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HPS/Pl 183: Bioethics

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Short Assignment 2

*Q: In 250-500 words: Provide your strongest objection to Thomson’s main argument on abortion and explain how that objection would affect her argument. How may she attempt to respond to this objection?*

*R:*

Thomson’s main argument is that a woman’s right to bodily autonomy trumps a fetus’ right to life in many, though not all, circumstances. To justify this claim, Thomson uses several illustrative thought experiments, intended to demonstrate to the reader that there are relevant moral precedents in which one person’s right to autonomy trump another person’s right to life. However, it is in this thought-experiment based justification that a serious objection may be raised. Despite structural similarities between Thomson’s thought experiments and abortion, none of the hypotheticals presented capture the relationship between a mother and a fetus, nor the mother’s responsibility incurred through that relationship. The biological relationship between mother and child is a unique and complex one which cannot be captured through analogy, and a critic of Thomson would argue that this responsibility grants the fetus the right to use of the mother’s body.  
 Thomson begins by assuming the personhood of a fetus. If a fetus is a person, then we should treat it as such, meaning we should place equal value to the relationship and responsibility between a mother and fetus as we do between a mother and a child who was already born. Therefore, to draw an accurate analogy with abortion, the situation must include factors analogous to said responsibility, otherwise the argument will be weakened significantly.

For example, in the cases of the violinist or Henry Fonda, the parties involved in the analogy have no relationship to each other, and no special responsibility exists between them. How would it change things if you had created violinist and were therefore responsible for their life and suffering? At the very least, adding these factors to the situation would introduce a lot more nuance and complexity into the discussion, and an opponent of Thomson could claim that the violinist gains the right to the use of your body through that responsibility. Clearly, failing to capture this nuance of abortion weakens the argument from analogy significantly. Each of the analogies which follow throughout the paper become less personal beyond this point, and so clearly each of the analogies will fail similarly to capture the element of the responsibility of the mother towards the fetus.

I believe Thomson would respond to this argument by claiming that the mother’s intentions decide whether any responsibility is incurred. If the mother engaged in consensual sex, whether protected or not, with the foresight that a pregnancy could occur, but without the intention to bring a pregnancy about, then the mother has not incurred a special responsibility to the fetus. Therefore, the analogies given in the paper remain relevant to the abortion case, since we may dismiss the claim that any special responsibility is owed by the mother to the child. The mother has not granted the child the right to her body since she had no intention of bringing about pregnancy (whether she foresaw it or not), and thus abortion remains morally permissible.