

Reading Guide #14

Marquis, “An Argument that Abortion is Wrong” (E: 786-797)

Thomson, “A Defense of Abortion” (765-775)

1) According to Marquis, in what does the wrongness of killing consist (i.e. what’s so bad about losing your life?) According to this view when is it permissible to kill a biologically alive adult human being? (Hint: the answer is not “never”.)

2) Suppose that someone argues as follows: “Creatures have rights not in virtue of what they will IN THE FUTURE be able to do, but what they can do right now. A fetus is not capable of X, Y, and Z and only creatures currently capable of X, Y, and Z have a right to life.” [where X, Y, and Z are some features of adult human beings that this theorist thinks are important, perhaps, it is self-consciousness, having sentience, being able to take an interest in their future, reason, or something else]. Explain Marquis’ objection to this sort of thinking NO MATTER what X, Y, and Z are. [Hint: construct a person who now lacks X,Y, and Z but clearly has rights!]

3) What is the contraception objection? How does Marquis respond to this objection?

4) 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.

5) 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 the you, the violinist, and the Society of Music Lovers attack. How does it attack this?

6) 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?