

Handout: Don Marquis — “Why Abortion Is Immoral”

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I. The Central Philosophical Problem

- **The Problem:** Why is abortion morally permissible—or morally wrong? Most philosophical defenses of abortion focus on the fetus' lack of “personhood.” Marquis finds this approach unsatisfying and wants to reframe the debate.
 - **Marquis's Aim:** To argue that *abortion is (except in rare cases) seriously immoral*—on par with killing an innocent adult human being.
 - **His Strategy:** Rather than appealing to controversial metaphysical categories (e.g., *personhood, human being*), Marquis shifts the moral focus to what *makes killing wrong in general*.
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II. Symmetry and Stalemate: The Standard Debate

Marquis begins by diagnosing why pro-life and pro-choice arguments often lead to a standoff:

The Standard Anti-Abortion View:

- Argues that the fetus is biologically human.
- Principle: “*It is always prima facie wrong to kill a human being.*”
- Problem: Too **broad** — implies it’s wrong to kill cancer cell cultures (they’re living and human).

The Standard Pro-Choice View:

- Argues that the fetus is not a person.
- Principle: “*Only persons have the right to life.*”
- Problem: Too **narrow** — fails to explain why it’s wrong to kill infants, the severely mentally disabled, or those in comas.

Marquis's Insight:

- Both sides rely on **moral generalizations** that seem intuitive, but *fail under scrutiny*.
 - This suggests a deeper question is needed: *What fundamentally makes killing wrong?*
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III. The Solution: A Future-Like-Ours Account

Marquis's Core Thesis:

What makes killing wrong is that it deprives the victim of a "future like ours" — i.e., the experiences, activities, enjoyments, and projects the person would have had.

- Killing is wrong not because of what it does to the killer or others, but because of what it does to the *victim*.
- This *loss-based account* captures why death is such a profound harm.
- Thus, **abortion is prima facie seriously immoral** because it deprives the fetus of a valuable future.

Why This Account is Attractive:

1. **Explains why killing is among the worst crimes** — it takes everything from the victim.

2. **Resonates with the lived experiences** of terminally ill patients — they grieve the loss of their futures.
 3. **Accounts for why killing infants is wrong** without invoking controversial definitions of “personhood.”
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IV. Advantages of the Future-Like-Ours Theory

Marquis shows that his account has both **philosophical depth and broad applicability**:

1. Avoids Speciesism:

- The theory doesn't rest on whether a being is *biologically human*, but whether it has a valuable future.
- Hence, it could be wrong to kill intelligent aliens or advanced nonhuman animals with futures like ours.

2. Compatible with Euthanasia:

- If someone has *no* valuable future (due to incurable pain or illness), then killing them is not morally wrong.
- Thus, the theory *does not entail* the wrongness of voluntary euthanasia.

3. Avoids Ad Hoc Exceptions:

- No need to add special clauses to explain why killing infants or children is wrong — they clearly have futures of value.

4. Independent of Personhood Debates:

- Marquis bypasses the personhood debate entirely — one doesn't need to be a person to have a valuable future.
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V. Abortion vs. Contraception

A common objection: *If abortion is wrong because it deprives a being of a future, then isn't contraception also wrong?*

Marquis's Reply:

- **Contraception does not deprive any particular subject of a future**, because no *determinate being* exists prior to fertilization.
 - There's no non-arbitrary subject (sperm? ovum? both?) that is harmed by contraception.
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VI. Responses to Alternative Accounts of Killing

1. Desire Account (Tooley, etc.):

- Killing is wrong because it frustrates our strong desire to continue living.
- **Problem:** We think it's wrong to kill people who are unconscious, suicidal, or indifferent to life.
- Marquis: The *value* of life—not the *desire* for it—is what matters.

2. Discontinuation Account:

- Killing is wrong because it cuts off ongoing experiences and projects.
 - **Problem:** Fails to explain why it's wrong to kill infants or people in comas, who may not have "ongoing" projects.
 - Marquis: It's not past or present experiences that matter—it's the **value of the future**.
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VII. Replies to Objections Against Fetal Victimhood

Several philosophers argue that fetuses cannot be *victims* of harm.

Objection: Fetuses don't have desires or consciousness.

- **Marquis's Response:** Neither do people who are temporarily unconscious. Yet we still think it's wrong to kill them.

Objection (Paul Bassen): Fetuses can't be wronged because they lack "mentation."

- **Marquis's Response:** Victimhood does not depend on present mental activity. What matters is whether there's a valuable future being lost.
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VIII. Conclusion: Why Marquis's Argument Matters

- Marquis provides a **non-religious, non-dogmatic, and non-speciesist** account of the wrongness of abortion.
- His “future like ours” argument:
 - Is consistent with widely shared intuitions about killing.
 - Does not depend on controversial metaphysical categories (e.g., *soul, personhood*).
 - Supports a strong, though not absolute, *presumption against abortion*.

Thesis: If it is wrong to kill adult human beings because it deprives them of a future like ours, and fetuses also have such futures, then *abortion is prima facie seriously morally wrong*.