

## Abortion and Objective Emotivism

To discuss the view that “abortion is always wrong as it involves killing” is to assume premises hidden within the words of the argument itself. To use the word “kill” is to assume there is a “person” to be killed, striking at the heart of the most contentious claim in the emotionally charged landscape of the abortion debate: the personhood status of a fetus. On the pro-abortion side of the spectrum, personhood is argued to be at a later stage than that argued by anti-abortionists. Thus, a pro-abortionist would argue that a “killing” is not happening in the first place. Both sides of the abortion debate construct logical arguments and clever linguistic tactics supporting their idea of personhood, but these statements hide the heart of their arguments, that being emotion and empathy. This debate of language forcing an emotional interpretation is discussed often in emotivism, a non-cognitive ethical theory kickstarted by logical positivist A.J. Ayer and developed fully by C.L. Stevenson. This essay will construct the emotivist claim that arguments for and against abortion are inherently based on empathy and pathos more than logical theory, concluding with an objective emotivist argument that sympathy for mothers supersedes sympathy for fetuses.

But before explaining how abortion has emotion at its core, I will first provide an explanation of the form of emotivism I plan to use in isolation from any specific moral dilemma. Emotivism began as a product of logical positivism. A.J. Ayer, in extending his principle of verification to ethical statements, concluded that ethical statements were neither analytically nor synthetically verifiable, and thus represented meaningless emotional statements. (Bowie 78) Ayer’s “primitive emotivism” has come under criticism for being an over simplistic view of all moral arguments. For example, children recognize the differences between the concepts of right and wrong before they develop emotional responses to such concepts, and *schadenfreude*, our emotional enjoyment of the suffering of others despite our knowledge that such suffering is wrong, seems to illustrate at least some split between our ‘rational’ and ‘emotional’ moral minds. Ayer himself later conceded that “to say, as [he] once did, that these moral judgements are merely expressive of certain feelings, feelings of approval or disapproval, is an oversimplification.” (Waller 61)

With such flaws in mind, Stevenson designed an emotivism with a more attitude-focused approach to morality, arguing that a moral judgment was made up of two pieces: “an expression

of an attitude based on a belief, and a persuasive element which seeks to influence others.” (Bowie 79) If I claim that murder is evil, what I really claim is that I disapprove of murder, and you should as well. Stevenson’s emotivism appears less dismissive than Ayer’s. Moral arguments do not contain logical truths, but this does not mean moral arguments are pointless. Our dispositions and attitudes towards certain things may still be respected under this form of emotivism. Furthermore, once we recognize the persuasive nature of moral arguments, we won’t fall victim to emotionally manipulative ethical arguments so easily. Recognition does not mean a dismissal in this case.

Of course, it should be noted that Stevenson was indeed an ethical relativist. Stevenson believes that the only way to “settle” an ethical argument is when the disputing parties eventually agree in attitude. No consideration is given to the objective “correctness” of attitudes. (Blackstone 1056) But there has been a recent push in contemporary philosophy to argue for a compatibilist theory of non-cognitive ethical objectivism. William Blackstone notes that Francis Hutcheson even argued for such a claim back in the eighteenth-century. (Blackstone 1056) Under this view, certain attitudes are ascribed objective truth, and some attitudes are more “worthy of preference” than others. This is the form of emotivism that I will argue for in the case of abortion. But before doing so, I will explain a common argument against emotivism, one which applies to both objective and non-objective emotivist theories.

In *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, James Rachels argues that equating moral judgements to preferences misses the point, since moral judgements are not arbitrary. The statement “I like toast,” for example, needs no reasoning, whereas the statement “euthanasia is impermissible” does. (Bowie 81) This argument relates to a common one against Stevenson: ethical arguments at least resemble logical ones. Stevenson here argues that “rational methods are preferable to nonrational ones.” (Wellman 92) Most rhetoricians will argue that non-artistic means of invention, facts, in combination with Logos are the most effective persuasive arguments. The more one can hide under the guise of logic and fact, the more persuasive an argument will be. The statement “I like toast” is not intended as a persuasive argument for the value of eating toast. If it were, it would be argued under some statement as “toast is the best food,” or “eating toast is good for you.” While these arguments are still ones of opinion, notice

that they take a more logical form in removing the “I” statement. With these refutations now made, we will move to an emotive discussion of abortion.

Underlying the problem of abortion is the metaphysical question of personhood. Don Marquis sums up the argument, saying “an argument that fetuses either have or lack the right to life must be based upon some general criterion for having or lacking the right to life.” (Marquis 92) For the anti-abortionists, this criterion is being “biologically human,” whereas for pro-abortionists this criterion is “personhood.” As Marquis points out, both sides must engage in “drawing a line” between the extremes of personhood beginning at conception, which appears too early, and at birth, which seems too late. At each line we draw, arguments for criterion being “too broad” or “too narrow” are constructed as refutations. Against conception arguments, “human cancer-cell cultures are biologically human, but they do not have the right to life,” and against the personhood argument, “infants, the severely retarded and some of the mentally ill seem to fall outside the class of persons.” (Marquis 93) But what makes these refutations sound?

Suppose I wish to construct a logical ethical argument that condones infanticide. Operating under the realm of Utilitarianism, I argue that killing unconscious orphaned infants is ethically permissible as long as others do not have an emotional connection to the child, since it would improve the state of overpopulation, climate change, and taxpayer expenditures. Operating under Kantian ethics, I argue that children do not fall into the realm of ethical society, since they are not yet rational, thinking persons. In both of these cases, one may accept that the logic of both arguments is sound and yet disagree with the ethical consequence that “infanticide ought to be permissible.”

When we criticize moral theories, we do so from a pseudo-logical lens. We argue Kantian ethics cannot be correct, for if an axe murderer asked where your friend was hiding you must tell him out of duty. We criticize Utilitarian ethics, arguing that it condones murder, and “murder is wrong.” I argue that to criticize a moral theory, one must have some preconceived, emotional sense of morality in the absence of moral logic. In his *Argument that Abortion is Wrong*, Marquis claims that “a sound ethical account should yield the right answers in the obvious cases; it should not be required to resolve every disputed question.” (Marquis 98) But I claim ethical theories judge the “obvious cases” by the very theory that they postulate. Anti-abortionists on the streets don’t start reading Kant to you. They show you photos of bloody fetuses and have you

hold life-sized figurines of unborn children at 4 months. Pro-choice advocates are innocent of this either. While Thomson's argument sidesteps the metaphysical problem of personhood by claiming "the fetus is a person from the moment of conception," (Thomson 69) the element of pathos is unavoidable even here. Thomson's violinist example places you at the center of a dramatic kidnapping to prove a point. (Thomson 70) I would argue that the kidnapping is more central to her argument than the violinist attachment, as if one elects to become attached to the violinist the whole thought experiment changes. The very names of the groups (pro-life vs pro-choice) are intended to emotionally manipulate, rather than logically convince. No matter how philosophically sound one attempts to make an argument, an element of pathos will always remain central.

Taking my proceeding arguments to be true, we are at a crossroads concerning future actions to take. We could make the ethically relativistic claim that no abortion argument holds any weight to begin with, since killing can't even be proved to be "wrong." In doing so, we would be making the sub-claim that arguments based on emotion should be ignored, a claim that I do not seek to make in this paper. The alternative approach, then, is to consider these arguments from an objective-emotivist standpoint, determining the "correctness" of various arguments by considering the emotional weight they hold. I will devote the remainder of this paper to the latter approach.

Reexamining Thomson and Marquis, we see two appeals to emotion in the form of empathy. In the violinist experiment, Thomson urges us to empathize with the pregnant mother, whereas Marquis has us empathize with the unborn child by having us imagine it having a "Future Like Ours." Marquis has us doing more conceptual work than Thomson does, since it's far easier to empathize with a conscious adult than an unconscious "potential adult." Marquis' argument, then, appears to be more deceptive. He posits a logical argument, mainly that:

P1: A child possibly can have a life like ours.

P2: If a child can possibly have a life like ours, necessarily we ought not to kill children.

Conclusion: Necessarily we ought not to kill children

The transcendental argument is strong in this case, as it relies on a premise of possibility, rather than necessity to draw its conclusions (Kant did similar). But we fall into a logical fallacy similar

to Anselm's and Descartes' proof of God: we must accept the premise that abortion is wrong to conclude that abortion is wrong. And since arguments for and against abortion have already been proven as emotive, we can recognize that his premise which we are asked to accept is an emotional one.

Marquis is far less emotionally attached to the issue of abortion than anyone who could potentially become pregnant. Through hiding his arguments under the guise of a logical proof, he masks the emotional stretch it takes to sympathize with an unborn fetus, which is essentially what he asks us to do in accepting his "logic." Thomson, on the other hand, can use real, concrete emotional arguments, since they involve rational agents who have emotions like ours and can clearly express them: potential mothers. The thought experiments she constructs do not attempt to create a logical ethical theory the way that Marquis does. While clearly under the influences of Utilitarianism, Thomson uses thought experiments of violinists, barred windows, and boxes of chocolates to directly appeal to empathy. Under the objective emotivist perspective, this is a stronger appeal to "ethical truth" than using theory-based arguments.

Another argument in opposition to abortion, one posed by Christopher Conn in *Female Genital Mutilation and the Moral Status of Abortion*, provides a stronger appeal to empathy that threatens my emotivist argument for allowing abortion. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is the practice of mutilating the genitals of women and girls such that sex becomes less pleasurable. Conn has us imagine a child who has gone through FGM in utero, arguing this is wrong because it would "effectively prevent her from having a future that includes the sorts of sexually gratifying experiences and relationships that we all take to be an important part of the good life." (Conn 8) The emotional work required to empathize here is minimal; men could even replace FGM with castration in utero. We can easily imagine ourselves distraught as adults, having gone through a depriving process as a fetus. But there's a fallacy here in allowing the fetus to grow up into a conscious adult. The equivalent argument for Marquis would be having us empathize with an adult ghost of a fetus, longing to exist in the world as a person. Since this argument is just as emotionally stretching as empathizing with a fetus, it can be regarded as less emotionally relevant.

In conclusion, the objective emotivist argument with regard to the moral status of abortion stands in support of it, since arguments in support of pregnant women hold more

objective emotional weight than those in support of unborn, potential lives. Such an argument calls into question the relative emotional detachment of law officials, such as those on the male-dominated supreme court, who have fallen victim to the illusion of logos in the ethical world of abortion. Such outcomes are not surprising in the emotionally barren landscape of modern judicial systems, where emotive arguments are dissuaded and ignored in favor of calculative precedent and logic-driven ones. We must re-examine our laws and by extension our ethical theories from their source, emotion, lest we become cold, diluted calculators, siding with theory rather than emotional fact.

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