# Violinists, Expanding Babies, and Henry Fonda: Thomson on Abortion

A common argument against the morality of abortion goes as follows:

* Premise: All fetuses are innocent persons.
* Premise: All innocent persons have a right to life.
* Premise: It is always immoral to kill those with a right to life.
* Conclusion: Therefore, it is wrong to kill fetuses (i.e. to get an abortion).

Most arguments for the morality of abortion deny premise 1: they deny that fetuses are “persons” in the sense that morally matters. **Judith Jarvis Thomson**, by contrast, assumes that both premise 1 and premise 2 are true; that is, she assumes that fetuses are just as much persons as adult humans, and that they have all the same rights as normal humans. She denies premise 3: she claims that the right to life does NOT mean that you have a right not to be killed. (Thomson notes that she personally doesn’t think that early-term fetuses would count as “persons,” but she notes that nothing in her argument depends on this belief.)

## The Violinist Analogy

“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. 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. 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.’ **Is it morally incumbent on you to accede to this situation?**” (Judith Jarvis Thomson)

## Thomson’s Arguments from Analogy

An **argument from analogy** is an argument of the form “Action X has properties A, B, and C. Action Y has properties A and B. Therefore, Action Y has property C.” In the case of the ethics property C is often “is morally permissible.” If you object to the conclusion of an argument from analogy, you must show how the cases are *relevantly different*. It is not OK to say “one case is unrealistic” unless you explain how this is relevant to the morality of the case.

Thomson’s most famous argument from analogy concerns a famous violinist. She asks you to suppose that the society of music lovers has kidnapped you and connected you via IV to a sick violinist. The violinist took no part in your kidnapping, and in fact would never have approved of it. If you stay attached to the sick violinist for nine months, he will live; if you detach before nine months, he will die. Here is the argument:

* Premise: The violinist is an innocent person with a right to life. You did not consent to be hooked up to him. You could save his life by staying attached to him. If you unplug yourself from the violinist, he will die.
* Premise: (Supposition) A fetus *resulting from rape* is an innocent person with a right to life. You did not consent to have him/her in your body. If you have an abortion, the fetus will die.
* Premise: It is morally OK to disconnect from the violinist.
* Conclusion 1: So, it is morally OK to have an abortion in the case of rape.
* Conclusion 2: So, it is sometimes morally OK to kill innocent people with a right to life. The right to life does NOT guarantee the “right not to be killed.”

This argument is intended to show two different things: (1) that abortion is morally OK in the case of rape and (2) that the prolife argument presented above fails. Thomson thinks that the **right to life** guarantees only the right not to be unjustly killed. She thinks that many opponents of abortion have (incorrectly) assumed that it is always and everywhere wrong to kill innocent people.

## Against “The Extreme View” of ABortion

Thomson also offers an analogical argument against what she calls the “extreme view of abortion” (the view that abortion is morally prohibited even to save the mother’s life). This view is most prominently defended by the Catholic Church (there are some exceptions, but they are not relevant to Thomson’s argument).

1. Premise: If you were trapped into a tiny house that you owned with a (very) rapidly growing baby such that your choices were (a) you could let the baby grow and crush you or (b) you could kill the baby and live, it would be ethical to kill the baby.
2. Premise: A life-threatening pregnancy is analogous to the growing-baby case.
3. Conclusion 1: So, abortion is morally OK if the continued pregnancy would endanger the life of the mother.
4. Conclusion 2 (again): It is sometimes OK to kill people that have a right to life. The right to life does NOT guarantee the “right not to be killed.”

Thomson also argues that, in cases like these, outside observers should aid the mother and not the baby. Why? Because it is the mother’s house.

## The Henry Fonda Case: When Does the Right to Life Apply?

Thomson offers an argument intended to show that the right to life does NOT guarantee the right to the resources we need to live. Moreover, she thinks that other people have only very weak moral obligations to help us get the things we need to live.

* Premise 1: Even if Henry Fonda could save my life merely by touching my forehead, he would not be murdering me if he failed to do so.
* Premise 2: If it were very easy for Henry Fonda to touch my forehead, he would have some (weak) obligation to do so. If it were very difficult for him to do so (if he lived far away, for instance), he would have NO obligation to do so.
* Conclusion 1: My right to life does not mean that people are required to give me the things I need to live.
* Conclusion 2: We have SOME obligation to be “good Samaritans” and to give others the things they need to live. However, this is a fairly weak moral requirement, and failing to do so does not mean that one has committed “murder” or that one has violated an innocent’s person “right to life.”

On the basis of these sorts of arguments, Thomson concludes that the morality of abortion may vary somewhat on a case-to-case basis. For example, it would (most likely) be morally wrong to have an abortion in the ninth month of pregnancy if there was no threat to the health of the woman. It would (most likely) be morally OK to have an abortion in the first trimester if the pregnancy would be very difficult (health-wise, career-wise, etc.) for the woman. In neither case, however, would having an abortion be akin to “murdering” a person.

Thomson concludes by noting two significant differences between her position and some more common prochoice positions:

1. Her position does not entail that abortion is always morally acceptable. Late-term abortions where there is no health risk to the mother will be especially suspect on Thomson’s view.
2. Her position does not allow for the mother to secure the death of the child if there is some way to save the child without cost to the mother. For example, if a rich family offers to pay to have the fetus removed and put in an incubator, the mother would be morally wrong in choosing abortion – in this case, she might even be guilty of murder.

## Small Group Activity

Thomson uses the “people seed” analogy to argue that abortion is permissible for some pregnancies resulting from voluntary intercourse that does *not* threaten the mother’s life. Explain what type of pregnancy each of the following cases corresponds to, then state whether you think you it is morally OK to kill the people-seed person in such a case.

1. You live in a house with no windows, out of fear of people seeds. However, the league for people-seeding smashes opens your door, and throws a people-seed in which attaches to your couch. You come home to find an (innocent) person attached to your couch, who will die without your constant attention for nine months.
2. You have windows, but they are guarded with top of the line screens to keep out people seeds. Due to no fault of your own, the screen has a flaw and a people-seed slips in. You come home to find an innocent person...
3. You have windows with screens as described above. However, you occasionally forget to put up the screens properly. During one of these occasions, a people seed slip by. You come home to find an innocent person...
4. You have windows with no screens whatsoever. The rest is as described above.

## REview Questions

1. In your own words, briefly explain the “point” of Thomson’s violinist and Henry Fonda analogies. To what extent do you think she succeeds? In your answer, be sure to think about both the relevant *similarities* and *dissimilarities* between these scenarios and “real life” abortion scenarios. (Also: remember that many similarities/dissimilarities won’t actually be relevant).
2. Explain why the following (common) confusions about Thomson’s argument are NOT correct:
   1. She genuinely believes the fetus is a person from the moment of conception.
   2. She thinks that fetuses don’t have a right to life, which is why it is OK to kill them.
   3. She thinks that abortion is only OK in the case of rape or life-threatening pregnancy.
   4. She argues that abortion is always morally OK.