

Three modes of pro-choice argument

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To be pro-choice is to be concerned that abortion become or remain legal, safe, pain-free, and easily available. Abortion is easily available when abortion services are local and, if not free, at least within the means of any woman seeking an abortion.

Pro-choicers tend to argue in support of their position in one or another of three ways. I think one of these ways is decisive, or at least as decisive as an argument about values (values as distinguished from facts) can be. Arguments in the other two modes have their problems.

Because it is important not only to advocate that which is sound, but to advocate it for the right reasons, it is important that we be clear exactly why the pro-choice stance is sound.

The first pro-choice argument to consider is that unwanted pregnancy and unwanted children are a significant factor in women's political, social, or economic subordination to men. Abortion makes it possible for women to continue with their work and life projects rather than to remain pregnant and then to care for a child, if doing so would set them back in their careers or other areas of their lives.

Easily available abortion, then, is either necessary or useful to women in order that they can pursue their goals alongside men. The control it affords them allows women to organize their families and nurture their children within their overall plans for their lives.

All these points are true, of course. Easily available abortion is an important tool in women's quest for material equality. Yet, as an argument for legal abortion it fails, for it leaves out of consideration the status of the human fetus.

Were this first argument the only argument pro-choice advocates had, pro-choice advocates would be committed to the view that women's liberation, autonomy, and equality should be bought at any price.

The second argument is that women should have as much control over what happens in and to their bodies as people in general or, specifically, men do. To force a woman to remain pregnant and to give birth is unfair and repressive, given the standards that apply to men.

It certainly can be unfair to force a woman to remain pregnant and to give birth, even if the human fetus has the same right to life as adult humans do. To see this, imagine a situation in which someone will die unless a particular man devotes time, energy, resources, perhaps even a degree of his own well being to rescuing her. (Suppose that she will die unless he donates a kidney.) That the person in our example has a right to life does not imply that she has a right to the man's body.

If people generally are not required to make sacrifices even to save others, then women should not be compelled to make comparable sacrifices in bringing fetuses to term.

This argument, expressed forcefully in Judith Jarvis Thomson's classic paper "A Defense of Abortion" (1971), teaches us much about the obligations that other people's rights do and do not impose on us. Yet, as Thomson herself recognized, it is not an argument for easily available abortion on demand. It doesn't go much beyond cases of pregnancy by rape and pregnancies that put the woman's life or health at serious risk. In other cases, if fetuses are persons, abortion would be like walking away from a desperate person whose plight is one's fault, for one knew what might happen when one consented to sex.

The second argument assumes that human fetuses are persons just like you and me. It shows that even so, in a significant range of cases there's nothing wrong with abortion. But it doesn't show that in all cases there's nothing wrong with abortion.

The third argument questions the assumption that fetuses are persons and rejects it.

According to the third argument, though human fetuses (and human embryos, and human zygotes) are human beings, they are not subjects of moral concern. They have no value to themselves, not having the organs or experiences that self-awareness or awareness requires. Whatever value they have, then, resides in their relations to others. Since a human fetus lacks awareness of itself as an agent within an environment, it has no interest in living. Thus, killing it does not violate its interests.

This third argument, developed most fully by Peter Singer in several chapters of the second edition of *Practical Ethics* (1993), shows human fetuses to have whatever moral status is possessed by non-human creatures of comparable levels of self-awareness and awareness. If there's nothing morally amiss in killing an adult turtle to serve some person's interests, there's nothing morally amiss in killing a human fetus to serve the interests of the woman carrying it.

This argument, if sound, establishes that ethically speaking, abortion is neither here nor there. A woman who has an abortion has done nothing ethically wrong in seeking to terminate her pregnancy. Her medical team has done nothing wrong in helping her. If there is anything ethically amiss in a particular woman's having a particular abortion, the wrong resides in a contextual responsibility she has to someone or something other than the fetus.

We said that the first argument, having to do with the place of abortion in women's autonomy and equality, does not go very far on its own. But when we place it after the third argument, it takes on great significance. There's nothing ethically wrong with abortion, and easy access to safe abortion is an important tool in gaining equality for women and enabling them to control their lives.

Those two points together imply that we should all work hard to see that abortion becomes or remains legal, safe, pain-free, and easily available.