

Philosophy 1100: Ethics

Topic 11: Thomson on Abortion

1. The Standard Anti-Abortion Argument
 - a. how to support its premises
 - b. the standard way to reply
 - c. Thomson's way of replying
2. Thomson's Counterexample
3. Thomson's Positive Argument
4. Objections to Thomson's Positive Argument
 - a. The Responsibility Objection
 - (b. The Consent Objection)
 - (c. Natural vs. Artificial Connection)
 - (d. Offspring vs. Stranger)
 - (e. Different Burdens)

The Standard Anti-Abortion Argument

Thomson, p. 48:

How does the argument go ... ? Something like this ...
... the fetus has a right to life.

No doubt the mother has a right to decide what shall happen in and to her body; everyone would grant that. But surely a person's right to life is stronger and more stringent than the mother's right to decide what happens in and to her body, and so outweighs it. So the fetus may not be killed; an abortion may not be performed.

The Standard Anti-Abortion Argument

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P1: The fetus has a full right to life.

P2. If the fetus has a full right to life, then abortion is wrong (or almost always wrong).

C. Therefore, abortion is wrong (or almost always wrong).

The standard way for defenders of abortion to reply:



attack P1.

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Thomson's way of replying:

attack P2!



Judith Thomson

Thomson's Counterexample to P2

Thomson's Counterexample to P2 of the Standard Anti-Abortion Argument:

The Famous Violinist (pp. 48-49):

“ ... let me ask you to imagine this.

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. ...



Thomson's Counterexample to P2

Thomson's Counterexample to P2 of the Standard Anti-Abortion Argument:

The Famous Violinist (pp. 48-49):

... 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, 'Look, we're sorry the Society of Music Lovers did this to you – we would never have permitted it if we had known. ...



Thomson's Counterexample to P2

Thomson's Counterexample to P2 of the Standard Anti-Abortion Argument:

The Famous Violinist (pp. 48-49):

... But still, they did it,
and the violinist now is plugged into 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.”



clicker question

As Thomson asks (p. 49), “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?”

A. YES, you are morally required to stay plugged into the violinist for nine months.

B. NO, you are not morally required to stay plugged into the violinist for nine months.

The Standard Anti-Abortion Argument

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P1: The fetus has a full right to life.

→ P2. If the fetus has a full right to life, then abortion is wrong (or almost always wrong).

C. Therefore, abortion is wrong (or almost always wrong).

The *Famous Violinist* case is supposed to show that **P2**, or at least the reasoning behind it, is mistaken.

Thomson's Positive Argument

Thomson's Positive Argument

P1. It's morally ok for you to unplug yourself from the violinist.

P2. Unplugging yourself from the violinist is morally on a par with a woman's having an abortion.

C. Therefore, it's morally ok for a woman to have an abortion.

clicker question

What is your initial reaction to Thomson's positive argument? Do you think that unplugging yourself from the violinist is indeed pretty much morally the same as having an abortion?

A. YES, unplugging from the violinist is pretty much morally equivalent to having an abortion.

B. NO, these acts are not morally on a par.

Thomson's Positive Argument

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P2. Unplugging yourself from the violinist is morally on a par with a woman's having an abortion.

C. Therefore, it's morally ok for a woman to have an abortion.

How to Object to a Claim that Two Cases are Morally on a Par

- (1) Identify a difference between the two cases
- (2) Try to show that this difference is *morally relevant*, as follows:
 - (a) construct a *variant* of one of the original cases, altered to correct for the difference in question
 - (b) see whether our intuitive judgment about the variant case is different from our intuitive judgment about the original case
 - (i) if it is different, this suggests that the difference is morally relevant
 - (ii) if it is not different, this suggests that the difference is not morally relevant.

The Responsibility Objection

Thomson (pp. 57-58):

Suppose a woman voluntarily indulges in intercourse, knowing of the chance it will issue in pregnancy, and then she does become pregnant;

is she not in part responsible for the presence, in fact the very existence, of the unborn person inside her?

No doubt she did not invite it in.

But doesn't her partial responsibility for its being there itself give it a right to the use of her body?

The Responsibility Objection

The allegedly morally relevant difference:

In a typical unwanted pregnancy, the woman *is partly responsible for the fact that there is this person who needs to use her body in order to survive.*

But in *Famous Violinist*, you are in no way responsible for the fact that there is this person who needs to use your body in order to survive.

Now we need a variant case to test whether this difference is indeed morally relevant ...

The Responsibility Objection

Variant case:

Hunting Accident: You are out hunting. You know that, no matter how careful you are, there is always a chance that you will shoot a person by accident. Because you enjoy hunting, you decide to go hunting anyway.

As it happens, a famous violinist is out jogging on a trail. A stray bullet of yours accidentally hits him. He is now injured, and needs your assistance in order to survive.

clicker question

Do you have a moral obligation to allow the violinist in *Hunting Accident* to use your body for life support?

A. **YES**, you are morally obligated to do this.

B. **NO**, you are not morally obligated to do this.

The Responsibility Objection

Thomson's reply: *People-Seeds* (p. 59).

But we still have *Hunting Accident*.

Another possible reply: A difference between *Hunting Accident* and a typical unwanted pregnancy:

Hunting Accident: if you hadn't done what you did (i.e., gone hunting), the jogging violinist would have been fine.

Unwanted Pregnancy: if the woman hadn't done what she did (i.e., had sex), it's NOT true that the fetus would have been fine; the fetus would not have existed at all.

The Responsibility Objection

Another variant case:

Doctor: A famous violinist is dying. His doctor can give him a drug that will hold off the disease for five years. This is the only possible treatment.

After that five years, the patient (somehow) could survive only by plugging into the doctor for nine months.