

Ten Arguments For & Against Abortion

Some arguments concluding abortion is permissible

Argument from spontaneous abortion

1. Most fetuses are spontaneously aborted.
2. If fetuses were morally significant, then we would view this as a tragedy akin to millions being killed in an epidemic.
3. We don't, so fetuses aren't morally significant.
4. Therefore, killing the fetus by abortion is permissible.

Problems: (1) is only true at a fairly early stage of development. It's unclear what the spontaneous abortion rate is for fetuses at the stage where they would be artificially aborted. And it may be important that most spontaneously aborted fetuses have some genetic abnormality. Also, the fact that something isn't a tragedy when it happens naturally doesn't show it wouldn't be deeply wrong to bring it about (e.g., a 90-year-old dying in their sleep vs. being murdered). Finally, intuitions in these cases may just be wrong; people can become inured to facts like mass starvation without that showing much.

Forced dependency argument

1. It's permissible to kill X if (a) X depends on you for its life, and (b) this dependency was forced on you
2. The fetus meets these conditions
3. Therefore, it's permissible to kill the fetus

Problems: Even granting the whole argument, it's unclear how many actual pregnancies could plausibly be described as involving forced dependency. Possibly only cases involving rape.

Woman's body argument

1. The fetus is a part of the woman's body
2. People have the right to do whatever they like with their bodies
3. Therefore, it's permissible to kill the fetus

Problems: (1) can be challenged. What makes the fetus a part of the mother's body? Most of the obvious criteria (e.g. that it would die without the mother or that it's physically connected to her) succumb to counterexamples. E.g. if I connected my body to yours via some tubes and made myself dependent on you, that would not make me a part of

your body. Nor would my (somehow) being placed inside a body-cavity of yours. There's also the problem of the newborn infant, still connected via the umbilical cord. If it's wrong to kill the newborn, then mere physical connectedness can't be the issue. Finally, (2) may be false. If I intentionally make your life depend on my body (e.g. by hooking you up to my kidneys), it may be wrong to kill you by refusing to allow you access to my body.

No relevant properties argument

1. Entities with similar morally significant properties deserve similar degrees of moral respect
2. The fetus possesses no morally significant properties a rat does not possess
 - a. The intrinsic properties of a fetus—its mental capacities, it's physical development, it's intelligence level etc—do not command more respect than a rat's
 - b. Belonging to the species *Homo sapiens* is not a morally significant property
3. We treat (and rightly treat) rats as requiring little moral respect—killing them is often permissible
4. Therefore, a fetus requires little moral respect—killing one is often permissible

Problems: This argument ignores the *future* properties of the fetus—the properties it will have when it grows into an adult person. If these matter, then this argument fails. There are also many complications involving (2b). It may be difficult to defend the moral importance of infants without appealing to their being human. A more complicated response would involve showing that the morally significant property the fetus possesses isn't its being human but rather the property *belonging to a species whose mature members possess properties P*, where P may include things like being rational, capable of forming plans, and so on. Finally, some people may take it to be *basic* that being human *is* morally significant.

Some arguments concluding abortion is wrong

The basic argument

1. Killing an innocent human being is wrong
2. The fetus is an innocent human being
3. Therefore, abortion is wrong

Problems: People tend to resist (2) by vaguely wondering about when human life begins. But it may be better to concede that the zygote is the earliest stage in the life-cycle of members of our species. The weaker premise may be (1). It might be said: what makes killing you or me

wrong is the same thing that would make killing a non-human alien like Spock wrong, i.e. something unrelated to our species membership. What makes killing us or Spock wrong is our having certain mental properties (our being rational, having plans and desires which death would foil etc), not our having a certain species membership. If this is so, it isn't obvious that killing something is wrong merely because it belongs to the species *Homo sapiens*.

Infanticide argument

1. Entities with similar morally significant properties deserve similar degrees of moral respect
2. An infant possesses no morally significant properties a fetus does not possess
3. We treat (and rightly treat) infants as requiring great moral respect—killing them is always wrong
4. Therefore, abortion is wrong

Problems: Even granting the argument, it only applies to abortions of fetuses which aren't significantly different from infants. Since the vast majority of abortions are performed in the first trimester or quite early in the second at which point there may exist relevant differences between the fetus and an infant, this argument may lack force in most actual instances of abortion. Some philosophers bite the bullet and deny (3), arguing that infanticide is permissible, as is thought by some societies today and as was thought by the Greeks and Romans.

Where-do-you-draw-the-line argument

1. Killing infants is clearly wrong
2. There's no obvious place to draw the line of moral respect on the continuum from zygote to infant
3. Therefore, we must extend the moral respect we accord infants all the way back to zygotes

Problems: This argument is formally invalid; the conclusion does not follow from the premises. It's not obvious which premises to add to make it valid. Cp. (1) At midnight it's clearly dark, (2) There's no obvious place to draw the line of darkness on the continuum from noon to midnight, (3) Therefore, we must consider it dark at noon.

Simple potentiality argument

1. If X is a potential F, then X commands the same moral respect as an actual F
2. The fetus is a potential adult human
3. It is wrong to kill innocent adult humans
4. Therefore, abortion is wrong

Problems: (1) may be false. A potential president does not have the rights and privileges of the actual president. Similarly, it's unclear why being a *potential* adult person should confer on a fetus the moral status of an *actual* adult. The argument may also run into trouble with parthenogenesis. If parthenogenesis is taken into account, then this argument seems to imply that disposing of a female egg is as bad as murdering an adult.

Sophisticated potentiality argument

1. If what *makes* doing X wrong is some feature F of the action, then if Y is F, it too must be wrong
2. What makes killing adult humans wrong is that doing so deprives them of a valuable future
3. Killing a fetus deprives it of a future of value
4. Therefore, abortion is wrong

Problems: (3) may be challenged by denying that the fetus is identical with the future adult and so denying *it* has a future of value. This denial may be reinforced by arguing that what has a future of value is a mind (you and I are *mental* things), whereas the fetus lacks such a mind. (2) may be denied by claiming that what makes killing people wrong isn't depriving them of a future but something else, e.g. frustrating their present desires. Since fetuses lack desires, such an account would block this argument. Finally, this argument, too, may face the problem of parthenogenesis.

Argument from risk-aversion

1. It's wrong to do X if doing X *may* be deeply wrong and you can't rule out its being so
2. Abortion may be deeply wrong, and we can't be sure it isn't
3. Therefore, abortion is wrong

Problems: (1) may imply paralysis. Perhaps few of us have grounds to be sure that anything much we do might not be deeply wrong. Eating meat may be deeply wrong (complicity in a collective action which results in massive and gratuitous suffering). So may driving a car (complicity in wrecking the environment), drinking a Coke (which company appears to have dissident workers in Latin America shot), wearing Gap, paying your taxes or buying anything rather than sending the money to famine relief. Obviously this argument will only work for people who feel they lack solid evidence that abortion is permissible.