

Judith Jarvis Thomson's paper "A Defense of Abortion" was first published in 1971 and stands as one of the most famous and influential works on the ethics of abortion. In this paper, Thomson seeks to challenge the pro-life claim that abortion is impermissible solely because the fetus is considered a person. She argues that personhood does not decisively settle the matter, and the permissibility or impermissibility of abortion depends on how the fetus relates to its mother. To support her viewpoint, she presents three thought experiments.

The Violinist Argument: 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 is now 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." (pg 1)

What about the fetus' right to life? She concedes that fetuses are persons with a right to life, *but* argues that this does not necessarily mean that abortion is always wrong. She uses the example of a person who is threatened with the loss of her own life if she carries a pregnancy to term. In this case, Thomson argues, the woman has the right to abort the fetus, even though it is a person with a right to life. This is because the woman's right to life is *greater* than the fetus's right to life. To this end she introduces us to the *expanding child*.

The Expanding Child Argument: Suppose you find yourself trapped in a tiny house with a growing child. I mean a very tiny house, and a rapidly growing child--you are already up against the wall of the house and in a few minutes you'll be crushed to death. The child on the other hand won't be crushed to death; if nothing is done to stop him from growing he'll be hurt, but in the end he'll simply burst open the house and walk out a free man. (pg 2)

Thomson goes on to argue that the morality of abortion depends on the circumstances of the pregnancy. She uses the example of the trolley problem to illustrate her point. In the trolley problem, a person is faced with the choice of diverting a trolley to kill one person or letting it continue on its course to kill five people. Thomson argues that just as it is morally permissible to divert the trolley to save five lives, it is also morally permissible to abort a fetus to save the life of the woman carrying it.

Thomson anticipates an objection to her argument based on the idea that women who engage in *consensual* sex are responsible for any resulting pregnancy. She argues that even if a woman is responsible for becoming pregnant, she does not forfeit the right to control her own body. She

also points out that this objection would only apply to cases where the woman had a choice in the matter, and not to cases where her consent was violated. To this end she introduces us to the *people-seed* thought experiment:

People-Seeds: Again, suppose it were like this: people-seeds drift about in the air like pollen, and if you open your windows, one may drift in and take root in your carpets or upholstery. You don't want children, so you fix up your windows with fine mesh screens, the very best you can buy. As it happens, however, and on very, very rare occasions does happen, one of the screens is defective; and a seed drifts in and takes root. Does the person-plant who now develops have a right to the use of your house? (pg 5)

Finally, Thomson addresses what she calls "the extreme view," which holds that abortion is never morally permissible. She argues that this view is untenable, because it would require us to give fetuses *greater* rights than we give to born persons. She also argues that the extreme view is incompatible with our intuitions about bodily autonomy and the right to life.