

Reading Guide #13

Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion" (765-775)

Hursthouse, "Virtue Theory and Abortion"*

- 1) Suppose that someone needs something in order to continue their life. According to Thomson, do they have a right to have this thing? [Hint: not necessarily. Now explain.
- 2) Thomson seeks to criticize the following argument:

- I. Every person has a right to life. [premise]
- II. A fetus is a person [premise]
- III. Therefore, a fetus has a right to life. [from 1 & 2]
- IV. The mother has a right to do what she wants with her body. [premise]
- V. The right to life is more important than the right to do what I want with my body. [premise]
- VI. the fetus' right to life is more important than the mother's right to do what she wants with her body [from 3,5]

Therefore,

VIII. A mother does not have a right to abort her fetus. [conclusion]

- a) Thomson grants one of these premises for the sake of argument (even though she thinks it is false), and believes another is uncontroversial. Which premise does she grant and why does she grant it?
- b) Which premise does the scenario of you, the violinist, and the Society of Music Lovers attack. How does it attack this?**

3) On page 770, Thomson considers the possibility that the violinist may have a right to not be unplugged if you have in some way consented to have her hooked up to you in the first place. Once you have volunteered, it is no longer permissible for you to unplug the violinist. Analogously, if you have consented to have sex in the full knowledge that there is a possibility of becoming pregnant then you have implicitly consented to house the fetus for nine months and it is no longer permissible for you to "unplug" the fetus. In order to combat this analogy, Thomson imagines a world in which there are "people-seeds" (page 771). How does this thought experiment bear on the question of whether or not it is permissible to abort a fetus in the conditions of voluntary sex?

4) It has been thought that virtue theory cannot actually help us make moral decisions. Instead, it simply tells us to do as a virtuous person would do without explaining who this virtuous person is or what the virtuous person would do. As Hursthouse admits, the advice, "Do as Socrates (or some other favorite virtuous person) would do" is spectacularly unhelpful when given to a teenage girl faced with the option of having an

abortion. However, argues Hursthouse, virtue theory is not alone in being unhelpful at this level of description. All three major normative ethical theories are alike in first stating a purely formal premise which cannot yield any advice. They must each be supplemented by a second premise which specifies and explains the key term that appears in the formal premise. What are the formal premises of the other theories of deontology and Consequentialism, how would a Kantian deontologist fill in the second specifying premise, and how would a Utilitarian consequentialist fill in her second specifying premise.

5) What is wrong with a moral theory that “any clever adolescent can apply”?

6) According to Hursthouse someone who believes that the fetus is not a person is committed to saying “What a fuss about nothing!” to a potential mother grieving about her miscarriage, and someone who believes that the fetus is a person from conception is committed to saying “What a tragedy” to a mother of 3 who accidentally gets pregnant, and loses her unwanted child due to miscarriage in the first few weeks. Both of these attitudes, according to Hursthouse, are inappropriate. Why are they both inappropriate? (Hint: the answer has nothing to do with the rights of the fetus. In the first case, the person is callous and insensible to a certain value. In the second case, the person is insensitive to a certain fact. What is the value in the first case and the fact in the second?)

7) What is wrong with someone who spends all their time checking/updating their facebook page to the point where they neglect their friends and career is not that they are violating someone’s rights, but that they place too much value on the unimportant things and not enough on the important things. Similarly, for Hursthouse, sometimes a mother’s decision to abort a fetus reflects a character flaw—she does not appreciate the things that are really important, and she has insufficient appreciation of how important motherhood is to having a rich and full life, where other times aborting a fetus does not reflect a character flaw. Give an example of each case. Do not use cases involving rape, teen pregnancy, hard economic circumstances, or cases where the life of the mother is threatened.