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A critique of “A Defense of Abortion”

My stance on abortion is that it’s morally wrong in virtually all cases. However, there are always some exceptions to clear moral lines. Take stealing, for example, I think that we would all agree that taking something that it not yours is morally wrong. But there are certainly scenarios where it is **less** wrong and even socially acceptable reasons. One such marginal case is the often used “Is it wrong to steal food if you are starving?” Again, I think we can all agree that, although taking something that isn’t yours is wrong, this is an understandable reason to do the immoral action.

Another case where we see this distinction is in the morality of lying. I would hope that we all agree that lying is wrong and intentionally misleading people is immoral. I think that it’s easy to see, however, marginal cases where doing this immoral action may not be the most moral thing to day. Take a case, for example, where you and your mother are enjoying dinner at the dining room table when you hear a knock on the door. Being the polite child, you offer to answer the door. As you open the door you’re greeted by a scary looking man covered in blood wielding an axe. He asks “Is (your mom’s name here) here?” I would venture that everyone would lie in this case and simply say “Sorry man, I’m house sitting while she’s on vacation.” And call the police.

I hope I’m making it clear that, although I think abortion is wrong, I don’t think all abortions are equally bad. With that out of the way, let’s jump into some of the cases presented by the author as some of them are egregiously bad.

The author begins by addressing the argument that a fetus is a human being from the moment of conception. She notes that there is a tendency to try to point to a specific time during fetal development at which we make an arbitrary decision to call the fetus human. Thomson argues that these rationales are like an acorn turning into an oak tree. We would never say that an acorn is a tree, she argues.

The author misses a major point and makes a critical error in this first paragraph. First, at the time of conception unique DNA is created. This DNA is not the fathers or the mothers, but its own unique entity. As we know, DNA is one of the most reliable ways to determine an individual human’s unique identity. This DNA, which is half the mothers, will go on to become a baby unless it’s directly acted against. This seems like a good place to start being concerned about it being a human life to me.

Second, the argument about the acorn and the tree is poorly thought out. If we start by agreeing that the analogy is good, we should at least point out the difference in stakes. I’m not overly concerned about killing a single tree, however, I am concerned about killing a single human. But the analogy itself is flawed. For example: an acorn is to a tree what a fetus is to an adult. A fetus is to a human what an acorn is to a plant. Unless the author is subtly hinting that she believes all fetuses are humans, it might be a bad argument.

As we continue, the author will concede for the sake of argument that life begins at conception. Thomson uses an analogy of a situation where you wake up attached to another person who requires you for life support. Detaching yourself will kill the other person but staying attached will leave you bed ridden next to this other person for 9 years. Given that I have bodily autonomy what moral obligation would I have to this other person?

Unless you can point me to a pair of people who don’t understand how babies are made, this analogy also stumbles before getting off the starting line. Let me use an analogy to show you what I mean.

Let’s say that we have a person, Fred, who **loves** chocolate more than anything. He finds out from his doctor that he has a condition that, if he eats chocolate, he may get violently ill for 9 months. The doctor advises Fred that luckily this is very easy to avoid. He can do anything from take a pill daily to getting a thing put his arm that last several years! If those options don’t work out for him there are many others, most of which can be acquired for free or very cheap.

The doctor also tells Fred, in hushed tones, that he wasn’t guaranteed to get sick every time. Even if he does get sick it’s socially acceptable to “abort” the sickness through the cost of a minor surgery. Fred is advised that another human life will have to be taken for the surgery to be successful, but not to worry. It’s socially acceptable, sometimes encouraged and protected by law so he has nothing to worry about.

Fred decides that he’ll just worry about getting the protection he needs later as it seems like no big deal if he gets sick. He goes home and gorges himself on chocolate after chocolate without any concern whatsoever for the dire consequences his lack of personal responsibility might have. Shockingly, Fred get’s sick and goes back to the doctor for the surgery. The doctor confirms with him that a human sacrifice will have to be made for him to avoid the 9-month sickness but reminds him that it will be an unknown person he’ll never meet. She tells him that with how many sick children there are in the world he’s probably doing them a favor anyway. Fred, feeling slightly guilty that he could have easily prevented this and now someone must die, decides to go ahead with the surgery because he really doesn’t want to be sick for 9 months.

In our scenario, unlike the violinist analogy, Fred understands his gluttony will have consequences. Fred knows that it’s easy to prevent but chooses not to. Out of his own personal convenience he decides to kill someone else and allows social norms to rid him of the guilt. Are Fred’s actions ethical? I’d be shocked if there’s anyone who isn’t some sort of zealot who believes in the morality of Fred’s behavior. In the case with the attached violinist the author would have us believe that, to exercise our bodily autonomy, we should look the dying violin player in the eyes and disconnect ourselves. Though cold blooded, I would like to point out that murdering the defenseless musician is much more ethical than murdering someone because you chose not to protect yourself.

In the next paragraph Thomson uses the marginal case of a rape victim. She argues that if the fetus is a human being then it shouldn’t matter how it was conceived. She’s right of course, it doesn’t matter. Let’s go back to Fred for a narrative representation of the difference here.

Fred aware of his peculiar health condition has sworn off chocolate all together. For many years he’s been chocolate free so both him and his doctor agreed that he no longer needs to take precautions. One day a criminal with a strange modus operandi breaks into his home. This criminal delights in forcing other people to eat chocolate and this home invasion will be no different. Fred is held down and force-fed chocolate until the burglar is satisfied. Knowing that no one would believe his story Fred just tries to go on with his life. A few weeks later he gets sick and returns to his doctor. The doctor notifies Fred that he’s got the chocolate sickness and asks what happened. Fred breaks down and tells the doctor about the intruder. The doctor let’s Fred know that it’s not a big deal, there’s no reason to worry the surgery is safe and easy. “Won’t someone be killed?” Fred asks. The doctor nods but says no one would blame him and people get the surgery all the time.

In this case we would agree that it’s still immoral to kill someone out of personal convenience. I think we can all empathized with Fred and a much larger percent wouldn’t blame him for his choice, but would that make his choice to murder ethical? Obviously not. Why take out the punishment on some poor person who can’t defend themselves simply because it’s socially acceptable?

Continuing, Thomson has several potential scenarios for us to consider about killing the innocent. These are: killing an innocent person is always wrong, directly killing an innocent person is murder which is wrong, the duty not to kill the innocent being great than the duty to keep a person from dying and if your only option is killing an innocent person you should die.

To prove that “killing an innocent person is always wrong” the author uses the example where the pregnancy endangers the woman’s life. “How can it be thought to be murder if the mother performs an abortion on herself to save her life?” she writes. Thomson is right here, but only by definition. How can it **ever** be murder if done to save your own life? If a crazed man is hell bent on ending my life and in the struggle, he gets killed, is that murder? No reasonable person would consider this example murder. In the same vein I would argue that **any** time someone is acting against you with force to harm you, you have the right to defend yourself accordingly. What if we shift the story and say the person I had to kill was innocent? Let’s say he was drugged unknowingly with PCP and thought I was a monster. The same struggle ensued, he still ends up fatal wounded. This would still not be considered murder, just a tragedy.

As a side note here, I want to just add that all the marginal cases used to defend abortion **in general** don’t make the act of an abortion moral. I’m certainly willing to concede that in extreme cases where the woman is not personally at fault that morally gray abortions should be a medical option. In fact, I’d be willing right now to say that I’ll be for abortion in marginal cases (roughly 10%) if it’s not used as a convenience (90%). But for some reason whenever I offer this to those who are pro abortion they always vehemently decline. Why then, do we even consider marginal cases? What’s the point of bringing up women who are victims of rape, incest and health complications if they are not who you are defending? It certainly *seems* dishonest, but hey I “hate women” so who knows.\

Thomson next shifts to the argument “directly killing an innocent person is murder” by citing an example where the woman and the child are tenants in a house. She also uses an example where one person is wearing a coat he needs to survive, and another tries to use the coat as well. Arguing that because the first person is the original owner of the coat, the second person has no right to it. This is another bad set of examples. If there’s someone else living in your house peacefully, you cannot murder them. Even if they eat your food and lay in your space. The argument with the coat acts as though the two people aren’t “in it together”, like one must live and one must die. This dichotomy is wrong as the first person can share the coat until they find a better solution. The baby is not some sort of invader, it’s a helpless defenseless little human that’s there because of choices that you made. Arguing that you should be able to just watch it freeze to death, so you can be in warm comfort is immoral.

Up next, “the duty not to kill the innocent being greater than the duty to keep a person from dying” is another moral fallacy. This line of reasoning implies again that it must be one or the other which seems to be a trend. This simply is not the case. Just like in Fred’s case, being sick for 9 months because of your personal decisions is still better than murdering someone who is defenseless. The author tries to make the case that because there are extremely marginal cases that no effort should be made whatsoever to save life.

The last argument claimed to be false is “if your only option is killing an innocent person then you should die” is another argument that hinges on life or death for both parties. Thomson finally drifts into the idea that if you knowingly take risk you should accept the consequences, but she overshoots the mark. She argues that if we say you cannot kill a child just because the mother’s choices caused the consequence, that it would only give the fetus a right to her body if it wasn’t rape.

Thomson uses the analogy that if you open your window and a burglar comes in you doesn’t have some obligation to take care of him. This sounds good on the surface, but let’s go back to the story where Fred was force fed chocolate for a second opinion.

This time, Fred was fed chocolate until he became unconscious. He awakens on an island and notices a small child is there with him. Somehow Fred knows that this is his assailant, but as a child before his force-feeding illness manifested. The child obviously won’t survive on his own and will need Fred’s help for his basic physical needs. Fred being resentful towards his assailant, decides that this child has no right to his food, shelter or water. The child, not understanding why Fred won’t help him, wonders off. Confused, scared and helpless the child dies alone punished for a crime he never committed.

Yikes, it seems like Fred really shouldn’t have punished the child for what his assailant did. We can certainly empathize with Fred’s feelings, and the kid may not have a “right” to his help, but should Fred have let him die? What if, like the author, we argue that Fred had taken every precaution possible to prevent being force fed chocolate. Let’s say he had a moat with alligators and laser guns mounted on the roof, disintegrating rays on the windows and a set of attack dogs, but he still got fed the chocolate and still ended up on that island. Then does it justify Fred’s actions towards the child?

Thomson’s next analogy is one of pollen getting in your home and growing in your carpet. I know I’m being a bit critical on the arguments, especially considering their age, but this is another awful argument. I mean I agree with her, I would vacuum up pollen in my carpet for sure. But could I vacuum up little humans? No. The analogy loses weight when it transitions to the other half of the biological tree of life which we split off from 1.538 billion years ago.

The author makes another argument in addition to the previous four we covered where she makes the case that Minimally Decent Samaritans should prevent abortions from being necessary in cases where it only takes one hour instead of 9 months for the fetus to grow. It’s here that I think I have the most in common with the author as she states that it would be wrong for a doctor to perform a seven-month abortion if its reason was to prevent a delay on a trip. I agree with this, but it raises the question: If murder is wrong at 7 months and to delay a trip why isn’t it wrong at 6 months and 30 days? Don’t get me wrong I’m willing to take any ground on this issue that’s to be given, but I’m left feeling like this was a cop out.

Let’s go back to Fred one last time, but the Fred from the animal cruelty article. Imagine if someone wrote an entire article, 12 pages, on why we should defend Fred’s right to torture puppies. What would the point have been if at the end the author said, “Look I’m not advocating for puppy torture to be moral in all cases, just some.” I want Fred to be happy as much as the next guy, but it doesn’t make his behavior ethical.

I’m tired as I’ve been writing this four about 4 hours now, so you’ll have to forgive the abrupt ending. Anyways, abortion is wrong but that doesn’t mean it should be illegal. The standard Democrats used to hold is “Safe, Legal, Rare” and I’m ok with that. But as it stands now the clear majority are done out of convenience instead of necessity, which is sad.

Troy