

ETHICS AS WORSHIP

The Pursuit of Moral Discipleship

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Abortion

*"For You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother's womb.
I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made."*

—PSALM 139:13–14

*"The texts of Sacred Scripture never address the question of deliberate abortion and so do not directly and specifically condemn it. But they show such great respect for the human being in the mother's womb that they require as a logical consequence that God's commandment 'You shall not kill' be extended to the unborn child as well."*¹

—POPE JOHN PAUL II, *Evangelium Vitae*

Introduction

Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton

On January 22, 1973, the Supreme Court of the United States issued two opinions that altered the face of the abortion debate in America. The joint decisions of *Roe v. Wade*² and *Doe v. Bolton*³ declared that women had a Fourteenth Amendment right to have an abortion as part of their right to privacy. The decisions specifically allowed women to choose abortion in situations in which their health was at stake; the Court decisions, however, defined *health of the mother* so broadly that virtually any physical, emotional, psychological, or familial issue could qualify as a legitimate reason for having an abortion. Tens of millions of abortions have been performed in the United States since 1973.

The first ruling, *Roe v. Wade*, struck down all state laws banning abortion, divided pregnancy into three trimesters (roughly twelve-week periods), and

1. John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 61, accessed April 6, 2020, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html.

2. 410 U.S. 113 (1973).

3. 410 U.S. 179 (1973).

imposed various regulations related to the development of the child and the health of the mother. *Roe* ruled that while abortion on demand was allowed without restriction in the first trimester, the state could limit abortion in the second trimester to ensure the safety of the mother. The Court allowed for states to ban abortion during the third trimester based on the obvious development of the child, but allowed abortion if the mother's health was threatened.

The companion case, *Doe v. Bolton*, ruled that the factors considered to be a threat to the woman's health included anything "physical, emotional, psychological, familial, [or related to] the woman's age."⁴ These two rulings, handed down together, made abortion on demand from conception to full term the law of the land.

The key element of the Supreme Court's rulings had to do with the question of the life of the baby. The majority opinion reads: "We need not resolve the difficult question of when life begins. When those trained in the respective disciplines of medicine, philosophy, and theology are unable to arrive at any consensus, the judiciary, at this point in the development of man's knowledge, is not in a position to speculate as to the answer."⁵ By sidestepping the question of when life begins, the Court ruled that the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment guaranteed a fundamental right to privacy, giving a woman the right to abort. Practically reversing the basic standards of justice commonly used to protect human life in all other circumstances, the Court placed the burden of proof on those who wanted to protect life. That is, the benefit of the doubt was given not to the innocent and unprotected child who "might" be alive, but to those who wanted to have the "choice" whether to terminate the baby.

The years since *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton* have seen remarkable advances in the fields of science and medicine that have effectively removed all doubt related to the question of when life begins. It is a scientific reality that the baby is a living, growing entity with the following characteristics:

1. The full human genetic code is present at the moment of conception; this information guides the growth of the person who will become an adult.
2. The nervous system begins by day 20.
3. The child's brain is fully proportioned by day 30.
4. The child will exhibit spontaneous movement by day 45.
5. His or her lips react to touch by 7 weeks.
6. The eyelids and palms of hands react to touch by 8½ weeks.
7. By the 9th or 10th week, the baby can turn somersaults, frown, and swallow.

4. *Doe*, 410 U.S. at 192.

5. *Roe*, 410 U.S. at 159.

8. By the 11th week, the baby normatively responds to touch, light, heat, and noise. The baby will recoil if pricked by a needle and will even learn and try to avoid the needle if a beep is sounded before subsequent needle pricks.

Based on these and other scientific facts, all parties are forced to agree that what is growing in a mother's womb is:

- Undeniably human (it is not a pig, horse, monkey, and so on);
- Undeniably alive (contrary to the *Roe v. Wade* language);
- Undeniably distinct from the mother (it is not merely tissue that is part of the mother's body);
- Undeniably unique (it has its own unique DNA); and
- Undeniably innocent (it has not broken the law in some way to warrant a death penalty).

Scientifically speaking, there is no longer a serious debate. When a woman is pregnant, she is pregnant with a human being—a human child. Moreover, this leads to the inescapable conclusion that abortion is without question the killing of an innocent, unique, distinct, living human being.

Statistics: U.S. and Global

In the United States alone, it is estimated that over 60 million babies have been killed through various forms of abortion since the *Roe* and *Doe* rulings. That number equates to nearly one-fifth of the current U.S. population. While some politicians may want to suggest that U.S. policies on abortion are restrictive of women's rights, the fact of the matter is that only nine countries report a higher abortion rate: Bulgaria, Cuba, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Romania, Russia, Sweden, and Ukraine.⁶ In the words of C. Ben Mitchell and D. Joy Riley, these two Supreme Court rulings "secured a place for the United States as the most permissive society in the world with respect to abortion laws and policy."⁷ Tragically, these U.S. figures are only a fraction of the total number of abortions that take place worldwide.

6. Abort 73, "U.S. Abortion Statistics," accessed January 23, 2020, https://abort73.com/abortion_facts/us_abortion_statistics/. This site comments regarding China: "Though the UN lists China's official abortion rate at 19.2, China's actual abortion rate is likely much higher. According to China's 2010 census, there were approximately 310 million women of reproductive age in the country. An estimated 13–23 million abortions happen annually in China, resulting in an adjusted abortion rate of 41.9–74.2. The abortion rate is the number of abortions per 1,000 women aged 15–44."

7. C. Ben Mitchell and D. Joy Riley, *Christian Bioethics: A Guide for Pastors, Health Care Professionals, and Families* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2014), 47.

Globally, it is estimated that approximately 56 million babies are aborted *each year*, which equates to roughly 150,000 babies *per day*.⁸ The United Nations periodically reviews abortion laws around the world, taking note of changes to the availability of abortion. In its 2020 report (citing statistics through 2017), the UN noted that “legal grounds for abortion have become less restrictive. Between 1996 and 2017, the percentage of countries permitting abortion increased gradually for all legal grounds, while the percentage of countries not permitting abortion on any grounds declined. As of 2017, four countries did not permit abortion on any grounds.”⁹ Abortion for reasons of fetal development has grown significantly around the world. The UN reports: “At the global level, there has been a marked increase in the proportion of countries permitting abortion in cases of foetal impairment. Sixty-one per cent of countries allowed abortion in cases of foetal impairment in 2017, up from 41 per cent in 1996.” Recent news has focused on the virtual elimination of Down syndrome in some countries, such as Iceland, by means of abortion. With prenatal screening, a pregnant woman can identify whether her unborn child is at high risk for a disorder such as Down syndrome and then terminate the pregnancy through abortion.¹⁰

According to studies done by the Guttmacher Institute, about one in four women in the United States will have an abortion by age forty-five. Most of the women who have abortions in the United States are in their twenties (roughly 60 percent). Some 39 percent identified as white, 28 percent as black, and 25 percent as Hispanic. About 75 percent of women who have abortions are considered “poor” in that they live near or below the federal poverty level. In regard to faith, 38 percent reported no religious affiliation, 24 percent of women identified themselves as Catholic, 17 percent as mainline Protestants, 13 percent as evangelical, and the remaining 8 percent as some other affiliation.¹¹

In the United States and around the world, the number of abortions is staggering. Interestingly, abortion rates have dropped in the United States from their highest levels in the early 1980s.¹² Globally, the total number of abortions has

8. Abort 73, “Worldwide Abortion Statistics,” accessed January 23, 2020, https://abort73.com/abortion_facts/worldwide_abortion_statistics/.

9. United Nations, *World Population Policies 2017: Abortion Laws and Policies* (2020), v, accessed April 7, 2020, https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/policy/WPP2017/WPP2017_Report.pdf.

10. Julian Quinones and Arijeta Lajka, “What Kind of Society Do You Want to Live In? Inside the Country Where Down Syndrome Is Disappearing,” CBS News, August 14, 2017, accessed April 7, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/down-syndrome-iceland/>.

11. Guttmacher Institute, “Induced Abortion in the United States,” accessed April 7, 2020, <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/induced-abortion-united-states>. These statistics reflect the most recent data available as of September 2019.

12. Guttmacher Institute, “Induced Abortion in the United States.”

increased in recent years, but the overall abortion rate has declined slightly. This can be explained by an increase in population accounting for more total abortions despite fewer abortions per woman.¹³ Even with overall abortion rates declining, the total number of abortions should remind us of the significance of this issue for our faith and society.

Core Issue: Life versus Choice

Why is abortion still a debate in our culture? There are many factors at play, but one of the key elements has to do with how the Supreme Court set up its rulings. By sidestepping the question of life and ruling based on a woman's right to choose, the Court set two lines of argument in opposition to each other. One side makes "pro-life" arguments revolving around the life of the baby in question, while the other side makes "pro-choice" arguments about a woman's right to control what happens to, and in, her own body. The former focuses on the principle of the *sanctity of human life*, while the latter centers on the principle of *autonomy*. This is, in fact, why those who argue opposing sides of the debate so often talk past each other and the discussions generate more heat than light.

Both these moral arguments have their rightful place in ethical and civil discourse. The problem comes not in a desire to honor these moral claims, but in trying to decide two things: (1) the extent to which each should hold sway over our moral choices, and (2) which one should be more binding when the life of a baby weighs in the balance. We must ask whether there are any limits to one's personal autonomy. Should a woman's autonomy and choice ("right to privacy") about her body trump the baby's right to survival? Or, on the other hand, we must ask: Is the sanctity of life absolute? Does the value of an innocent human life place limitations on one's freedoms such that we cannot kill an innocent person even when that innocent person's survival restricts our own autonomy?

Another closely related reason why this is still a debate in our country is that the way in which one answers the questions above has massive ramifications for many other applied ethical issues relating to the beginning and end of life. Issues such as euthanasia, physician-assisted suicide, cloning, stem-cell research, genetic engineering, and even contraception and assisted reproductive technologies are closely related because the underlying ethical principles in question here are important factors in those issues as well. Keep in mind that (as we discussed in the first chapter) this is not a question whether we should legislate morality. All legislation related to these issues—regardless of one's position—is a form of

13. Gilda Sedgh et al., "Abortion Incidence between 1990 and 2014: Global, Regional, and Subregional Levels and Trends," *Lancet* 388, no. 10041 (July 16, 2016): 258–67, accessed April 7, 2020, [https://www.the-lancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(16\)30380-4/fulltext](https://www.the-lancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(16)30380-4/fulltext).

legislating morality. The question, then, is not *whether* we should legislate morality but *whose* morality will be legislated. The abortion debate functions as a watershed debate because the arguments that hold sway in this debate will greatly influence the moral, legal, and social implications on many other issues as well.

We will need to address these issues and seek biblical wisdom to know how best to worship God maximally. In order to do so, we begin by defining key terms and highlighting key concepts to orient and frame the discussion. Next, we explore central biblical and theological concepts to ground a particular Christian understanding of the problem of abortion. Third, we will then address the most common lines of objection to a distinctly pro-life point of view. Finally, before bringing the chapter to a conclusion, we will address hard cases that frequently come up for debate about the application of a pro-life ethic.

Key Terms and Concepts

Definition of *Abortion*

The term *abort* means to “stop” or “cease” something in a premature stage. When we speak of aborting a pregnancy, we mean the termination of a pregnancy both before the time of fetal viability (the ability of the child to live independently outside the mother’s womb) and after fetal viability and before live birth. Generally speaking, four categories of abortion reflect the reasons why an abortion takes place. The first is *spontaneous abortion*, which is most commonly known as a *miscarriage*. It is the abrupt and unplanned (spontaneous) early end of a pregnancy that takes place before the fetus is viable.

Table 15.1. Four Categories of Abortion

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Spontaneous Abortion (Miscarriage) 2. Induced Therapeutic Abortion 3. Induced Elective Abortion 4. Induced Eugenic Abortion |
|---|

Much more commonly, however, the term *abortion* is used to refer to what is technically better described as *induced abortion*. An induced abortion is distinct from a miscarriage in that it involves the intentional interruption of a pregnancy. This category can be further differentiated between *therapeutic abortion*, *elective abortion*, and *eugenic abortion*. *Therapeutic abortions* are induced or caused for purposes directly related to either terminal fetal disease or the *health of the mother* (broadly defined by the *Doe v. Bolton* case), and most often they refer to

those rare situations when a pregnancy is purposely terminated in order to save the mother's life.

An *elective* (or voluntary) *abortion* is not medically necessary but instead reflects a response to some other social or personal factor(s). For example, a 2005 study listed such reasons as the woman's feeling that she was too young to be a mother, the absence of a partner, pressure from the genetic father, and the lack of financial means as some of the more common reasons why women elect to have abortions.¹⁴ The vast majority of induced abortions are elective abortions.

Eugenic abortion (sometimes referred to as *selective termination*) differs from both therapeutic abortion and elective abortion in that the primary motive is not merely about the mother's or baby's survival, nor is it focused primarily on a woman's right to "reproductive choice." Instead, eugenic abortion involves the decision to abort a child who may have unwanted characteristics that can range anywhere from having debilitating diseases such as Down syndrome, to being a particular gender (e.g., aborting female babies in China), to having undesirable eye color. It involves the selective termination of life based on factors discovered in prenatal genetic screening that are related not to the viability of a child, but to whether the genetics are either "normal" or "preferred." The term *eugenics* literally means "good genes." As a "science," eugenics involves the attempt to improve the human race through a manipulation of the gene pool via methods such as selective breeding, elimination of those with defective genes, and the sterilization of individuals who may be carriers of undesirable traits. Eugenics raises questions pertaining to the morality of terminating the life of the handicapped, the creation of "designer babies," and a desire for a "pure," or "master," race.

Methods of Abortion

The methods of abortion fall into two broad categories. The first category is medical abortion. "Medical" refers to the administration of medications or drugs that, by differing mechanisms, cause the uterus to contract and expel its contents early.¹⁵ Medically induced abortions normally involve the use of two drugs. Mifepristone is taken orally and functions to decrease the hormones that help maintain a viable pregnancy, which results in a depletion of the uterine lining necessary for a pregnancy to continue. Subsequently, it causes the embryo to detach from the uterus. The other drug, misoprostol, is taken in order to cause the uterus

14. Lawrence B. Finer et al., "Reasons U.S. Women Have Abortions: Quantitative and Qualitative Perspectives," *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* 37, no. 3 (2005): 112–14, accessed April 6, 2020, <https://www.guttmacher.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/journals/3711005.pdf>. See also Maggie Kirkman et al., "Reasons Women Give for Abortion: A Review of the Literature," *Archives of Women's Mental Health* 12, no. 6 (December 2009): 365–78.

15. Mitchell and Riley, *Christian Bioethics*, 47.

to contract and thereby discharge the embryo. Medical abortions are performed within the first sixty-three days (nine weeks) of the first trimester. According to the Guttmacher Institute, this form of abortion accounted for 39 percent of all U.S. abortions in 2017.¹⁶

Surgical abortion, the second method, is performed either by opening the mother's cervix and passing surgical instruments into the uterus to remove the developing baby and placenta or through abdominal surgery.¹⁷ The exact method depends to a large degree on the level of development of the baby that is going to be aborted. *Vacuum (suction) aspiration* is the most common method of surgical abortion in the first trimester. This method involves the dilation of the cervix and the insertion of a hollow vacuum tube with a sharp knife-edged tip known as a vacuum curette. The tube is connected to a powerful vacuum. The baby and the placenta are torn into small pieces and suctioned out into a jar and discarded. *Dilation and curettage (D&C)* is often used in conjunction with vacuum aspiration in first-trimester abortions. In this method, the cervix is dilated, and the uterine wall is scraped to release the fetus and placenta before using suction to remove them from the mother's body.

Other methods of surgical abortion are commonly used in the second trimester and beyond. The most common is *dilation and evacuation (D&E)*. This method involves the use of a pair of forceps inserted into the uterus to grasp the fetus and break and twist off the bones of the child. The spine is then snapped and the baby's skull is crushed. Once the baby is completely dismembered, the body parts are removed with a vacuum (suction) curette. Another method of abortion that has also been used in later-term abortions is known as *dilation and extraction (D&X)*. This procedure, which is also known as *partial-birth abortion*, involves the use of forceps to turn the baby into a breech position (birthing feet-first) in order to deliver the entire lower part of the baby with the exception of the head. While the baby's head is still in the womb, the physician then punctures the base of the baby's skull and suctions out the brain in order to collapse the skull. The rest of the body is removed from the mother. This particular procedure was banned in the United States in 2003 (with the possible exception of an emergency situation to save a mother's life).¹⁸

The Moral Principles at Play in the Abortion Debate

In contemporary healthcare settings, the decision whether to terminate a pregnancy is almost exclusively determined through an emphasis on the autonomy of

16. Guttmacher Institute, "Induced Abortion in the United States."

17. Maureen Paul et al., *Management of Unintended and Abnormal Pregnancy: Comprehensive Abortion Care* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 135–56.

18. John and Paul Feinberg have a helpful discussion of these and other methods of abortion. See John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 74–75.

the woman making the decision. As we alluded to in the introduction above, the core of the moral debate about abortion is a battle over the principle of moral autonomy and the principle of the sanctity of human life.

The word *autonomy* most literally means “self-rule” or “a law unto oneself” (Greek, *autos* “self,” *nomos* “law”). In the field of ethics, the principle of autonomy can be traced back to the Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant and his emphasis on respect for persons as a foundational moral category. Per his view, even without an appeal to God, universal moral principles can still be determined based on the idea that humans should be treated as “ends in themselves” and never merely as a “means to an end.”¹⁹ This ethical move by Kant ultimately paved the way for what has become known as a “rights-based” understanding of ethics in Western society. That is, the idea that I am an “end in myself” and should not be treated merely as a means to an end leads to the conclusion that I must also have some *inalienable rights* that govern how I should (or should not) be treated. This emphasis on rights has in time led to an emphasis on personal liberty and the autonomy of a person to be his or her own decision-maker about his or her life and body.²⁰ As Tom Beauchamp and James Childress summarize:

Personal autonomy encompasses, at a minimum, self-rule that is free from both controlling interference by others and from certain limitations. . . . The autonomous individual acts freely in accordance with a self-chosen plan. . . . Virtually all theories of autonomy view two conditions as essential for autonomy: liberty (independence from controlling influences) and agency (capacity for intentional action).²¹

In the abortion debate, the application of the principle of autonomy happens most commonly when a woman expresses her right to govern her own body as she chooses (liberty) as long as she has the capacity to make an informed choice (agency). It is common, for example, to see a bumper sticker or a placard at a rally that says something to the effect of “Keep your laws off my body” or “My body, my choice.” These signs are indicative of this principle of autonomy.

The same principle could be appealed to with regard to the baby who is going to be aborted. Should not the baby also be given the same dignity regarding its

19. Kant formulates this version of his categorical imperative by stating that a person should always “act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means.” This is the second formulation of his categorical imperative. Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Ethical Philosophy*, ed. Warner A. Wick, trans. James W. Ellington, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 36.

20. Particularly in the field of medical ethics, the principle of autonomy has risen to a position of priority largely due to the influence of Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress’s influential work *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 8th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

21. Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 99–100.

own body? Would it not be wrong to take the life of the child? If the baby is considered to have the same *moral status* (or *moral standing*) as the mother, then he or she is also "an end in himself or herself."²² And if so, then the baby should also not be treated as merely a means to an end. The baby, too, would have a right not to be killed. This is exactly what those who focus on the right to life argue in opposition to abortion. From the Kantian perspective, life is set apart as a fundamental value of existence. While there is no appeal to God for justification of this value, the rational argument that supports the child's "right to life" flows from the basic premise that in order to have a choice, one has to be alive. Thus, the right to not be killed is both logically prior to, and more fundamental than, the right to choose. This is especially the case if my autonomous choice would result in the death of another person with equal moral status.

From a distinctly Christian point of view, the principle of autonomy is likewise not fundamentally denied, but understood in a more limited form. Liberty and freedom are best understood as living in accord with one's own design and the design God wove into the fabric of the universe. When we make our decisions freely *in accord with God's design and moral order*, we will find ourselves most fully human and most fully alive. Likewise, from a distinctively Christian point of view, this is why an unlimited view of autonomy is understood to be so dangerous. As we saw in our earlier discussion (chapter 3) of Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve asserted their own autonomy from God's benevolent leadership and moral direction, they earned striving, toil, alienation, and ultimately death. Thus, Christians do not deny the importance of the principle of autonomy, but rather recognize that it must be brought into the context of what God has revealed about the nature of reality and the nature of morality. We can claim autonomy from the law of gravity, but when we step off a cliff, we will realize that we are still subject to the reality of the way that things actually are. Similarly with the principle of autonomy, God has given us free moral agency, but moral agency is truly free only when the choices made are in accord with the way in which God made the world. From a Christian point of view, the Kantian-based rational appeal to respect the life of another person who is an "end in himself or herself" is not necessarily rejected but is further grounded on the biblical passages to affirm the special moral status of human beings, who are made in God's image (*imago Dei*). As God's image-bearers, human beings have inherent value in themselves (because God gave it to them), but also find their final *end in God*.

Given this line of reasoning, it seems clear that much of the debate then comes down to the question of the moral status of the child. Should the child be granted

22. For a fuller discussion of the concept of moral status, see Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 64–81.

the same status as the mother? Should the baby be granted the same right to not be killed as the mother? Could we make bumper stickers or hold placards on behalf of the baby that read “Keep your laws off my body” or “My body, my choice” as well? Or is there a sense in which the child is somehow “less than” the mother in terms of his or her moral standing? David Platt is correct when he writes:

The key question that we all must answer—and the question that determines how we view abortion—is this: What is contained in the womb? Is it a person? Or is it merely an embryo, a fetus? Virtually every other question and every single argument in the abortion controversy comes back to this question: What, or who, is in the womb? And once this question is answered, everything else comes into perspective.²³

A Biblical Understanding of Moral Status and the Question of Abortion

Moral Status

The Christian is duty-bound to seek Scripture for clarity regarding the moral standing of the child who inhabits the womb of a mother. What does the Bible teach about the value of human beings? Does the Bible give clarity on whether a child in the womb should be considered a human being in the same sense as a human being who has been born?

In regard to the value of human beings, as we have argued elsewhere (see our discussion on the sanctity of human life in chapter 13 on capital punishment), biblical passages such as Genesis 1:26–27; 9:6; Psalm 8:3–8; and James 3:9 all indicate that God places a high and unique value on human life because human beings carry the special status of *image-bearers*. For this reason, Scripture also clearly prohibits the taking of innocent human life. The commandment “You shall not murder” (Ex. 20:13) applies to all human beings who have not relinquished their right to life through ungodly or immoral behavior as specified in Scripture.

Scott Rae is helpful here when he points out that simply because we know it is wrong to unjustly take an innocent human life, that does not necessarily mean that we have gained clarity on the issue of abortion. As Rae suggests, applying Exodus 20:13 “directly to the unborn involves begging the question about the moral and ontological status of the unborn. That is, to apply this to the unborn involves a further argument that the embryo/fetus in the womb constitutes a person who possesses the right to life. . . . The important part of the argument is to

23. David Platt, *Counter Culture: A Compassionate Call to Counter Culture in a World of Poverty, Same-Sex Marriage, Racism, Sex Slavery, Immigration, Abortion, Persecution, Orphans, and Pornography* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2015), 63.

show that God attributes the same characteristics to the unborn in the womb as to a person out of the womb.”²⁴

Theologically, one can make the strongest argument regarding the full moral status of an unborn child by considering the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Regarding the incarnation, both the Bible and church tradition recognize that the person Jesus Christ is both fully God and fully human (i.e., the doctrine of *hypostatic union*, Heb. 1:3) from the moment of conception. In the Gospel of Luke, we learn that Jesus was born of a woman (Luke 1:31) and that although his conception was miraculous, his gestation would proceed normally as Mary carried him in pregnancy for nine months. Not only did his life begin at the moment of conception, it was also at that point that the angel Gabriel told Mary to name him Jesus, thereby recognizing his personal nature. The text further indicates that soon after learning that she was pregnant,

Mary arose and went in a hurry to the hill country, to a city of Judah, and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. And she cried out with a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And how has it happened to me, that the mother of my Lord would come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped in my womb for joy." (Luke 1:39–44)

Note that in this passage not only does Elizabeth recognize that Mary is already the mother of the “Lord” and not merely the incubator of a fetus, but she also indicates that her own child (John) “leaped in my womb for joy.” The passage leads us to a conclusion that from the earliest stages of pregnancy, not only was Jesus an embodied human, but he was clearly accorded the moral standing of personhood as well.

Lest one think that Jesus could be a special case since his incarnation was miraculous in nature, it is good to consider other passages of Scripture that affirm a similar moral status for preborn children. Biblically speaking, several passages affirm this conclusion and give clarity regarding the continuity of a human being's moral status from the earliest moments of human life into eternity.²⁵ For example, in Jeremiah 1:5, the Lord says, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations.” This passage clearly indicates a type of personal knowledge that God has

24. Scott B. Rae, *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 133.

25. We are indebted here to Mitchell and Riley's discussion of the importance of the doctrine of Christology in the abortion debate. See Mitchell and Riley, *Christian Bioethics*, 54–55.

of Jeremiah before birth. It indicates that God "knew" Jeremiah in the same way as an embryo as he does as an adult. Similarly, with the poetic language of Job 3:3, "Let the day perish on which I was to be born, and the night which said, 'A boy is conceived,'" the child in question at the day of birth is considered to be the same person as he was on the day of conception.

In Psalm 51:5, David writes, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me." As David writes a poem of contrition and lament, he not only expresses sorrow over his sinful actions, but also recognizes that his proclivity to sin (a trait of personhood) began at his conception and has carried forth into his adulthood. He uses a similar line of reasoning in Psalm 139:13-16. Here David acknowledges God's intimate and careful process in forming an unborn child throughout the process of a pregnancy:

For You formed my inward parts;
 You wove me in my mother's womb.
 I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
 Wonderful are Your works,
 And my soul knows it very well.
 My frame was not hidden from You,
 When I was made in secret,
 And skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth;
 Your eyes have seen my unformed substance;
 And in Your book were all written
 The days that were ordained for me,
 When as yet there was not one of them.

In the Hebrew language, the imagery of "inward parts" was used to refer to the seat of a person's affections and passions. Such language is used elsewhere in Scripture to refer to the inner part of a person where emotions are felt, where the conscience dwells, and where spiritual distress is experienced (e.g., Job 16:13; Pss. 51:7; 73:21).²⁶ It is evident that the general tenor of Scripture supports for all pre-born children the conclusion we reached by considering the incarnation of Jesus. In particular, "the unborn is considered a person by God, being described with many of the same characteristics that apply to children and adults."²⁷

The "law of retribution" (*lex talionis*) in Exodus 21:22-25 also highlights the idea that the unborn is considered a person from God's perspective. This passage emphasizes the sanctity of human life both by its demand for appropriate

26. Mitchell and Riley, *Christian Bioethics*, 57.

27. Rae, *Moral Choices*, 138.

measures of retribution in the face of evil and by the limitation of its extent in view of the nature of the evil committed. The passage reads:

If men struggle with each other and strike a woman with child so that she *gives birth prematurely*, yet there is no injury, he shall surely be fined as the woman's husband may demand of him, and he shall pay as the judges decide. But if there is any further injury, then you shall appoint as a penalty life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise. (Ex. 21:22–25)

In context, this passage falls within a section of the law of Moses that is concerned with giving instruction on how the Israelites were to compensate or penalize people for loss of property or personal injury (Ex. 21:12–36). These particular verses describe a case in which two men are fighting and in the midst of their scuffle they accidentally hit a pregnant woman.

The phrase “gives birth prematurely” in the passage is an English interpretation of the Hebrew verb *yātzā*, which literally means “to go or come out.” In Scripture, when this word is used in relation to pregnancy, it describes the birth of a living child.²⁸ In contrast, the word normally used for a miscarriage—which is not present in this verse—is *shākōl* (e.g., Gen. 42:36; 43:14; Ex. 23:26; Lev. 26:22). In fact, the term *shākōl* is used only two chapters later in Exodus 23:26 as God describes what he will do for the people of Israel once they enter the promised land (“There shall be no one miscarrying or barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days.”). In light of this evidence, Exodus 21:22–25 should be understood to mean that while fighting, the men bump into a pregnant woman and cause her to go into premature labor. The law indicates that if there is “no injury” to either the mother or the child, the guilty party should still be penalized for endangering either the mother or the baby. If, however, the men bump the pregnant woman and cause harm to either the baby or the mother, then the normative standards of the law apply: life for life, eye for eye, and the like.²⁹

28. Walter Kaiser states, “Moreover, the verb ‘to come out’ is used in every case except one (Num. 12:12, [where] it is used for a stillborn child) for the birth of an ordinary child.” Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 171.

29. Some have interpreted this passage alternatively to mean “she has a miscarriage,” implying that the miscarriage of a child would result in only a fine’s being assessed and thus it could be concluded that the preborn child carried less moral standing than an already-born child or adult human person. These arguments are not persuasive given either the context of the passage or the language used. In addition, even if the incident resulted in the accidental death of the child (miscarriage), this would not necessarily lead to the conclusion that somehow the unborn child carried less moral status. The discussion would then shift to whether different penalties should be incurred for an accidental death versus a premeditated murder—much like the laws for manslaughter versus first-degree murder in modern legal contexts. For a fuller discussion, see

In light of the incarnation of Christ, the general tenor of biblical passages that address contexts of preborn life, and the law of Moses regarding appropriate retribution for behavior that threatens the life of the innocent, we can conclude that the Bible indicates that from the earliest stages of development, every living human being is granted the same moral status. In sum, *there is no such thing as a living human being who is not also granted the full moral status of a human person.*

A Biblical Perspective on Abortion

Having arrived at this conclusion, we can now directly address the morality of abortion. It is important that those who take a *pro-life position* realize that the Bible never specifically says either that an unborn child is a person or that abortion is morally wrong. One cannot look in a concordance for the word *abortion* and find a direct statement about it in the Bible. As the previous discussion indicates, however, this should not be taken to mean that the Bible is silent about the issue. Recalling our discussion earlier in the book about biblical hermeneutics, this is a specific situation in which the moral question is best answered by using Scriptures to derive an ethical principle and then driving that ethical principle into the topic in question (see chapter 5 on the role of the Bible in ethics as worship). Here, the principle of the sanctity of human life moves to the central position in the debate. Since unborn children are given equal status as adult humans, the sixth commandment directly applies to the discussion: "You shall not murder" (Ex. 20:13).

Recalling what we have highlighted in previous chapters about this commandment, the Hebrew word translated into English as "murder" is *ratsakh*. In the Bible, *ratsakh* is never used to describe the killing that takes place in contexts in which God has commanded humans to take other human life (such as in the just application of capital punishment or divinely permitted involvement in war). Also, this word is never used in the Bible to refer to the killing of animals or plants. Thus, not all killing is forbidden by Scripture, but *the unjust taking of innocent life* is forbidden, which is what this command addresses. This includes not just intended homicide, but also negligent homicide in which a death takes place because of a failure to take adequate precautions. Therefore, in relation to the discussion of abortion, we can conclude that the sixth commandment does indeed speak directly to this topic. Any intentional and direct killing of a child (born or preborn) would fall into the category of *murder*.

Even though Scripture does not directly address the topic of abortion, this does not mean that the Bible is silent about the issue, nor were the early-church fathers. Some of the earliest church documents, which were heavily influenced

Jack W. Cottrell, "Abortion and the Mosaic Law," in *Issues and Applications*, ed. David K. Clark and Robert V. Rakestraw, vol. 2 of *Readings in Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 32–35.

by Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, specifically forbid the practice of both abortion and infanticide and set the standard for an overwhelmingly pro-life ethical stance throughout the history of the church. For example, as early as 120 A.D., the *Didache* (an early guide on Christian teaching) specifically teaches that "you shall not murder a child by abortion nor kill that which is begotten."³⁰ In like manner, the *Epistle of Barnabas* (125 A.D.) gives this instruction: "You shall not slay the child by procuring abortion; nor, again, shall you destroy it after it is born."³¹ The second-century theologian and apologist Athenagoras offered one of the most reasoned cases against abortion in the early church. In his defense of the Christian faith, written to the Roman emperor, he drew on the issue of abortion to defend the nonviolence of Christians:

And when we say that those women who use drugs to bring on abortion commit murder, and will have to give an account to God for the abortion, on what principle should we commit murder? For it does not belong to the same person to regard the very fetus in the womb as a created being, and therefore an object of God's care, and when it has passed into life, to kill it; and not to expose an infant, because those who expose them are chargeable with child-murder, and on the other hand, when it has been reared to destroy it. But we are in all things always alike and the same, submitting ourselves to reason, and not ruling over it.³²

These and a host of other documents from the church fathers uniformly speak against the morality of abortion.³³

It seems that as we consider a Christian perspective on abortion and the morality of the practice, practical wisdom should dictate what has generally been true of any civilized society. When there is any doubt, the benefit of the doubt should go toward the protection of human life. Therefore, not only is abortion wrong, this would also call into question the use of some forms of birth control as well as embryonic research conducted for either therapeutic reasons or reproductive purposes. We will address these topics in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

30. *Didache*, 2, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. M. B. Riddle, Ante-Nicene Fathers 7 (Buffalo: Christian Literature, 1886), accessed January 25, 2020, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0714.htm>.

31. *Epistle of Barnabas*, 19, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Ante-Nicene Fathers 1 (Buffalo: Christian Literature, 1885), accessed January 25, 2020, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0124.htm>.

32. Athenagoras, "A Plea for the Christians," in *Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria (Entire)*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. B. P. Pratten, Ante-Nicene Fathers 2 (Buffalo: Christian Literature, 1885), 147.

33. For a focused list of early-church writings about abortion, see "The Fathers on Abortion," accessed April 8, 2020, <https://catholicism.org/fathers-abortion.html>.

In sum, Scripture and church history attest that the child in the womb has moral status as an image-bearer and deserves protection against the travesty of abortion. Pope John Paul II was correct when he wrote that "the texts of Sacred Scripture never address the question of deliberate abortion and so do not directly and specifically condemn it. But they show such great respect for the human being in the mother's womb that they require as a logical consequence that God's commandment 'You shall not kill' be extended to the unborn child as well."³⁴ And this, then, is precisely why the Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision was so immensely tragic.

Objections

Even though we have made the case from Scripture and church history that abortion is a violation of God's design for human life, we still need to engage in the abortion debate with a society that may not accept biblical and theological arguments. Therefore, we need to be prepared to answer objections that we find in the public square. Francis Beckwith is on point when he writes:

Most supporters of abortion choice agree with pro-life advocates that the question of abortion's permissibility rests on the moral status of the unborn: abortion is prima facie unjustified homicide if and only if the unborn entity is a full-fledged member of the human community (i.e., a person or subject of moral rights).³⁵

Philosophically, the right to life is both logically prior to and more fundamental than the right to choose. Biblically, the taking of innocent human life is considered murder. The only way to justify that a right to choose trumps a right to life is either by attempting to make the case that the preborn baby does not have full moral status (denial of personhood) or by arguing that autonomy is the more binding moral norm even when an innocent life weighs in the balance. Most of the objections that are made to the biblical case against abortion fall along these two lines. In this section, we address examples of each in turn.

Personhood Objections

Two prominent forms of argument bring into question the moral status or personhood of the preborn child. Both forms suggest that moral status is not attained until some decisive point in the baby's development. The first is related to

34. John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 61.

35. Francis J. Beckwith, *Defending Life: A Moral and Legal Case against Abortion Choice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 130.

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the question of biological development and the point of *ensoulment*. The second type of personhood objection focuses on the functional development of the child and can thus apply to unborn children as well as to children who are already born (thus raising the possibility of infanticide).

Developmental and Ensoulment Objections

Ensoulment has to do with an attempt to identify the point at which a soul inhabits a human body. The basic idea behind this objection is recognition of the living status of the unborn child but a denial of the status of personhood until the soul is present. This type of argument rests on the idea that at some decisive point in the process of biological development, God imparts a soul to the child and that it thus moves from the category of human being to human person.

Philosophically, this is a difficult argument to make because the soul is commonly understood as the animating principle of life in any living organism. As Aristotle argued, if something is alive, it has a soul.³⁶ Theologically, this is problematic because Christian doctrines related to anthropology have always held that human beings are “embodied selves” that are best understood as a body-soul duality integrated into one united self. Hence, the soul and the body are united at the point at which a unique life begins. Biblically, we have already seen this in our discussion of Jesus’ incarnation in the Gospel of Luke.

Nonetheless, there are some who will appeal to a passage such as Genesis 2:7 to suggest that a human being does not receive a soul until the person receives the “breath of life.” This passage reads, “Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.” Before a child is born, it receives oxygen through the mother’s body. The mother delivers oxygen to the baby through the blood that circulates through the placenta by means of the umbilical cord. This “breath of life” argument suggests that personhood does not begin until a baby draws its first breath at birth and only then becomes a living soul with full moral status. In addition to the philosophical, theological, and biblical reasons mentioned above, such an argument lacks substance for two additional reasons. First, the biblical text of Genesis 2:7 is speaking to “life” of the being in question, not personhood. To make a personhood argument is to demand from the text an argument that is not present in it. The better understanding is to recognize that Adam was a full person when he came to life, and that therefore the same would be true of a child at the moment of conception. Second, this type of argument does not take into account the unique nature of Adam’s (and Eve’s) creation. The first humans were uniquely created as adults. All other humans are conceived and grow through a normal

36. Aristotle, *De Anima*, 2.1 (412a20, 415b8).

process of gestation. Therefore, to appeal to this unique example as the normative understanding of when a human “becomes alive” or receives a soul is to compare apples to oranges.

A second version of this ensoulment objection identifies the point of quickening as the decisive point when the soul transforms the living being to a living person. *Quickening* is an old-fashioned word used to describe the point in a pregnancy when a mother becomes aware of the baby’s movement. As it relates to this discussion, the argument is sometimes made that it is at the point of quickening that a rational soul enters the child and that thus, before this point, the baby is not a person, just living tissue. Those who want to make this type of argument often appeal to the Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas (1224–74). Based on the scientific data available to him at the time, Aquinas concluded that God placed a rational soul within the body after conception: in males at the forty-day point and in females roughly at the eighty-day point.³⁷ This appeal to Aquinas was even present in the *Roe v. Wade* decision, noting the historical and legal significance of quickening as the point of ensoulment.

The problem with this form of reasoning, however, is twofold. First, it relies on an antiquated understanding of biology, which is all that Aquinas had available at the time, and second, it assumes that he would have retained the same perspective even if he did have a better sense of fetal development. Even though Aquinas never directly discussed the issue of abortion, there are two places in the *Summa Theologica* where he clearly indicates that taking the life of a preborn child would be a form of murder.³⁸ Thus, given his overall perspective on the sanctity of life, it is certainly possible to suggest that had he had a better understanding of modern biology, he very likely would have taken a much different view on the issue.

A third version would point to an even earlier stage in development by appealing to Leviticus 17:11 (see also Deut. 12:23), which states, “For the life of the flesh is in the blood.” Here the argument is made that it is at the biological point when a fetus develops its own blood supply (around three weeks after conception) that the baby attains moral status. Biologically speaking, it is true that blood actively maintains life by providing oxygen and other vital nutrients to cells, tissues, and organs. But it would be wrong to suggest that a baby is not actually alive before having its own blood supply. Technically speaking, in the early stages of development before a child acquires its own blood supply, it is both alive and dependent

37. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences*, trans. Ralph McInerny, bk. 3, d.2, q.5, a.2, resp., accessed June 23, 2020, <https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/Sentences.htm>.

38. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2–2.64.8; 3.68.11. We are indebted to Douglas Beaumont’s helpful discussion on this topic. See his blog post “Aquinas on Abortion,” March 1, 2012, accessed January 25, 2020, <https://douglasbeaumont.com/2012/03/01/aquinas-on-abortion/>.

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on blood for its survival. In this case, its life is dependent on the mother's blood. It follows that the fact that the early-stage fetus does not yet have its own blood supply does not limit its "life."

Further, for the animals alluded to in Leviticus 17:11, given their stage of development, blood is necessary for them to be alive. It is the necessary precondition for their moral existence. Without blood, an animal will indeed die, as would also an early-stage embryo. But with a pre-twenty-day-old human embryo, the presence of its own blood supply is not a necessary precondition for life. Logically, it does not follow that the lack of an independent blood supply indicates that the child in question either is not alive or is not a person.

Finally, as we saw with Genesis 2:7, this text is speaking to the "life" of an animal, not the soul or personhood. Using this text as grounds for arguing a later stage of ensoulment both takes the text out of context and forces on it a discussion that is not inherent in it. Again, it is not a direct comparison and therefore results in the problem of eisegesis.

In sum, any appeal to a decisive moment of biological development other than conception is going to run into the problem of explaining the existence of "life" without the presence of the animating soul. As we have seen from these three examples, such arguments often appeal to sketchy attempts to force an idea into the text of Scripture that it does not speak to and to shift the argument being made about life to an artificial discussion about the soul. While biological development does indeed raise important and sometimes troubling questions about the human soul (e.g., the possibility of twinning and recombination), none of these necessarily lead to the conclusion that the soul is not present from the moment of conception. As we have argued above, the most compelling case both biblically and theologically is the one that places the point of ensoulment at the moment of conception.³⁹

Functionalism Objections

The second type of personhood objection, *functionalism*, suggests that not all humans have equal moral status because some do not currently possess (or have not developed) the ability to function at a level deemed necessary to qualify for the full moral status of *person*. Influential ethicists such as Michael Tooley, Peter Singer, Tristram Engelhardt, and Jeffrey Reiman all suggest that personhood requires the presence of some combination of specific human functions such as self-consciousness, rationality, the ability to freely choose, moral agency,

39. For a helpful discussion regarding the nature of human personhood in light of early stages of human development (a "substance view of personhood"), see Beckwith, *Defending Life*, 132–34. See also J. P. Moreland and Scott Rae, *Body and Soul: Human Nature and the Crisis in Ethics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 206.

the ability to interact with others, and the ability to feel pain.⁴⁰ Singer, for example, comments: "My suggestion, then, is that we accord the fetus no higher moral status than we give to a nonhuman animal at a similar level of rationality, self-consciousness, awareness, capacity to feel and so on. Because no fetus is a person, no fetus has the same claim to life as a person."⁴¹ From this point of view, unborn children do not have the status of fully human persons and therefore should be granted fewer moral and legal rights than someone who qualifies as a person.

The following diagram (see fig. 15.1) helps illustrate the idea.

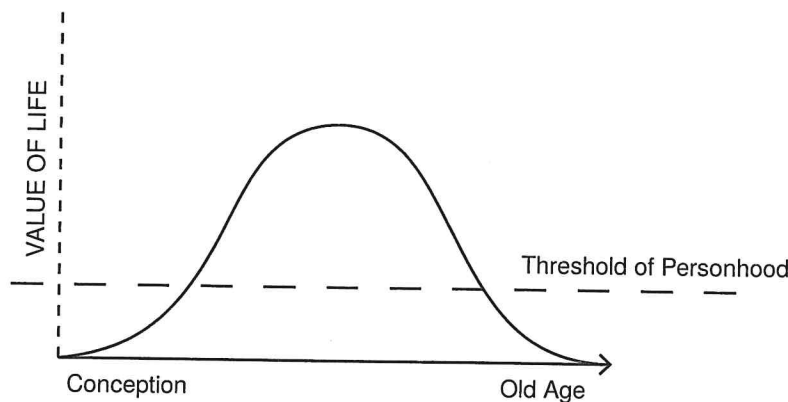


Fig. 15.1. Functionalism Perspective on Personhood

Note that this view of *functionalism* leads to several very troubling logical conclusions. First, not only does this view of personhood lead to the possible conclusion that abortion would be permissible from conception to birth, it actually rejects birth as a clear line of demarcation altogether. Following the logic of his own reasoning, for example, Singer comments: "A week-old baby is not a rational and self-aware being, and there are many nonhuman animals whose rationality, self-awareness, capacity to feel and so on, exceed that of a human baby a week or a month old. If, for the reasons I have given, the fetus does not have the same claim to life as a person, it appears that the newborn baby does not either."⁴² Thus, not

40. See, e.g., Michael Tooley, "Abortion and Infanticide," in *Rights and Wrongs of Abortion*, ed. Marshall Cohen, Thomas Nagel, and Thomas Scanlon (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), 57; Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 136; H. Tristram Engelhardt Jr., *The Foundations of Bioethics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 136; Jeffrey Reiman, *Critical Moral Liberalism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 121.

41. Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 136. Singer goes on to claim that the status of nonperson extends to a child after birth as well. He acknowledges that abortion-rights proponents are uncomfortable with his logical consistency, but he believes that he is the one being consistent. Therefore, he argues for infanticide as well. See Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 151–54.

42. Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 151.

only is his argument "pro-choice" in regard to abortion, it is pro-choice in regard to infanticide.

Second, functionalism also has massive implications related to end-of-life scenarios in which, through age, injury, or illness, someone who may have once had the abilities that would qualify an individual for full moral status as a person may lose them. Logical consistency would suggest that in such cases, these humans no longer qualify as persons and also have fewer rights to life. In certain circumstances, it would then be morally permissible to terminate these lives as well. If this is the case with the aged, infirm, or ill, it logically follows that in certain contexts this must also be true of those who have disabilities that limit their ability to function.

As troubling as these types of arguments are, they can actually play a helpful role for pro-life advocates. There are two reasons that this is so. First, Singer's brutal honesty about the logical conclusions that follow from his (and all functionalist) arguments demonstrates the arbitrary nature of any form of pro-choice or pro-abortion positions that suggest a clear and obvious dividing line between those who have the lesser moral status of a human being and those granted the full moral status of a human person. Regardless of whether the standard is judged in terms of biological or rational development, certain questions emerge: Who gets to determine where that dividing line falls? Who is qualified to set the minimal standards required for someone to cross the threshold from human being into human person? It seems that the logical answer to those questions would be either "God" or "those who hold positions of power or influence." If the decision-maker is God, then what is said in the Bible pushes our understanding of personhood back toward the moment of conception, and abortion becomes immoral. If the decision-makers are persons of influence and power, the moral conclusion is not only much more liberal regarding abortion, but also much more frightening. History suggests that a dystopian reality with eugenics as the principal moral goal will be the result.

This leads to the second reason that this kind of argument can actually be helpful to the pro-life cause. The endgame of *functionalism* is horrifying. Therefore, although Singer's ultimate conclusion leads him to support legalized abortion, his critique of the classic pro-choice argument is, in a rather twisted way, very helpful. As this debate continues in the public square, it might be useful for pro-lifers to take note of Singer's critiques and the logical conclusions that follow from a functionalist type of argument about personhood and employ them by appealing to whatever sense of human dignity remains in our social and cultural bloodstream.

Autonomy Objection

In addition to the preceding personhood objections, a second category of pro-choice objections to pro-life arguments is best described as the *autonomy argument*. The autonomy argument emphasizes the right of a person to do with his

or her own body whatever he or she deems favorable. In the abortion debate, the emphasis is the mother's body. The autonomy argument attempts to make the case that even if we grant the full moral status of personhood to a preborn baby all the way from the moment of conception, this fact does not necessarily require the moral conclusion that aborting the child is wrong. In the public square, this type of objection is often expressed by statements such as these: "Keep your laws off my body" and "My body, my choice." This argument is also often coupled with sentiments such as "I would never have an abortion myself, but I support a woman's right to choose." The foundational idea of the argument, in essence, is that *a woman should have the right to do with her own body whatever she chooses*.⁴³

The Sovereign-Zone Argument

In his book *Persuasive Pro-Life*, Trent Horn helpfully distinguishes between two versions of this type of argument.⁴⁴ The first he calls the "sovereign zone" argument. Simply put, this argument rests on the claim that a woman has the absolute right to do whatever she wants with anything that is *inside* her body. While a woman would not be permitted to kill an infant or toddler because that child is outside her body, it is different with an unborn child. Since an unborn baby is inside the "sovereign zone" of her body, she can do whatever she wants with it.

This is a remarkably extreme argument. First, it is extreme because it flies in the face of how we generally think about the limits of sovereignty over property in general. Nowhere in society do we use the idea of personal ownership to do on our property whatever we choose. If a stranger wanders onto my land, I am not permitted to torture him because he has wandered into the sovereign zone of my private land. Likewise, I am not permitted to kill him on sight. Certainly, I cannot lure someone onto my land and kill him with impunity simply because he is in the "sovereign zone." Private-property rights are not absolute—especially when someone else's life is at stake.

Further, this type of absolute personal-sovereignty argument violates many laws that seek to protect both the mother and the child from behaviors that might endanger either. For example, we have laws that prohibit drug abuse and prostitution for a reason. But if we stick specifically to the type of "sovereign zone" that this argument is claiming, it leads to an extreme understanding of sovereignty. Consider the following two scenarios. First, if a woman were to cut open her own body and mutilate parts of her intestines or kidneys, we would question her claim to sovereignty based on concern for her sanity. "Who would do such a

43. Rae, *Moral Choices*, 139.

44. Trent Horn, *Persuasive Pro-Life: How to Talk about Our Culture's Toughest Issue* (El Cajon, CA: Catholic Answers, 2014), 155–73.

thing?" we would rightly ask. "Certainly no one in her right mind!" would be our answer. Common decency would move us to call authorities to get her help, and a civilized society would use the coercive force of the law to limit her own choices regarding her own body for her own good. Second, in the same flow of argument, if a mother chose to open her abdomen for the purpose not of aborting her unborn child, but of purposely maiming or torturing it, society not only would question her sanity, but would use the force of the law to protect the child for *its* own sake precisely because the sovereign claim over the mother's own body finds its limits at the boundary of causing harm to another person.⁴⁵ How much more so with killing her child? While bodily autonomy is important, there are limits. Both reasonable people and civilized societies recognize this.

Judith Jarvis Thomson's "Right to Refuse" Argument: "Unplugging the Violinist"

The second type of autonomy argument that Horn describes is the "right to refuse" argument. Instead of arguing that a woman can do whatever she wants within her body, this more subtle approach argues that she has the right to refuse to do something in her body. That is, she has the right to not be forced to care for a child that is living inside her.

Without question, Judith Jarvis Thomson introduced the most influential version of this argument in her article "A Defense of Abortion." Her argument has come to be known as "the violinist" argument. In the first part of her argument, she fully grants the status of personhood to the unborn from the point of conception. Then, having granted this, she goes on to make her case for autonomous choice by proposing the following (and now very famous) thought experiment:

Let me ask you to imagine this. You wake up in the morning and find yourself back to back in bed with an unconscious violinist. A famous unconscious violinist. He has been found to have a fatal kidney ailment, and the Society of Music Lovers has canvassed all the available medical records and found that you alone have the right blood type to help. They have therefore kidnapped you, and last night the violinist's circulatory system was plugged into yours, so that your kidneys can be used to extract poisons from his blood as well as your own. The director of the hospital now tells you, "Look, we're sorry the Society of Music Lovers did this to you—we

45. This has been a long-standing limit to even utilitarian arguments such as those of John Stuart Mill, who asserted the "simple principle" or "harm principle," which states that a person can do whatever he wants as long as his actions do not harm others. Further, if they do harm others, then society is justified to use coercive force to prevent those actions that cause harm to others. In Mill's words, "the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant." John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (New York: Penguin, 1974), 68–69.

would never have permitted it if we had known. But still, they did it, and the violinist is now plugged into you. To unplug you would be to kill him. But never mind, it's only for nine months. By then he will have recovered from his ailment, and can safely be unplugged from you." Is it morally incumbent on you to accede to this situation? No doubt it would be very nice of you if you did, a great kindness. But do you have to accede to it? What if it were not nine months, but nine years? Or longer still? What if the director of the hospital says, "Tough luck, I agree, but now you've got to stay in bed, with the violinist plugged into you, for the rest of your life. Because remember this. All persons have a right to life, and violinists are persons. Granted you have a right to decide what happens in and to your body, but a person's right to life outweighs your right to decide what happens in and to your body. So you cannot ever be unplugged from him."⁴⁶

At first blush, this case typically elicits strong sympathy from any reader. The reason is that Thomson invites readers to put themselves in the shoes of someone who has unjustly and involuntarily been forced into a position of carrying a heavy and unwanted burden. She uses an emotional appeal to personal freedom in an attempt to place the principle of autonomy above the principle of the sanctity of human life. In doing so, she concludes that while it would be very nice for someone (like you) to provide the means for the other person's survival, certainly (she reasons) remaining connected to the violinist *cannot* be morally *obligatory*. Her move at this point is to suggest that it must be reasonable to see that in the same way, one could not require a mother to continue to sustain the life of an unwanted child. Abortion, she concludes, is therefore morally permissible because a mother is simply "unplugging" herself from a burden. If the mother wants to withdraw her uterus from the child, says Thomson, it is her right to do so.

Nevertheless, is such an argument logical? It is not, for several very important reasons. First, recognize that the scenario that Thomson sets up is not a direct comparison. Recalling our earlier discussion of the methods of abortion, actual abortions are nothing like this rather gentle description of "unplugging." To make the scenarios equal, we would have to be willing to say that it would be morally permissible to detach ourselves from the violinist through an act of violence in order to "unplug" him. It is not merely about allowing the violinist to die; he would need to be attacked and directly and purposely killed in a remarkably brutal manner.

Second, the violinist case is very different from that of abortion because in the vast majority of cases, the father and mother voluntarily entered into a sexual relationship. It is the natural order of the biology God created for sexual

46. Judith Jarvis Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1971): 47-48.

intercourse to result in conception and pregnancy. Therefore, the parents do indeed bear a responsibility for the child. Remember, the autonomy argument (my body, my choice) grants that the baby is a full human person. Therefore, if it is wrong to kill the child to be free from it *after birth*, it is also wrong to kill the child *before birth*.

Third, it should be pointed out that if radical choice like this is allowable even in the face of the full moral status of another person, then why would such an argument be limited to the context of abortion? Why would such an argument be limited to the location of the baby in the woman's body? Wouldn't the same logic work in other situations and contexts in which someone else's existence places what I consider to be undue hardship on me? I can think of a few graduate students who might be willing to "unplug" me because of the heavy burden I place on them! On a serious note, would not this kind of argument lead to conclusions in which care for the invalid, comatose, or severely handicapped would become grounds for "unplugging" that person because his or her continued existence demands much of me?

Finally, Thomson's argument also seems to lead to the conclusion that if she saw an infant drowning in a puddle, she would have no moral obligation to seek to offer life-saving aid if it meant that doing so was burdensome. Granted, she is making the case that a nine-month pregnancy requires a much longer and more sustained effort to save a life. But if the argument is that one is not required to do so because of the principle of autonomy, then the length of inconvenience is ultimately not a determining factor. If I have the right to do with my body what I want, then there is no moral requirement to spend nine months or nine seconds to save the baby. The length of time just serves as a smoke screen regarding the fundamental nature of the argument she is making.⁴⁷

Based on this reasoning, one can see why even these autonomy-based arguments ultimately fall back to questions of the moral status of human beings and personhood. Returning to the previous question that David Platt raised, what is in the womb is the central question:

The key question that we all must answer—and the question that determines how we view abortion—is this: What is contained in the womb? Is it a person? Or is it merely an embryo, a fetus?⁴⁸

47. For a more in-depth response to Thomson's argument, we refer our readers to two very helpful sources. See Mathew Lu, "Defusing the Violinist Analogy," *Human Life Review* 39, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 46–62, <https://www.humanlifereview.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/2013-winter.pdf>. See also Beckwith, *Defending Life*, 172–99. On a more popular level, we refer our readers to the excellent work of Randy Alcorn in *ProLife Answers to ProChoice Arguments*, expanded and updated ed. (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2000), 103–38.

48. Platt, *Counter Culture*, 63.

We cannot pretend to be a just and good society if we allow the killing of innocent persons either because they are in the wrong place (in the uterus of a mother who does not want the child) or because the person in question is burdensome.

Some well-meaning people may make a statement to this effect: "*while I would never have an abortion, I don't think it is right to limit the right of a woman to do with her own body whatever she chooses.*" Such a statement, however, espouses a level of autonomy that no society can tolerate. The logical extension of such absolute autonomy means that all manner of activities should be legal, including drug use and prostitution. This absolute autonomy may also allow for the direct, intentional killing of *anyone* simply based on location or the burdensome nature of the person's existence. This is not the mark of a just and good society.

On the other hand, perhaps the more consistent (and morally upright) understanding would be a recognition that a baby has full personhood from the moment of conception, and that if a mother has a right to bodily integrity, so also does a baby. Therefore, from the moment of conception, the baby has a right to not have his or her bodily integrity literally dismembered, poisoned, or crushed through abortion.⁴⁹

Worship in the Hard Cases

Rape and Incest

We mentioned in the previous section that the vast majority of pregnancies that end in abortion are the result of consensual sexual encounters. Yet some are not. In a broken world, the tragic reality is that some pregnancies result from the wickedness of rape or incest. In the midst of debate and rational discussion, the Christian must not lose sight of the personal empathy, care, and love that must shape the way that we care for victims of such crimes. Likewise, Christians must not lose sight of the importance of seeing justice applied on behalf of both

49. Interestingly enough, Thomson in essence makes this point herself when she clarifies in her conclusion that while she is arguing for the permissibility of abortion if the child could simply be unplugged, she is not arguing for the right to secure the death of the unborn child. She writes: "I have argued that you are not morally required to spend nine months in bed, sustaining the life of that violinist, but to say this is by no means to say that if, when you unplug yourself, there is a miracle and he survives, you then have a right to turn round and slit his throat. You may detach yourself even if this costs him his life; you have no right to be guaranteed his death, by some other means, if unplugging yourself does not kill him." But here is precisely where this bodily-right argument fails. If Thomson is correct in making this distinction, then she has undercut her own argument for abortion because the process of abortion by definition intentionally and purposely secures the death of a child by the means of its procedure. Thus, her violinist case would actually apply only in scenarios in which the entire uterus is removed without directly harming the child. The indirect result may be the child's death, but not because of direct action to the child. Thomson, "Defense of Abortion," 66.

the woman and the society that are violated. No human being should ever have to experience rape or incest, and no society should be stained by such crimes. For this reason, those who commit these acts should be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. But given the horrible reality that such crimes do take place and the fact that these types of acts could lead to unwanted pregnancy, how should a Christian think about abortion when the child conceived results from either rape or incest?

First, it is important to keep in mind that the number of abortions that are sought out for reasons of rape or incest is very low in comparison to the overall number. The Guttmacher Institute conducted a survey in 2004 that reported that the number of abortions sought for the reason of rape is roughly 1 percent. Incest accounts for an even smaller percentage, at less than 0.5 percent.⁵⁰ The state of Florida records a reason for every abortion performed in the state, and rape was the reason reported for less than 0.2 percent of abortions and incest accounted for just over 0.01 percent of abortions in 2019.⁵¹ While behind each of those requests for an abortion is a real person with a real story, it is important to keep in mind that these types of cases are much rarer than one might think—less than 1.5 percent of the total number of abortions annually.

In those cases in which pregnancy does occur, some argue, it would be better to allow the victim to terminate the pregnancy. Scott Klusendorf points out in response to this type of argument that we must remain clear about who is actually guilty of the crimes of rape and incest. It may be our desire and tendency to displace our grief and even anger toward the child, but the child is not the person who committed the crime. Thus, in a civilized society, we must be careful to not wrongly punish the innocent in order to be rid of a problem or to limit our experience of the aftermath of wickedness. Even if the presence of a child would bring to mind the painful memories of the rape or incest, this does not justify the killing of another person who had nothing to do with the crime itself. If we ask, “How should we treat innocent human beings who remind us of painful events?” surely the best answer is not “Kill them.”⁵²

Further, it is far from certain that encouraging a pregnant victim of rape or incest to abort is actually helpful to the woman in question. In fact, adding the trauma of abortion may actually exacerbate the problem. In the words of Planned Parenthood member Fred E. Mecklenburg, professor of obstetrics and gynecology

50. Finer et al., “Reasons U.S. Women Have Abortions,” 113.

51. Agency for Health Care Administration, “Reported Induced Terminations of Pregnancy (ITOP) by Reason, by Trimester: 2019,” accessed April 7, 2020, https://ahca.myflorida.com/MCHQ/Central_Services/Training_Support/docs/TrimesterByReason_2019.pdf.

52. Scott Klusendorf, *The Case for Life: Equipping Christians to Engage the Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 173–74.

at the University of Minnesota Medical School: "There are no known psychiatric diseases which can be cured by abortion. . . . It may leave unresolved conflicts coupled with guilt and added depression which may be more harmful than the continuation of the pregnancy."⁵³

Life of Mother

As pregnancies due to rape and incest are very rare, so also are contexts in which an unborn child's life needs to be taken in order to save the *life* of the mother. While there are many situations in which the mother's *health* may be compromised, this is not the same as concluding that her *life* may be in danger. Clarity on this point is important given the wording of *Roe v. Wade*, which conflated the language of *health* to be virtually all-inclusive. Concerns for the mother's general health are always important, but not all health issues are life-and-death concerns.

In those rare situations in which both the life of the mother and the life of the child are in question, doctors should do all they can to make sure that both patients survive. In some cases, normally in the later stages of a pregnancy, complications arise in which the mother cannot be saved but the baby can. In one example that we are familiar with, the mother was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer and chose to forgo treatments for fear that those treatments would harm her unborn baby.

Most often, however, the concern is raised in relation to the rare situations in which the mother's life can be saved only by the removal and subsequent death of the child. In these cases, a consistently pro-life stance will recognize the important distinction between providing a medical treatment for the particular attending problem or disease and the practice of abortion. For example, in the case of a "tubal pregnancy" (ectopic pregnancy), since the fertilized egg attaches outside the uterus (normally in the fallopian tube), it is particularly dangerous for the mother because the continued growth of the child can cause the tube to rupture, resulting in both the child's death and internal bleeding, infection, and possibly the mother's death. Often ectopic pregnancies resolve naturally in the form of miscarriages, but when they do not, medical intervention is needed.

When medical intervention is necessary, a consideration of both the *intent* and the *manner* of treatment is important to the overall moral evaluation. What distinguishes these cases from abortion is that the death of the baby is not desired, and the means chosen to treat the problem must not involve a direct and intentional killing of the child. No matter how the scenario is resolved, it is virtually a foregone conclusion that the child will perish. This foreseen fact, however, does

53. Quoted in Francis J. Beckwith, *Politically Correct Death: Answering the Arguments for Abortion Rights* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 71.

not legitimize wanting to kill the child or choosing to commit an act that directly targets the child and causes his or her death.

The *principle of double effect* proves to be a helpful guide in determining how best to proceed in such a situation. This principle helps determine when it is morally permissible to choose a course of action that will result in both good and bad effects. In order to invoke the principle of double effect, all four of the following criteria must be met:

1. The act being contemplated must be good in itself or at least morally neutral.
2. The evil result/effect must not be desired in itself but only permitted.
3. The good result/effect must not come about as a result of the evil effect. It must come directly from the good action.
4. There must be a sufficiently grave reason for permitting the evil effect to occur.

In using medical intervention to save the life of a mother in the case of an ectopic pregnancy, the principle guides in the following way:

1. The goal of the surgery is to save the life of the mother.
2. The removal of an ectopic pregnancy is not intended to kill the child; the baby's death is unwanted and not sought after.
3. Because directly targeting the baby to kill it is not an acceptable act, the doctors choose to remove the fallopian tube that would be the source of the bleeding and rupture. The death of the baby is foreseen but not directly chosen.
4. The reason that this drastic step has been chosen is that all other options have been exhausted and the life of the mother hangs in the balance.

In conclusion, while it is a foreseen consequence that the baby will die, the death is not intended and there was no direct attack on the baby in the procedure. The baby's death was a secondary result of removing the fallopian tube. For this reason, there is a critical difference between this form of medical treatment and abortion. Both the intent of the procedure and the cause of the baby's death are different.

For this reason, such a procedure would technically not be an abortion. In fact, given the pro-life ethic driving the decision-making process, it would be inappropriate to say that the procedure is a justification for "abortion in the case of saving the life of the mother." Rather, it is more accurate to say that sometimes medical intervention to save the life of the mother is permissible—even when there is a foreseen secondary effect of the baby's death—when, in an emergency

situation, her life hangs in the balance. If ever in the course of treatment it is determined that the lives of the mother and the child can both be saved, the principle of double effect is no longer relevant to the context.⁵⁴

Conclusion: Abortion Is a Watershed Issue

We began this chapter by considering the Supreme Court decision to legalize abortion in 1973. We have argued that by sidestepping the question of “when life begins” and by granting women legal permission to terminate a pregnancy based on a “right to privacy,” the Court pitted the principles of the sanctity of human life and the principle of moral autonomy against each other. The resulting culture war has raged ever since.

As we conclude our discussion, it is important to remember what we argued in the opening chapter of this book. All human laws reflect and arise from underlying worldview assumptions. All laws are based on some perspective of morality. Therefore, whether someone claims to be pro-life or pro-choice, the arguments made in support of either position will reflect some underlying moral commitments. There is no such thing as a neutral position. The essential question, then, is not *whether* morality will be legislated, but *whose*.

When it comes to the issue of abortion, this reality plays out in very specific ways. Those who argue from a pro-life position will elevate the principle of the sanctity of human life, and suggest that from the moment of conception not only is a baby a human life, but because he or she bears the image of God, that child is also a human person. For this reason, our morality and our laws related to the issue of abortion should prioritize the protection and valuation of human life from the moment of conception. On the other hand, those who argue from a pro-choice perspective will elevate the principle of personal autonomy and suggest that one qualifies for the category of personhood only when one demonstrates the functional ability to qualify as a person. At such a point, not only does the person

54. Understanding this principle is why we (as otherwise very highly loyal and proud Southern Baptists) found the 2018 resolution by Southern Baptists at the 2018 SBC Annual Meeting in Dallas Texas, June 2018, to be so very disappointing. The resolution read as follows: “RESOLVED, That we affirm the full dignity of every unborn child and denounce every act of abortion *except to save the mother’s physical life*.” The exception included in the resolution represented muddled ethical thinking for at least one of the following three possible reasons: First, it suggests directly and intentionally targeting the life of an innocent human being to bring about a favorable result (i.e., murder to save a life); second, it fails to recognize the distinction between abortion and secondary effects of medical treatments; third (as a melded form of the previous two reasons), it presumes a form of “hierarchicalism” in the ethical process that suggests that it is sometimes permissible to break a command and commit an evil to bring about good without recognition that the evil is still evil. “On Reaffirming the Full Dignity of Every Human Being,” accessed January 29, 2020, <http://sbcannualmeeting.net/sbc18/resolutions/>.

have the right to govern the person's own body as he or she will, but the person also has the moral right to kill those humans who do not qualify as persons. Both perspectives reflect a moral system. The question is, which one is correct?

We have argued in this chapter that while both these moral principles are important and have their place in ethical and civil discourse, Scripture and logic have led us to the conclusion not only that the principle of the sanctity of human life is the more fundamental and binding principle of the two, but that it should rightly shape how we understand who qualifies as a "person," as well as how we place restrictions on our own personal autonomy. From the moment of conception, a human child is an innocent, unique, distinct, living human being, who also bears the image of God. Directly and intentionally taking the life of a human child at any stage of its development is the same thing as killing an innocent human person. It breaks the sixth commandment and is therefore a form of murder.

In the end, this conclusion once again casts us back on the foundations of ethics as worship. God creates us to worship him maximally in all aspects of our lives. Human beings, however, not only have sinned but have thereby defiled themselves and broken the world in which we live. Each of us is a sinner; each of us needs a Savior. Thanks be to God that Jesus was willing to die on the cross for our sins, and praise be to God that he rose again to conquer sin and death. With all our brokenness, but especially with regard to this topic of abortion, God is good and his kindness draws us to repentance. While his grace, goodness, and kindness do not excuse our sin or provide a basis for justifying abortion, these qualities of God do invite us to be cleansed and made free. May it be that this kind of unmerited favor becomes the basis not only of why we "go our way and sin no more" in relationship to this issue, but also for the way in which we invite any and all who may have been involved in the abortive process in any way to find their way to forgiveness, hope, and life.

Key Terms and Concepts

abortion, elective	ensoulment
abortion, eugenic	functionalism
abortion, induced	image-bearer (<i>imago Dei</i>)
abortion, spontaneous	moral status
abortion, therapeutic	personhood
autonomy	principle of double effect
<i>Doe v. Bolton</i>	<i>ratsakh</i>
ectopic pregnancy ("tubal pregnancy")	right to life
	right to privacy

Roe v. Wade
sanctity of human life

shākōl
yātzā

Key Scriptures

Genesis 1:26–28
Exodus 20:13
Exodus 21:12–36 (22–25)
Job 3:3
Psalm 8:3–8
Psalm 51:5

Psalms 139:13–16
Jeremiah 1:5
Luke 1:39–44
Luke 2:6–7
Romans 13:9
1 Peter 4:15

Study Questions

1. What does the Bible teach about the sanctity of human life, and how should that shape a person's view of abortion? How does understanding the Hebrew word *ratsakh* in the sixth commandment ("You shall not murder," Ex. 20:13) shape your view?
2. What is the significance of Exodus 21:22–25 for the abortion debate?
3. What is the pro-choice *functionalism* argument? Why is this problematic from a Christian worldview? What are the logical consequences of such an argument for people with disabilities or infirmities, or whose "social value" may be considered low?
4. If one is a retentionist regarding capital punishment and in support of a "just-war" perspective, does consistency demand that he or she should also adopt a pro-abortion stance? Identify the key issues and discuss. How is the question of "guilt" related to the discussion?
5. If one is an abolitionist regarding capital punishment or a pacifist regarding war, does consistency demand that the person also be pro-life regarding the debate on abortion? Identify the key issues and discuss. How is the question of personhood related to the discussion?

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