

THOMSON ON ABORTION

Ted Sider
Intro Philosophy

1. Is the fetus a person?

Bad argument: *Nowhere to draw the line; so personhood begins at conception.* But suppose that the fetus *is* a person. Would abortion then be wrong?

2. Right to life and abortion

1. The fetus has a right to life
2. The right to life is stronger than the right to control one's body
3. If premises 1 and 2 are true then abortion is wrong (except perhaps to save the mother's life)
4. Therefore, abortion is wrong (except perhaps to save the mother's life)

Assumption behind premise 3: *If two rights conflict, then everyone must do whatever is necessary to ensure that the stronger right prevails*

3. The violinist

You wake up in the morning and find yourself back to back in bed with an unconscious violinist. A famous unconscious violinist. He has been found to have a fatal kidney ailment, and the Society of Music Lovers has canvassed all the available medical records and found that you alone have the right blood type to help. They have therefore kidnapped you, and last night the violinist's circulatory system was plugged into yours, so that your kidneys can be used to extract poisons from his blood as well as your own. The director of the hospital now tells you, "...To unplug you would be to kill him. But never mind, it's only for nine months. By then he will have recovered from his ailment, and can safely be unplugged from you." Is it morally incumbent on you to accede to this situation? No doubt it would be very nice of you if you did, a great kindness. But do you have to accede to it? (Thomson, pp. 48–9)

Thomson answers: no. She is challenging the assumption behind premise 3.

4. What does the right to life entail?

For we should now, at long last, ask what it comes to, to have a right to life. In some views having a right to life includes having a right to be given at least the bare minimum one needs for continued life. But suppose that what in fact is the bare minimum a man needs for continued life is something he has no right at all to be given? If I am sick unto death, and the only thing that will save my life is the touch of Henry Fonda's cool hand on my fevered brow, then all the same, I have no right to be given the touch of Henry Fonda's cool hand on my fevered brow. It would be frightfully nice of him to fly in from the West Coast to provide it. It would be less nice, though no doubt well meant, if my friends flew out to the West Coast and carried Henry Fonda back with them. But I have no right at all against anybody that he should do this for me. (Thomson, p. 55)

Having a right to something doesn't automatically give you a right to anything you'd need to get it.

5. More on rights

We're not obligated to make great sacrifices to benefit someone else, if they have no particular claim on us. But perhaps mothers implicitly grant to fetuses a claim on their bodies? Thomson's reply:

If the room is stuffy, and I therefore open a window to air it, and a burglar climbs in, it would it be absurd to say, "Ah, now he can stay, she's given him a right to the use of her house—for she is partially responsible for his presence there, having voluntarily done what enabled him to get in, in full knowledge that there are such things as burglars, and that burglars burgle." It would be still more absurd to say this if I had had bars installed outside my windows, precisely to prevent burglars from getting in, and a burglar got in only because of a defect in the bars. (Thomson, pp. 58–9)

6. When are abortions wrong?