like for the victim if Turner were not properly punished. However, there may be cases where fully grasping one of the relevant experiences inevitably distorts our judgment because it raises emotions so powerful that they blind us. This seems to me to be most likely to happen when we must make a decision in which no matter what we do an innocent person will suffer greatly. I admit the possibility of such cases. However, I do not think that the best response is a blanket ban on trying to fully grasp the experiences of those involved in issues in applied ethics. This would have a far more distorting effect on moral judgment, for it would amount to a principled decision to ignore an extremely important aspect of moral situations.

*Objection 3: But how will I know for sure?*

This third objection comes from a debate within Feminist Standpoint Theory. According to Feminist Standpoint theory, the oppressed are in a privileged epistemic position when it comes to recognising the blind spots of dominant discourses. As Alison Wylie explains:

[Feminist Standpoint Theory’s] central and motivating insight is an inversion thesis: those who are subject to structures of domination that systematically marginalize and oppress them may, in fact, be epistemically privileged in some crucial respects. They may know different things, or know some things better than those who are comparatively privileged… by virtue of what they typically experience and how they understand their experience… Their aim is both to understand how the systematic partiality of authoritative knowledge arises… and to account for the constructive contributions made by those working from marginal standpoints.[[75]](#footnote-75)

Harding’s approach is interesting (and relevant here) because she appears to argue that we can inhabit the standpoints of others. She argues:

There is no single, ideal women’s life from which standpoint theories recommend that thought start. Instead, one must turn to all the lives that are marginalized in different ways by the operative systems of social stratification. The different feminisms inform each other; we can learn from all of them and change our patterns of belief.[[76]](#footnote-76)

Helen Longino has famously criticised Harding’s theory, arguing that it is “a recipe for futility – how does one know if one has properly understood the situation of another?”[[77]](#footnote-77) Jennifer Saul presents this as a dilemma: those attempting to follow achieving Harding’s form of objectivity might forever worry about whether they have obtained a legitimate position from which to do science – or they might be too easily convinced that they have achieved it.[[78]](#footnote-78) The analogue for my discussion of epistemically transformative experiences is obvious: are we left either forever worrying whether we have adequately understood the knowledge gained by transformative experiences or too easily convinced that we have done so?

I do not think this worry undermines my position. In order to do applied ethics adequately, we do not need to be certain that we have adequately grasped, for example, what it is like to be pregnant. Instead, we need to sufficient reason for believing that we have done so. Someone can become all too easily convinced that they understand what it is like to be pregnant. But someone can also have good reason to think that they have done enough. Suppose someone has read many accounts of pregnancy in literature and pregnancy guide books and made significant efforts to have a dialogue with those who have been pregnant demonstrating the virtue of epistemic humility I described. Such a person might have reason to think they have an understanding that is adequate enough to begin doing applied ethics. In addition, my method of continuing dialogue provides a process for checking their understanding with those who have not been pregnant. It requires them to explain their reasoning and ask for guidance on what they are missing. Certainly is not possible. But lack of certainty does not imply futility.

**Summary**

I have argued that being pregnant gives a woman\* knowledge that is crucial for adequate debate about the ethics of abortion. Through being pregnant, a woman\* acquires knowledge about what pregnancy is like – and hence about what it is to require someone to remain pregnant against their will - and about the moral status of the foetus. This knowledge transforms the debate about abortion, not by providing a simple answer, but by making the debate more complex. Moreover, being pregnancy is not just one way of acquiring this knowledge: it is difficult, if not impossible, to convey this knowledge to those who have not been pregnant.

This connects with L.A. Paul’s work on transformative experience. On Paul’s account, an experience is epistemically transformative if the subject acquires knowledge that they could not have acquired without having that experience. I call this epistemic transformationNARROW. I argue that thinking about the epistemic effects of pregnancy suggests we should also be interested in epistemic transformationWIDE. An experience is epistemically transformativeWIDE if and only after the experience the subject is in a significantly different epistemic position, with knowledge which it is difficult if not impossible to acquire without the experience. I argue that pregnancy is both an epistemically transformativeWIDE experience and an epistemically transformativeNARROW experience. I describe two methods that can help those who have not been pregnant partially overcome the barriers to grasping the knowledge gained in pregnancy: literature and dialogue with epistemic humility. However, there is an inevitable gap between what those who have been pregnant know and what can be conveyed using these methods. This has significant implications for the way in which we should approach debate about the ethics of abortion. Those who have not been pregnant cannot engage with the ethics of abortion on their own. They must enter into an ongoing dialogue with those who have experienced pregnancy, not just in developing their views on abortion but also in checking that these views do not go astray because of failure to grasp some knowledge acquired in pregnancy. In fact, philosophy already operates on a collaborative model, whereby arguments are tested by appropriate criticism. What is missing is: (a) appropriate input from relevant literature and dialogue with epistemic humility with those with the relevant epistemically transformative experiences before the philosophical positions are developed; (b) consideration of whether there are (enough) people with the relevant epistemically transformative experiences engaged in the refinement process.

This argument is likely to have much wider implications. Many other areas of applied ethics seem likely to involve epistemically transformative experiences. Just war theory, the duties of the affluent to respond to global poverty, euthanasia: all seem likely to require knowledge which is difficult to grasp at all without the relevant experiences and which cannot be fully grasped by those without the relevant experiences.

1. This research was made possible through a Non-Residential Research Fellowship on The Experience Project in association with the University of Notre Dame, the University of North Carolina and the Templeton Foundation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Chitra Ramaswamy, *Expecting: The Inner Life of Pregnancy* (Saraband, Glasgow, 2016), p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Judith Jarvis Thomson, ‘A Defense of Abortion’, *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Autumn, 1971), p 48-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For similar arguments, see Margaret Little, ‘Abortion, Intimacy and the Duty to Gestate’, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, Vol. 2, No. 3, (September 1999), pp. 295-312; Karen L. F. Houle Responsibility, Complexity, and Abortion: Toward a New Image of Ethical Thought. (Lexington Books, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I’ve struggled over the correct terminology here. “Pregnant persons” seems to me to sweep under the carpet the fact that most pregnancies are experienced by women and that the people whose knowledge is being ignored here are, mostly, women. Nonetheless, some pregnant persons do not identify as women. I thus refer to “the pregnant woman\*” and “pregnant women\*” and use the pronouns ‘she\*’ and ‘her\*’ to both include pregnant persons who do not identify as women and to acknowledge that most pregnancies are experienced by women. As I note later, the knowledge gained by those who experience pregnancy who do not identify as women requires further special attention. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See L. A Paul, *Transformative Experience*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014.); L.A. Paul, ‘What You Can't Expect When You're Expecting’, Res Philosophica, 92 (2) (2015): 1-23. Note that in Paul’s view, the really troublesome cases are those that are not just epistemically transformative but also personally transformative: such experiences do not just provide you with new information, but also change your fundamental preferences (L. A Paul, *Transformative Experience*, p. 17). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. L. A Paul, *Transformative Experience*, pp.71-93; L.A. Paul, ‘What You Can't Expect When You're Expecting’. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. L. A Paul, *Transformative Experience*, p. 10-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. L. A Paul, *Transformative Experience*, p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Paul notes in response to critics that her main interest in not in whether those who have not been parents can understand the details of parenting: “The idea isn’t that you don’t know what it’s like to babysit, change diapers, or be very

    tired before you become a parent. Rather, what you don’t know is its most

    important and distinctive feature: what it will be like to form and occupy

    the identity-constructing, preference-changing, physically and emotionally

    overwhelming perspective of being a parent.” (Paul, Replies to Critics, Res Philosophica, p. 474) In contrast I am interested in the difficulty of understanding these mundane details. I think that it is extremely difficult for those who have not been parents to understand , for example, the tiredness associated with parenthood: first, because falling under a similar description doesn’t mean that you can grasp what it is like and second because even with similar levels of sleep deprivation, the experiences will differ. Similarly, I will argue that it is difficult, if not impossible, for those who have not been pregnant to grasp aspects of pregnancy such as pregnancy sickness. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. I thank Sonia Roca-Royes for pressing me to make this clear. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See L. A Paul, *Transformative Experience*, p. 3, 10, 76. Paul does add a caveat explaining that she means that within the constraints of ordinary knowledge the new knowledge cannot be acquired without the experience rather than that it could not be acquired by a ‘super scientist’ who knew all that science could ever tell us about the experience. (*Transformative Experience,* p. 26). However, since applied ethics is performed in ordinary circumstances rather than by super-scientists, this caveat needn’t concern us. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Paul’s definition does not imply that if an experience is to count as epistemically transformative it might provide knowledge that cannot be conveyed to those who have not had the experience. Paul’s argument that we cannot know what it would be like to have a child or become a vampire without undergoing that epistemically transformative experience has a second important strand: concern that even if testimony or scientific studies could tell what it is like for a friend to have this experience or whether it tends to make people happy, this would not tell you what it would be like for *you*. The worry is that because you cannot know whether you are similar in the relevant respects, you cannot know what their experience implies for you. So it seems to be compatible with Paul’s understanding of an epistemically transformative experience that an experiences could be epistemically transformative because it gives me knowledge, which I could not otherwise acquire, about what it is like for me to have the experience. It might still be true that, after I have had the experience, I can explain to you what it was like for me to have it – even if I cannot tell you what it would be like for you to have it. If pregnancy were epistemically transformative in just this sense, this might have important ethical implications. However, our concern in this paper is whether pregnancy is epistemically transformative due to the difficulty of conveying knowledge gained in pregnancy to those who have not been pregnant. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. I thank Adrian Haddock for suggesting this to me. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The literature on abortion is vast, but some prominent examples of this strand include Don Marquis, ‘Why Abortion is Immoral’, *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 86 (April, 1989), pp. 183-202; Michael Tooley, ‘Abortion and Infanticide’, *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Autumn, 1972), pp. 37-65 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Again selecting just a few examples from a vast literature, see Thomson, ‘A Defense of Abortion’; Harry J. Gensler, ‘A Kantian Argument Against Abortion’, *Philosophical Studies* 49 (1986) 83-98; Frances Kamm (Creation and Abortion: A Study in Moral and Legal Philosophy. (Oxford University Press, 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Margaret Little, ‘Abortion, Intimacy and the Duty to Gestate’, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, Vol. 2, No. 3, (September 1999), 298. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Thomson, ‘A Defense of Abortion’. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Harry J. Gensler, ‘A Kantian Argument Against Abortion’, *Philosophical Studies* 49 (1986), p. 88. To be fair to Gensler, he uses this analogy mainly to undermine Thomson’s claim that someone does not have a right to use your body unless you have given them that right. However, throughout the remainder of the paper, he never addresses the possibility that pregnancy might use one’s body in a way which does require consent, nor indeed does he show any awareness that pregnancy involves any serious burdens. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. According to the President of the RCOG, 90% of women tear during childbirth (https://www.rcog.org.uk/en/blog/perineal-tearing-is-a-national-issue-we-must-address/). (In the US in 2008, the maternal mortality rate was 16.7 per 100, 000 live births. **‘**Maternal mortality for 181 countries, 1980–2008: a systematic analysis of progress towards Millennium Development Goal 5’**,** Hogan, Margaret C et al. The Lancet , Volume 375 , Issue 9726 , 1609 - 1623 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. I thank Elselijn Kingma for discussion of this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Such arguments would need to do more than simply show that the foetus is a person with all a person’s rights. Even if you believe that the foetus is a person (which I don’t) and that abortion is doing harm (which I don’t), it is not obvious that abortion must be impermissible. Understanding what is being asked of the woman should (I suggest) show it is not outrageous to suggest that killing an innocent threat in self-defence to avoid that harm is permissible. Some women who have been pregnant may argue that this overestimates the cost of forced pregnancy – but this requires detailed engagement with what it is like to be pregnant. To show that the understanding gained through pregnancy is irrelevant, one would need to argue that (a) the foetus has the full moral status of a person; (b) having an abortion is no different from killing an innocent threat; (c) killing innocent threats is impermissible in all circumstances (or in all circumstances except to prevent the certainty of your own death, remembering that being pregnant involved a non-trivial risk of death). Alternatively, they might argue (a’) the foetus has the full moral status of a person; (b’) the pregnant woman has a special responsibility for the foetus; (c’) this special responsibility for the foetus gives her the responsibility to keep it alive whatever it costs her or, whatever it costs her short of her own death. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Margaret Little, ‘Abortion, Intimacy and the Duty to Gestate’, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, Vol. 2, No. 3, (September 1999), 302. See also Koppelman, A., Forced Labor: A Thirteenth Amendment Defense of Abortion. *Northwestern University Law Review* 84 (1990) (pp. 480–535). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. I thank Andreas Kaspner for pressing me on this. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. (See, for example, *Ginger is ineffective for hyperemesis gravidarum, and causes harm: an internet based survey of sufferers,* Dean CR and O’Hara ME, MIDIRS Midwifery Digest 25:4 2015 25:4 449 – 455; POURSHARIF, B., KORST, L. M., FEJZO, M. S., MACGIBBON, K. W., ROMERO, R. & GOODWIN, T. M. (2008) The psychosocial burden of hyperemesis gravidarum. *Journal of Perinatology*, 28, 176-181.) The psychosocial burden of hyperemesis gravidarum. *Journal of Perinatology*, 28, 176-181.) [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. I thank Simon Hope for pressing me on this. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. I thank Elizabeth Phelps and Monica Lipscomb-Smith for helpful discussion on cultural variation in attitudes to pregnancy. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. References [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Miranda Fricker, “Epistemic Oppression and Epistemic Privilege” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 29, 2009: 201 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. This way of understanding experiences of pregnancy is based on a suggestion from Jessica Hammer. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. In some cases, a group of people who have not been pregnant may be better placed to understand what a particular pregnancy is like than most women\* who have been pregnant. For example, it was suggested to me that those who have become parents through adoption after struggling with infertility may be better placed to understand the pregnancy of someone who has struggled with infertility than most women\* who have been pregnant. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. There may also be differences within the group of those who have not been pregnant. For example, it may be that it is easier for a woman who has lived her adult life with the threat of an unwanted pregnancy to understand what it is like to be pregnant than for a man to do so. I thank Rachel Elizabeth Fraser for suggesting this to me. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. I expect that women\* who do not voluntarily have sex with men will experience this differently from those who do. They may not experience fear of unplanned pregnancy as a restriction of voluntary sexual activity or as interfering with relationships of erotic love, but the threat of pregnancy through rape may still structure their lives and choices. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. For a good overview of the positions, see Margaret Little’s “"Abortion & the Margins of Personhood." *Rutgers Law Journal* 39 (2008): 331. She cites: BARUCH BRODY, ABORTION AND THE SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE: A PHILOSOPHICAL VIEW 116-22 (1975); John Finnis, *The Rights and Wrongs of Abortion*: *A Reply to Judith Thomson*, 2 PHIL. & PUB. AFF. 117, 144-45 (1973); Patrick Lee & Robert P. George, *The Wrong of Abortion*, *in* CONTEMPORARY DEBATES IN APPLIED ETHICS 13 (Andrew I. Cohen & Christopher Health Wellman eds., 2005) [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Again, for a good overview see Maggie Little’s “"Abortion & the Margins of Personhood." *Rutgers Law Journal* 39 (2008):331.) She cites: PETER SINGER, PRACTICAL ETHICS 96-99, 186-88 (2d ed. 1993); Michael Tooley, *A Defense of Abortion and Infanticide*, *in* THE PROBLEM OF ABORTION 51, 51-52 (Joel Feinberg ed., 1973); Mary Anne Warren, *On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion*, 57 MONIST 43, 57-59 (1973). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Again, for a good overview, see Maggie Little’s “"Abortion & the Margins of Personhood." *Rutgers Law Journal* 39 (2008):331.) She cites: DAVID BOONIN, A DEFENSE OF ABORTION 107-09 (2003); JEFF MCMAHAN, THE ETHICS OF KILLING: PROBLEMS AT THE MARGINS OF LIFE 267-80 (2002); *see generally* BONNIE STEINBOCK, LIFE BEFORE BIRTH: THE MORAL AND LEGAL STATUS OF EMBRYOS AND FETUSES (1992); Elizabeth Harman, *The Potentiality Problem*, 114 PHIL. STUD. 173 (2003). ) [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Little offers a much better gradualist account of foetal status. Margaret Little, “"Abortion & the Margins of Personhood." *Rutgers Law Journal* 39 (2008) [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Sudeshna Mukherjee, Digna R. Velez Edwards, Donna D. Baird, David A. Savitz, and Katherine E. Hartmann, “Risk of Miscarriage Among Black Women and White Women in a US Prospective Cohort Study”, Am. J. Epidemiol. (2013) (doi: 10.1093/aje/kws393), p. 1. Mukherjee et al cite: Wilcox AJ, Weinberg CR, O'Connor JF, et al. Incidence of early loss of pregnancy. N Engl J Med 1988;319(4):189-194; Maconochie N, Doyle P, Prior S, et al. Risk factors for first trimester miscarriage—results from a UK-population-based case-control study. BJOG 2007;114(2):170-186; Kline J, Stein Z, Susser M. Conception to Birth: Epidemiology of Prenatal Development. New York, NY: Oxford University Press; 1989; Michels TC, Tiu AY. Second trimester pregnancy loss. Am Fam Physician 2007;76(9):1341-1346. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. As I will discuss later, others who are deeply involved in a pregnancy may also gain a grasp of the fragility of early human life through their own experiences of anxiety and relief. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Thanks to Lauren Ware and Steinvor Tholl Arnadottir for helping me to develop my thinking on these issues. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*. Trans. J. H. Bernard. (New York: Dover, 2005); Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects.* 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980;

    Robert Hopkins, ‘Beauty and Testimony.’ *Philosophy, the Good, the True & the Beautiful*. Ed. A. O’ Hear. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 209–36;

    Goldman ‘The Experiential Account of Aesthetic Value.’ *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64.3 (2006): 333–42; Meskin, A. ‘Aesthetic Testimony: What Can We Learn From Others About Beauty and Art?’ Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 69.1 (2004): 65–91. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. See Woollard, “Pregnancy and Knowledge Through Acquaintance of Moral Value” Work in Progress. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Black RE, Morris SS, Bryce J. “Where and why are 10 million children dying every year?” Lancet. 2003 Jun 28;361(9376):2226-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Amy Kind and Peter Kung discuss two distinctions in the literature on imagination: imagining from the inside vs. imagining from the outside and imagistic imagination vs non-imagistic imagination (“Introduction: the Puzzle of Imaginative Use”, in Amy Kind and Peter Kung (eds), *Knowledge Through Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) p. 4-5). Paul’s first-personal perspective involves imagistic (or at least experiential) imagining from the inside. Magdalena Balcerak Jackson defines imagination as experiential perspective-taking and contrasts this with ‘supposing’ which can be achieved by ‘simply tak[ing] the situation as obtaining without representing it as being experienced from the first-personal perspective, and in fact without representing it in any particular way at all’. (“On the Epistemic Value of Imagining, Supposing, and Conceiving”, in Amy Kind and Peter Kung (eds), *Knowledge Through Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016)p. 46). Balcerak Jackson’s conception of imagination is wider than both Paul’s notion of the first-personal perspective (because the perspective taken needn’t be that of the person having the experience) and may be wider than Kind and Kung’s notion of imagistic imagining (because she notes that imagination does not need to include any perceptual phenomenology: for example, when we imagine anger, although we form a mental state with a distinctive phenomenology, this is an emotive rather than a perceptual one.) Again these concepts are relevant to the distinction between information and grasp. Insofar as it reflects reality, successful imagistic imagining and successful experiential perspective-taking require grasp rather than mere information. However, I am not sure that failure to grasp that 10 million children die each year should be understood as a failure of experiential perspective taking. It does not seem that what is lacking here is a distinctive phenomenology, even an emotive one. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Having a grasp rather than merely information may be relevant to applied ethics in less obvious ways. See Neil Van Leeuven (“The Imaginative Agent”, *Knowledge through Imagination*, p. 87-90) and Jennifer Church (“Perceiving People as People: An overlooked role for the imagination”, Knowledge through imagination, p. 179) for arguments connection between imagery and emotion and preparedness for action. (Many people think that emotions are relevant to ethical deliberation.) See Van Leeuven for an argument that visualisation is useful for moral evaluation ((“The Imaginative Agent”, *Knowledge through Imagination* p. 99-103). See Jennifer Church for an argument that imagining rather than simply ‘thinking about’ scenarios helps us to check consistency (“Perceiving People as People: An overlooked role for the imagination”, Knowledge through imagination, p. 177). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Maibon, “Knowing Me, Knowing You”, *Knowledge Through Imagination.* [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Maibon, “Knowing Me, Knowing You”, *Knowledge Through Imagination*, p. 192. Reference to Gilbert, Gill and Wilson 2002. Maibon notes that people are able to correct some errors when asked to consider neglected details. (Maibon, p.192, referencing Dunn, Forrin, Ashton-James 2009). Maibon argues that focalising isn’t the only problem, citing the Bystander study which shows that people are less likely to help someone when many inactive bystanders are present. Maibon argues that imagining the bystanders does not make you think that you will not help. However, it seems to me that this failure in prediction could also be explained by a different unnoticed detail: we have failed to take into account how worried would we will be that we are over-reacting or misjudging the situation. (Maibon, p. 192, citing, Latane and Darley 1970). Anecdotally, I have always been very alive to the effects of embarrassment and self-doubt. As such, I have never been surprised by the Bystander study: indeed, it has always seemed to me somewhat surprising that people are so surprised by it. Isn’t it obvious that surrounded by apparently decent people calmly ignoring someone who is in need, an ordinary person might conclude that the bystanders must know something they don’t about the situation? Maibon also refers to studies that show that even those who have already had an experience may be poor at forecasting their reactions. She points to issues with memory and argues that there are particular difficulties in recreating visceral experiences such as hunger or pain. This of course presents a problem for my claim that women who have been pregnant know what it is like to be pregnant. I still think women who have been pregnant understand what it is like to be pregnant in a way someone who has not been pregnant cannot. But it is true that problems with memory might undermine this knowledge. This may mean that those who have been, but not longer are pregnant have a weaker grasp of the knowledge gained in pregnancy than those who are currently pregnant. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. (Ramaswamy 2016: 8). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*. Trans. J. H. Bernard. (New York: Dover, 2005); Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects.* 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980; Robert Hopkins, ‘Beauty and Testimony.’ *Philosophy, the Good, the True & the Beautiful*. Ed. A. O’ Hear. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 209–36; Goldman ‘The Experiential Account of Aesthetic Value.’ *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64.3 (2006): 333–42; Meskin, A. ‘Aesthetic Testimony: What Can We Learn From Others About Beauty and Art?’ Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 69.1 (2004): 65–91. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. *Love’s Knowledge*, p. 47 [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. (Jecker, p. 179) [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. p. 81-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Maibon, “Knowing Me, Knowing You”, *Knowledge Through Imagination*, p. 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Nussbaum also notes the way in a sense of time allows narrative to play a crucial role in our ethical thought. For example, she argues that “it is only by following a pattern of choice and commitment over a relatively long time – as the novel characteristically does – that we can understand the pervasiveness of such conflicts in human efforts to live well”. Nussbaum, *Loves Knowledge*, p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. See, for example, *Loves Knowledge*, p. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Paul appears to claim that it is not possible to take the first-personal perspective without having had sufficiently similar experiences (*Transformative Experience*, p.109). Contra Paul, I suggest that narrative can allow us to take this perspective – although, as I will argue later, our projection is inevitably imperfect. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. *Love’s Knowledge,* p. 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. *Love’s Knowledge*, p. 47 [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. *Love’s Knowledge*, p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. P. 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. See Maibon, “Knowing Me, Knowing You”, *Knowledge Through Imagination* p. 190 on our tendency to overestimate our ability to imagine what it would be like to be in a given situation. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. This is similar to the account of the virtue of intellectual humility discussed in Whitcomb, Dennis ; Battaly, Heather ; Baehr, Jason & Howard‐Snyder, Daniel (2015). Intellectual Humility: Owning Our Limitations. \_Philosophy and Phenomenological Research\_ 91 (1). See also Narayan’s notion of ‘methodological humility’ discussed in “Working Together across Difference: Some Considerations on Emotions and Political Practice , Uma Narayan , Hypatia, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Summer, 1988), pp. 38” and in Nancy Daukas’ Epistemic Trust and Social Location Nancy Daukas , Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology, Volume 3, Issue 1-2, 2006, pp. 121-122. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. I thank Adrian Haddock and Peter Sullivan for pressing me on this. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Nancy S. Jecker, ‘The Role of Standpoint in Justice Theory’ The Journal of Value Enquiry 41 (2007), p. 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Paul’s idea of ‘higher order features’ may be helpful here. Paul, Transformative Experience, 157-158, 160-65, 175. Paul suggests that we may be able to get some grip on epistemically transformative experiences by identified higher order descriptions which they share with familiar experiences. Literature may be seen as making use of this technique: conveying something of what it is like by helping us to identify higher order commonalities between pregnancy and other experiences which those who have not been pregnant are likely to be familiar with. Nonetheless, even if we can gain a significant grasp of what pregnancy is like through such higher order commonalities, when the experience is radically different from anything we have experienced, these higher order commonalities might have to be at such a high level of abstraction that the missing understanding of what the lower order descriptions mean represents an importantly incomplete grasp. For example, I am familiar with what it is like to drink a cup of coffee but not with what it is like to drink the particular cup of coffee that Bob is drinking now. Bob can convey a pretty good picture to me of what his experience is like by identifying commonalities with other experiences I have had: the coffee is rich with bitter aftertaste. I’ve got a pretty good grasp of Bob’s experience. In contrast, to try to convey what it is like to see the colour ‘octarine’, any descriptions would have to occur at such a high level of abstraction that there would be a significant gap between the experience and what can be conveyed. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Note that I include within the ‘ethics of abortion’ the question of whether abortion should be legal and who, if anyone, has a duty to provide access to safe abortions. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. See “Moral Testimony Pessimism and the Uncertain Value of Authenticity”, Andreas L. Mogensen, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, doi:10.1111/phpr.12255 for a good overview of the literature on moral testimony pessimism. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. In fact, because of the variety between pregnancies and because of the issues raised by Maibon about memory, those who have been pregnant should also enter into ongoing dialogue with other people who are or have been pregnant. They should make particular effort to engage with people who might have had very different experiences. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. I thank Antti Kappuninen for this objection. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. I thank Rachel Elizabeth Fraser for raising this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. I thank Laurie Paul for this comment. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. I thank Crispin Wright for pressing me on this. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Thomas D. Sullivan, “Active and Passive Euthanasia: an impertinent distinction”, in Norcross and Steinbock, Killing and Letting Die (Fordham University Press, 1994), p. 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Allison Wylie, ‘Why Standpoint Matters’ in Sandra Harding (ed.) The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), p. 399. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Sandra Harding, ‘Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is Strong Objectivity?’ in Sandra Harding (ed.) *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), p. 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Longino 1999 (‘Feminist Epistemology’ in J. Greco and E. Sosa (eds) *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology* Oxford, Blackwell, p. 339. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Saul, Feminism: Issues and Arguments, p. 248 [↑](#footnote-ref-78)