

Abortion: An Overview of the Ethical Issues

Ethics Updates

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Introduction

- Abortion is the most difficult and controversial moral issues we will consider.
- Listen to both sides, even if that is difficult to do. Both sides have important moral insights, even if ultimately these insights are outweighed by the insights of the other side.
- The *goal* of this presentation is not to convince you to accept one position or the other, but to help you to understand both side.

The Rhetoric of Abortion Discussions

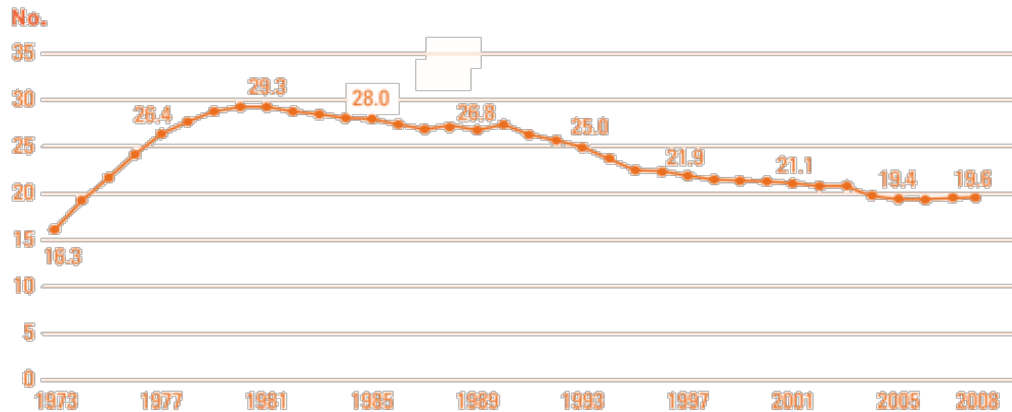
- Beware of the labels “Pro-life” and “Pro-choice.”
 - They imply that the other side is against “life” or against “choice.”
 - They ignore the nuances in a person’s position.

Part One

The Empirical Background

Decreasing rates of abortion

- Two principal sources of data:
 - [CDC abortion stats, 2009](#)
 - [Guttmacher stats, 2008](#)
- Data tend to be incomplete
- Overall in US, number of abortions is decreasing.



•About 1.21 M in 2008

Pregnancy & Intentions

In the United States:

- 49% of pregnancies were unintended (2006)
- Of unintended pregnancies, about 40% ended in abortions
- Unintended pregnancies increased among poor women, decreased among financially well-off women.
- Unintended pregnancies increased among black and Hispanic women.

Reasons given for abortions

- Concern for/responsibility to other individuals 74%
- Cannot afford a baby now 73%
- A baby would interfere with school/
employment/ability to care for dependents 69%
- Would be a single parent/
having relationship problems 48%
- Has completed childbearing 38%

Source: Finer et al., 2005 (2004 data)

Incidence of Abortion

- **Nearly half of pregnancies among American women are unintended, and about four in 10 of these are terminated by abortion.** Twenty-two percent of all pregnancies (excluding miscarriages) end in abortion.
- Forty percent of pregnancies among white women, 67% among blacks and 53% among Hispanics are unintended.
- In 2008, 1.21 million abortions were performed, down from 1.31 million in 2000. However, between 2005 and 2008, the long-term decline in abortions stalled. From 1973 through 2008, nearly 50 million legal abortions occurred.
- Each year, two percent of women aged 15–44 have an abortion. Half have had at least one previous abortion.
- At least half of American women will experience an unintended pregnancy by age 45, and, at current rates, one in 10 women will have an abortion by age 20, one in four by age 30 and three in 10 by age 45.

Who has abortions?

- 18% of U.S. women obtaining abortions are teenagers; those aged 15–17 obtain 6% of all abortions, teens aged 18–19 obtain 11%, and teens younger than age 15 obtain 0.4%.
- Women in their 20s account for more than half of all abortions; women aged 20–24 obtain 33% of all abortions, and women aged 25–29 obtain 24%.
- Non-Hispanic white women account for 36% of abortions, non-Hispanic black women for 30%, Hispanic women for 25% and women of other races for 9%.
- 37% of women obtaining abortions identify as Protestant and 28% as Catholic.
- Women who have never married and are not cohabiting account for 45% of all abortions
- About 61% of abortions are obtained by women who have one or more children.
- 42% of women obtaining abortions have incomes below 100% of the federal poverty level (\$10,830 for a single woman with no children).
- 27% of women obtaining abortions have incomes between 100–199% of the federal poverty level.

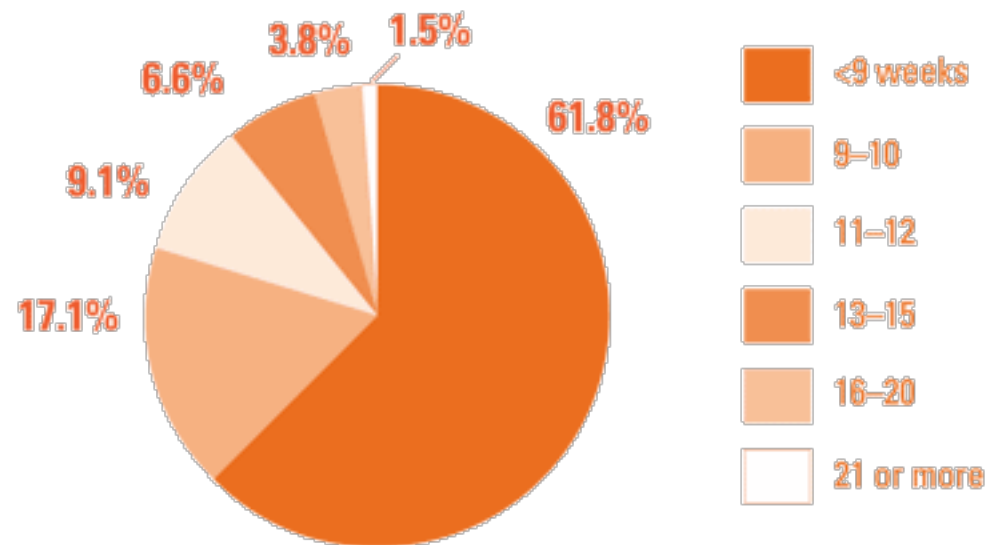
Source: [Guttmacher Institute](#)

Contraceptive Use

- 54% of women who have abortions had used a contraceptive method (usually the condom or the pill) during the month they became pregnant. Among those women, 76% of pill users and 49% of condom users report having used their method inconsistently, while 13% of pill users and 14% of condom users report correct use.
- 46% of women who have abortions had not used a contraceptive method during the month they became pregnant. Of these women, 33% had perceived themselves to be at low risk for pregnancy, 32% had had concerns about contraceptive methods, 26% had had unexpected sex and 1% had been forced to have sex.
- 8% of women who have abortions have never used a method of birth control; nonuse is greatest among those who are young, poor, black, Hispanic or less educated.
- **About half of unintended pregnancies occur among the 11% of women who are at risk for unintended pregnancy but are not using contraceptives.** Most of these women have practiced contraception in the past.

When abortions occur

88% of abortions occur in the first 12 weeks of the pregnancy (2006 stats)



*In weeks from the last menstrual period.

Source: [Guttmacher Institute](#)

Safety

- Abortion is one of the safest medical procedures, with minimal—less than 0.05%—risk of major complications that might not need hospital care.
- **Abortions performed in the first trimester pose virtually no long-term risk** of such problems as infertility, ectopic pregnancy, spontaneous abortion (miscarriage) or birth defect, and little or no risk of preterm or low-birth-weight deliveries.
- Exhaustive reviews by panels convened by the U.S. and British governments have concluded that there is no association between abortion and breast cancer. There is also no indication that abortion is a risk factor for other cancers.
- In repeated studies since the early 1980s, leading experts have concluded that abortion does not pose a hazard to women's mental health.
- **The risk of death associated with abortion increases with the length of pregnancy**, from one death for every one million abortions at or before eight weeks to one per 29,000 at 16–20 weeks—and one per 11,000 at 21 or more weeks.
- **Fifty-eight percent of abortion patients say they would have liked to have had their abortion earlier.** Nearly 60% of women who experienced a delay in obtaining an abortion cite the time it took to make arrangements and raise money.
- **Teens are more likely than older women to delay having an abortion until after 15 weeks of pregnancy**, when the medical risks associated with abortion are significantly higher.

Source: [Guttmacher Institute](#)

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Part Two

The Philosophical Arguments

Two Principal Moral Considerations

The moral status of the fetus

- Is the fetus a person? At what stage in its development does it become a person? Conception? 1st trimester? Birth?

The rights of the pregnant woman

- Does the pregnant woman have the right to decide if she is going to carry the baby to term or not?

An Important Distinction

- As you consider this difficult issue, it is important to distinguish two questions:
 - Is abortion *morally* wrong?
 - Should abortion be *illegal*?
- These are distinct issues. Not everything that is immoral is necessarily illegal. We may, for example, want to say that being unfaithful in one's marriage is immoral, but we may not want to see it made illegal.

The Central Argument

Here is the main argument that is usually advanced against abortion:

P_1 : The fetus is an innocent person.

P_2 : It is morally wrong to end the life of an innocent person.

C: Therefore, it is morally wrong to end the life of a fetus.

The Moral Status of the Fetus

- Much of the debate in regard to abortion has centered around the first premise, namely, whether the fetus is a person or not.
- If the fetus is a person, then it has the rights that belong to persons, including the right to life.
- The concept of personhood, in other words, is the bridge that connects the fetus with the right to life.



Criteria of Personhood

- *Star Trek* thought experiment
- Possible criteria
 - Conceived by humans
 - Genetic structure
 - Physical resemblance
 - Presence of a soul
 - Viability
 - A future like ours

Necessary and Sufficient Conditions

- A *necessary condition* is something which must be present for another thing to be possible-- e.g., having your eyes open is a necessary condition for watching television.
- A *sufficient condition* is something which, if present, guarantees that the other thing will occur--e.g., drinking a quart of whiskey is a sufficient condition for becoming drunk.

Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of Personhood

- Using this distinction, we can then ask:
 - What are the necessary conditions of personhood?
 - What are the sufficient conditions of personhood?

The Relevance of Personhood: J. J. Thomson

- Some philosophers--beginning with *Judith Jarvis Thomson* and Jane English--have argued that, even if the fetus is a person, abortion may be morally justified. In other words, they dispute the truth of the premise, “It is wrong to end the life of an innocent person.”



The Violinist Example

- Thomson offers an analogy: imagine that you were knocked unconscious, hooked up to a famous violinist who must depend on you for life support for the coming nine months.
- Thomson maintains that you would be morally justified in unhooking yourself, even if it resulted in the death of the violinist.
- By analogy, a pregnant woman is justified in “unhooking” herself from the fetus, even if doing so results in the death of the fetus and even if the fetus is a person.

Limitations of the Violinist Analogy

Thomson's analogy has several limitations:

- Only covers cases of rape.
- The violinist is not someone to whom one is related, even potentially.



Jane English's Revisions

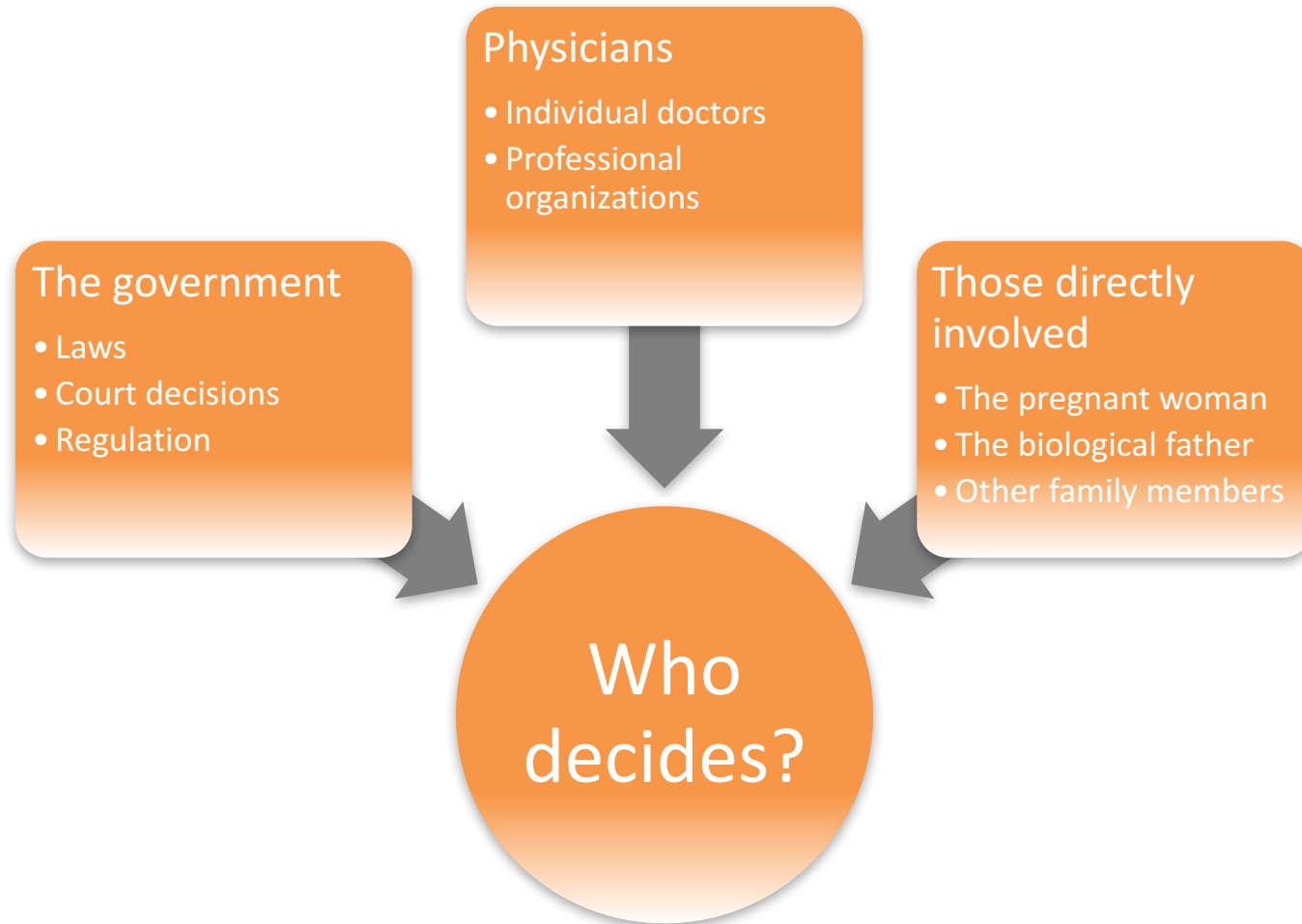
- The philosopher Jane English amended Thomson's example.
 - Imagine that you go out at night, knowing that you might be rendered unconscious and hooked up to the violinist.
 - You would still, according to English, be entitled to unhook yourself.
 - This case is more closely analogous to conventional cases of unwanted pregnancies.

The Rights of the Pregnant Woman

What right does a woman possess that would entitle her to choose an abortion?

- Right to privacy.
 - this is the right specified in *Roe v. Wade*.
- Right to ownership of one's own body.
 - Is ownership a perspicuous category?
- Right to equal treatment.
 - Men can't get pregnant.
- Right to self-determination.
 - Women have the right to decide about their own futures.
 - It is morally repellent to force a woman to bear a child against her will.

Who decides?



Feminist Concerns about Abortion

Many feminists see abortion issue within context of:

- history of oppression of women
- history of danger and death for women when abortion is illegal

Abortion and Racism

Some, particularly within African-American communities, see the call for abortion as a racist, genocidal threat.

Rights of the Father

To what extent do the father's preferences count in making this decision?

- Mother actually give birth, fathers don't.
- Society usually places primary responsibility on the mother.
- Fathers don't even always know they are fathers; mothers always do.

Principle of the Double Effect

Four conditions must be met:

1. the action itself must be either morally good or at least morally neutral;
2. the bad consequences must not be intended;
3. the good consequences cannot be the direct causal result of the bad consequences; and
4. the good consequences must be proportionate to the bad consequences.

Abortion and Sex Selection

- Some worry that abortion, coupled with techniques for determining whether the fetus is male or female, could be used for sex selection, which would probably result in fewer female babies.

Seeking a Common Ground

- Points of possible agreement
 - Reducing unwanted pregnancies
 - But: disagreement about the means
 - Guaranteeing genuinely free and informed choice
 - Providing a loving home for all children

Notable Web Resources

- [Ethics Updates](#)
- Steven Schwartz, [The Moral Question of Abortion](#). (Loyola University Press, 1990). Full text of entire book.
- Judith Jarvis Thomson, "[Abortion](#)," *The Boston Review*, Vol. XX, No. 3, (Jan 1994/Dec 1995). Full text & replies.
- George McKenna, "[On Abortion: A Lincolnian Position](#)," *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 276, No. 3; (September, 1995).
- Martha Bayles, "[Feminism and Abortion](#)." *Atlantic Monthly*. April, 1990.