

Abortion: An Overview of the Ethical Issues

Ethics Matters

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Introduction

Abortion is the most difficult and controversial moral issues we will consider.

Listen to both sides, even if that is difficult to do. Both sides have important moral insights, even if ultimately these insights are outweighed by the insights of the other side.

The *goal* of this presentation is not to convince you to accept one position or the other, but to help you to understand both side.

The Rhetoric of Abortion Discussions

Beware of the labels “Pro-life” and “Pro-choice.”

- They imply that the other side is against “life” or against “choice.”
- They ignore the nuances in a person’s position.

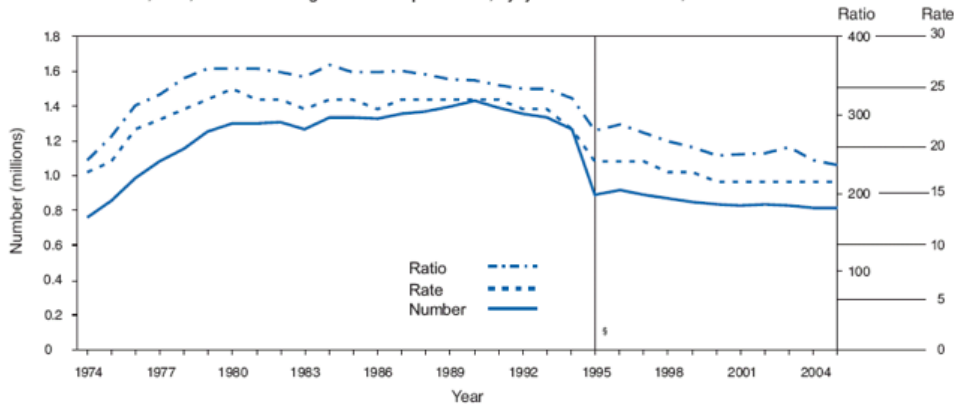
The Empirical Picture

- Two principal sources of data:
 - CDC abortion stats, 2005
 - Guttmacher stats, 2008

Data tend to be incomplete

Overall in US, number of abortions is decreasing.

FIGURE 1. Number, ratio,* and rate† of legal abortions performed, by year — United States, 1974–2005‡



* Number of abortions per 1,000 live births.
† Number of abortions per 1,000 women aged 15–44 years.
‡ For 1995–2005, data are from 46 reporting areas (see Table 2).

- About 1.25 M in 2005



Pregnancy & Intentions

In the United States:

- 49% of pregnancies were unintended (2006)
- Of unintended pregnancies, 49% ended in abortions
- Unintended pregnancies increased among poor women, decreased among financially well-off women.
- Unintended pregnancies increased among black and Hispanic women.



Reasons given for abortions

- Concern for/responsibility to other individuals 74%
- Cannot afford a baby now 73%
- A baby would interfere with school/
employment/ability to care for dependents 69%
- Would be a single parent/
having relationship problems 48%
- Has completed childbearing 38%

Source: Finer et al., 2005 (2004 data)

Two Principal Moral Considerations

The moral status of the fetus

- Is the fetus a person? At what stage in its development does it become a person? Conception? 1st trimester? Birth?

The rights of the pregnant woman

- Does the pregnant woman have the right to decide if she is going to carry the baby to term or not?

An Important Distinction

As you consider this difficult issue, it is important to distinguish two questions:

- Is abortion *morally* wrong?
- Should abortion be *illegal*?

These are distinct issues. Not everything that is immoral is necessarily illegal. We may, for example, want to say that being unfaithful in one's marriage is immoral, but we may not want to see it made illegal.

The Central Argument

Here is the main argument that is usually advanced against abortion:

P_1 : The fetus is an innocent person.

P_2 : It is morally wrong to end the life of an innocent person.

C: Therefore, it is morally wrong to end the life of a fetus.

The Moral Status of the Fetus

Much of the debate in regard to abortion has centered around the first premise, namely, whether the fetus is a person or not.

If the fetus is a person, then it has the rights that belong to persons, including the right to life.

The concept of personhood, in other words, is the bridge that connects the fetus with the right to life.



Criteria of Personhood

Star Trek thought experiment

Possible criteria

- Conceived by humans
- Genetic structure
- Physical resemblance
- Presence of a soul
- Viability
- A future like ours

Necessary and Sufficient Conditions

A *necessary condition* is something which must be present for another thing to be possible--e.g., having your eyes open is a necessary condition for watching television.

A *sufficient condition* is something which, if present, guarantees that the other thing will occur--e.g., drinking a quart of whiskey is a sufficient condition for becoming drunk.

Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of Personhood

Using this distinction, we can then ask:

- What are the necessary conditions of personhood?
- What are the sufficient conditions of personhood?

The Relevance of Personhood

Some philosophers--beginning *with Judith Jarvis Thomson* and Jane English--have argued that, even if the fetus is a person, abortion may be morally justified. In other words, they dispute the truth of the premise, “It is wrong to end the life of an innocent person.”



The Violinist Example

Thomson offers an analogy: imagine that you were knocked unconscious, hooked up to a famous violinist who must depend on you for life support for the coming nine months.

Thomson maintains that you would be morally justified in unhooking yourself, even if it resulted in the death of the violinist.

By analogy, a pregnant woman is justified in “unhooking” herself from the fetus, even if doing so results in the death of the fetus and even if the fetus is a person.

Limitations of the Violinist Analogy

Thomson's analogy has several limitations:

- Only covers cases of rape.
- The violinist is not someone to whom one is related, even potentially.



Jane English's Revisions

The philosopher Jane English amended Thomson's example.

- Imagine that you go out at night, knowing that you might be rendered unconscious and hooked up to the violinist.
- You would still, according to English, be entitled to unhook yourself.
- This case is more closely analogous to conventional cases of unwanted pregnancies.

The Rights of the Pregnant Woman

What right does a woman possess that would entitle her to choose an abortion?

Right to privacy.

- this is the right specified in *Roe v. Wade*.

Right to ownership of one's own body.

- Is ownership a perspicuous category?

Right to equal treatment.

- Men can't get pregnant.

Right to self-determination.

- Women have the right to decide about their own futures.
- It is morally repellent to force a woman to bear a child against her will.

Feminist Concerns about Abortion

See abortion issue within context of

- history of oppression of women
- history of danger and death for women when abortion is illegal

Abortion and Racism

Some, particularly within African-American communities, see the call for abortion as a racist, genocidal threat.

Rights of the Father

To what extent do the father's preferences count in making this decision?

- Mother actually give birth, fathers don't.
- Society usually places primary responsibility on the mother.
- Fathers don't even always know they are fathers; mothers always do.

Principle of the Double Effect

Four conditions must be met:

1. the action itself must be either morally good or at least morally neutral;
2. the bad consequences must not be intended;
3. the good consequences cannot be the direct causal result of the bad consequences; and
4. the good consequences must be proportionate to the bad consequences.

Abortion and Sex Selection

Some worry that abortion, coupled with techniques for determining whether the fetus is male or female, could be used for sex selection, which would probably result in fewer female babies.

Seeking a Common Ground

Points of possible agreement

- Reducing unwanted pregnancies
 - But: disagreement about the means
- Guaranteeing genuinely free and informed choice
- Providing a loving home for all children

Notable Web Resources

- Ethics Updates
- Steven Schwartz, *The Moral Question of Abortion*. (Loyola University Press, 1990). Full text of entire book.
- Judith Jarvis Thomson, "Abortion," *The Boston Review*, Vol. XX, No. 3, (Jan 1994/Dec 1995). Full text & replies.
- George McKenna, "On Abortion: A Lincolnian Position," *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 276, No. 3; (September, 1995).
- Martha Bayles, "Feminism and Abortion." *Atlantic Monthly*. April, 1990.