

Becky Clay  
Dr. Doug Deaver  
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## **Personhood and Abortion**

When evaluating the moral dilemmas of abortion, there are several arguments to consider. A main argument that is made by anti-abortionists is whether or not a fetus is human. It is widely accepted that if one can prove a fetus to be human from the beginning of conception, then it is morally wrong to end a pregnancy. Another perspective, however, is based off the consideration that even if a fetus is human, it may not be enough of a reason to proceed with an abortion. There is also a third perspective that argues it is ultimately the woman's decision to have an abortion in every situation, and at any stage of pregnancy.

The personhood argument is one that states if a fetus is just in fact an immature person, then there is no reason that we can deny it the right to life. Just because a fetus does not look or resemble a human (in the early stages especially) does not mean that it is not "human." If you looked at photos of a person from when they were six years old, then fourteen years old, then twenty-seven years old, then fifty years old, there will be many differences. But these differences do not conclude that the person was ever nonhuman, they simply prove that the human was at different stages of development. The same argument can be applied to an acorn. An acorn will eventually develop into an oak tree. There is no question as to when it will develop into an oak tree, because it is always an oak tree, just at the early stages of development.

Warren attempts to utilize the personhood argument by stating that though a fetus does not resemble a person in any way, its potential to develop naturally and become a person gives it at least some right to life. She states that "It is hard to deny that the fact that an entity is a potential person is a strong prima facia

reason for not destroying it; but we need not conclude from this that a potential person has a right to life; by virtue of that potential.” She believes that potential people are still felt to be an invaluable resource, and that it is better not to destroy them (other things being equal).

Warren then goes on to argue that although a potential person may have some prima facie right to life, that such a right would not outweigh the right of a woman to obtain an abortion. She states that that “rights of any actual person invariably outweigh those of any potential person whenever the two conflict.” A woman’s right to protect her health, happiness, freedom, and her life by terminating an unwanted pregnancy will always override whatever right to life a fetus might have. This rationality brings Warren to the conclusion that unless there is a social need for every possible child, that any laws restricting abortion or even limit the period of which a pregnancy can be terminated is “wholly unjustified” and a violation of a woman’s moral and Constitutional rights.

Don Marquis also argues that abortion is immoral, but on the basis that killing is depriving someone of “activities, projects, experiences, and enjoyments.” If these reasons are true for killing an adult, then it is also wrong to deprive a fetus of these futures.

Marquis acknowledges that there are some compelling considerations that could override this belief that abortion is seriously immoral, and those reasons are: abortion before implantation, abortion when the life of a woman is threatened by a pregnancy, or abortion after rape. Marquis neglects to discuss the casuistry of these cases, and focuses on the overwhelming majority of cases where deliberate abortions are seriously immoral.

Marquis states that what makes killing wrong is neither its effect on the murderer, nor its effect on the victim’s friends and relatives, but its effect on the victim. And

the loss of one's life is one of the greatest losses one can suffer. If the value of a future is defined as activities, projects, experiences, and enjoyments, and they are valuable for their own sake as well as a means for something else that is valuable for its own sake, then when one is killed they are being deprived of both what they now value as well as what they might come to value. Therefore, what makes killing wrong, in any case, is depriving someone of his or her future.

This rationality also opposes the idea that it is wrong to kill only beings that are biologically human. "It is possible that there exists a different species from another planet whose members have a future like ours," so therefore killing any species is seriously immoral. Admitting that biological humans are not the only lives that have great moral worth, works in accordance with common personhood theories in that it is okay to kill a fetus based on the fact that it is not human.

Jarvis Thompson takes a different approach and believes that abortion is permissible even if we assume the fetus is a person. She argues, "The moral impermissibility of abortion does not follow simply from the admission that the fetus (as a person) has a right to life." In her view, "the right to life is to be understood as the right not to be killed unjustly and does not entail the right to use another person's body."

When taking the argument that every person has the right to life, and assuming the fetus is a person, then it is consistent to say that the fetus has a right to life. Additionally, though the mother has a right to decide what should happen to her body, a person's right to life is more stringent than this right, so therefore the mother's right is outweighed and the fetus may not be killed, and abortion may not be performed.

Thompson takes this argument and places it in a different context to prove how outrageous and wrong such a plausible-sounding argument can be. She paints

the scenario that you wake up one morning to find yourself lying in bed, back to back, with an unconscious violinist. The man was found to have a fatal kidney ailment, and the Society of Music Lovers has found that you are the only person on the planet that has the right blood type to help him. They kidnapped you, and then took the liberty of plugging your circulatory system into his, so that your kidneys may be used to clean the poisons that are in his system. The violinist will be cured in 9 months, and afterwards you may unplug yourself and both of you will live. If you unplug yourself any sooner, he will die.

Thompson draws parallels to this argument with those of the one that was presented previously. She reminds the reader “All persons have the right to life, and violinists are persons. Granted you have a right to decide what happens to your body, but a person’s right to life outweighs your right to decide what happens in and to your body.” Thompson acknowledges that in this case you were kidnapped, and that such a scenario is better parallel to a case of rape. However, in such a case as rape, one would be making a decision that “all persons have a right to life, but that some have less of a right than others, in particular, that those who came into existence because of rape have less.” No doubt, this is a rather unpleasant sounding argument.

Thompson goes on to say that she acknowledges that her argument may be found unsatisfactory on two counts: 1) that while she argues that abortion is not impermissible, she does not argue that it is always permissible, 2) that while she is arguing for the permissibility of abortion in some cases, she is not arguing for the right to secure death of the unborn child.

In the first unsatisfactory count, Thompson admits that there may well be cases where carrying a child for the entire term requires only “Minimally Decent Samaritanism” of the mother, and that it is a standard that one must not fall below. In the same respect, an abortion should be permissible in a case where a

fourteen-year-old girl is pregnant and scared due to an act of rape.

In the second unsatisfactory count, Thompson clarifies that while she supports the woman's right to detach herself from the fetus even if it may cost him or her their life, but you may not do so in order to guarantee his or her death. For example, up to a certain point in the life of a fetus it is not able to survive outside the mother's body, hence removing it from her body guarantees its death. If a fetus were able to survive once detached from the mother, the mother at that point has no right to guarantee its death. In other words, an abortion may be performed only to preserve the health or safety of the mother, and has no direct relation to the life of the unborn child.

Margaret Little argues that the issue of abortion is weighty because there is "something precious and significant about germinating human life that deserves respect." She draws the analogy that the destruction of a DaVinci painting is not bad for the painting because the painting has no interests, but rather it is regrettable because of the deep value it has. So therefore, an abortion may not be classified as morally weighty based on being bad for the fetus, because a fetus may or may not satisfy the criteria for having interests in the first place.

This view is similar in the view of Mary Ann Warren's in that they both agree that it is ultimately the woman's right to end a pregnancy. While Warren believes that the woman's right to have an abortion is absolute and there should be no legal restrictions, Little argues, "the desire to avoid the enterprise and identity of motherhood is an understandable and honorable basis for deciding to end a pregnancy.

Though they share similar views, the two are not in direct accord with one another. Little might criticize Warren's argument on the basis that establishing the value of human life cannot solve the moral dilemma of abortion. The abortion

dilemma has more to do with issues of creation, responsibility, and kinship. Little would disagree with Warren's main argument of the fetus being human because she does not feel that it has much importance. To Little, the morality of abortion lies in the complexity of the woman's choice- that is based on the unique way in which individual women construct their fundamental identities, commitments, and personal ideals.

From the four authors that have been presented, it is no wonder why the topic of abortion is so controversial. Not only are there the basic moral dilemmas to consider, like whether ending a pregnancy is the equivalent to murder, but there are also other dilemmas to consider as well, like whether or not the mother should be able to make the choice to end her pregnancy. As seen in the arguments presented, it is hard to come to a conclusion as to what everyone's moral obligations are, and also if those moral obligations can be universalized.