

# Handout: Judith Jarvis Thomson – “A Defense of Abortion”

---

## The Philosophical Problem

**The problem:** Most arguments against abortion rest on the assumption that *the fetus is a person from the moment of conception*, and that this fact alone renders abortion morally impermissible.

- Thomson finds this leap *logically unsubstantiated*.
  - The inference often goes:
    1. The fetus is a person.
    2. Every person has a right to life.
    3. Therefore, abortion is morally impermissible.

She challenges this argument not by *denying* the personhood of the fetus, but by *granting it for the sake of argument*—and still *rejecting the conclusion* that abortion is always impermissible.

---

## The Aim and Solution

**Thomson's aim:** Even *if* the fetus is a person with a right to life, it does *not follow* that abortion is morally impermissible.

Her central thesis: **A right to life does not entail a right to use another person's body to stay alive.**

Thus, even if the fetus has a right to life, abortion is not necessarily unjust killing.

---

## Thought Experiments and Argument Structure

Thomson's argument proceeds via a series of thought experiments. These function as *philosophical analogies* to show that the fetus's right to life does not guarantee the right to use the mother's body.

---

### 1. The Famous Violinist (pp. 48–49)

**Scenario:** You wake up connected to a famous unconscious violinist. You're told your kidneys are keeping him alive, and disconnecting would kill him. He needs to remain attached for 9 months.

- *Analogy:* Pregnancy resulting from **non-consensual sex**.
  - *Moral intuition:* You are not obligated to stay connected—even if disconnecting results in death. Therefore:  
→ **The fetus's right to life does not entail the right to use the mother's body.**
- 

### 2. The Expanding Child (p. 52)

**Scenario:** You're trapped in a tiny house with a rapidly growing child who will crush you to death unless killed.

- *Analogy:* Pregnancy threatening the mother's life.
  - *Point:* Self-defense justifies abortion in such a case—even if it kills an innocent person.  
→ **Direct killing may be justified if it's self-defense.**
- 

### 3. The Coat Analogy (p. 53)

**Scenario:** A third party sees two people freezing. One owns the only coat; the other has taken it. The third party may return it to its rightful owner.

- *Analogy:* Third parties performing abortions.
  - *Point:* Refusing to assist (i.e., doctors declining to abort) fails to recognize the woman's ownership over her own body.  
→ **Abortion may be permissible as restoring rightful control over one's body.**
- 

#### 4. People-Seeds (p. 59)

**Scenario:** Imagine people-seeds drift in through windows. You install fine mesh screens, but one is defective, and a seed takes root in your house.

- *Analogy:* Pregnancy despite precautions (e.g., contraception).
  - *Point:* Taking precautions does not entail granting the fetus a right to the body.  
→ **Voluntary intercourse does not automatically grant the fetus a right to use the woman's body.**
- 

#### Justice vs. Decency (pp. 60–61)

Thomson distinguishes:

- **Unjust killing:** Violating someone's *rights*.
- **Indecent behavior:** Morally objectionable, but not a rights violation.

E.g., refusing to donate an hour of your time to save the violinist may be indecent, but not unjust.

→ **Not all morally questionable actions are rights violations. Abortion may be indecent in some cases but not unjust.**

---

#### Clarification of the Right to Life (pp. 55–56)

- **A right to life ≠ a right to be given what you need to live.**

- It is a **right not to be killed unjustly.**
- Therefore, unless the fetus has a *right to the woman's body*, abortion is *not* unjust killing.

"The right to life does not guarantee the right to use another's body—even if it's needed to stay alive."

---

### **Responsibility & Parental Obligation (pp. 57–58)**

Thomson examines whether *causing* the fetus to exist makes one responsible for keeping it alive.

- Rejects the idea that mere *biological parenthood* entails an obligation to carry the fetus.
  - Only if one *assumes responsibility* (e.g., chooses to keep the child), does one acquire an obligation.
- 

### **Good Samaritan vs. Minimally Decent Samaritan (pp. 62–63)**

- **Good Samaritan:** Goes out of their way to help others.
- **Minimally Decent Samaritan:** Does the bare minimum.

Thomson argues that laws forcing women to carry pregnancies make them Good Samaritans—**an unjust standard not applied to anyone else in society.**

E.g., No one is legally required to donate a kidney to save another, but pregnant women are expected to risk their health and make massive sacrifices.

---

### **Third Party Interventions (p. 64)**

- If a woman is being *compelled by nature* to sustain another's life at great cost, a third party may intervene and perform the abortion.
- This is not injustice to the fetus *because it has no right to the woman's body in the first place.*