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Thinking About Abortion

Growing up in Alabama in a Christian household, I was taught that abortion was murder. Not just by my parents or my church, but by my community. Growing older and developing my own beliefs and values, specifically being a woman who has always been interested in science, I no longer believe this. When Roe v. Wade was overturned last year, it was terrifying to me. Not only am I worried for myself, I am worried for my two younger siblings. All this being said, I knew I would have bias going into the readings for this week.

Doing the readings, I saw familiar arguments from both sides. Hadley Arkes takes the anti-abortion position in her chapter, "The Question of Abortion and the Discipline of Moral Reasoning". I found her language to be quite harsh, but overall she did have a compelling argument which she based on the opinion that life begins at conception. Though I disagreed and found flaws in most of what she said, I could see how it would influence others to take her stance. Judith Jarvis Thomson, on the other hand, presents a pro-abortion argument in her article, "A Defense of Abortion". She uses anecdotes throughout her writing to dissect common anti-abortion arguments, specifically one's right to life. These two readings juxtaposed with each other was an interesting read, as I feel Thomson, though never mentioning "The Question of Abortion and the Discipline of Moral Reasoning", was directly aiming to change Arkes opinion. While Arkes' main claim is that life begins at conception, therefore abortion is murder, Thomson

claims that even if life did begin at conception, there is no obligation for a woman to sustain a fetus in her body.

Arkes opens her chapter “The Question of Abortion and the Discipline of Moral Reasoning” by giving a critique to the Supreme Court’s decision during the Roe v. Wade trial. Judge Blackmun states it was not the court’s place to determine when life began, as that is an area that professionals trained in areas of medicine and philosophy cannot agree on. Arkes argues that to be a logical fallacy. She claims that the beginning of human life is not just a question of morals, but is a topic with a concrete answer; if something is determined to be wrong, lawmakers should not allow it to be legal just because some people may find ways to justify it. She proposes that these justifications for abortion come from the individual’s ability to separate a fetus from a life. Since a fetus does not possess qualities considered “human” (physical features, speech, character), it is easier to consider it inhuman in the eyes of abortion supporters. However, she claims that something cannot obtain the quality of being human—a fetus should always be considered human because it does not have the potential to be anything else. Therefore, abortion cannot be justified because it is killing a human.

Arkes delivers another critique to Judge Blackmun for determining a benchmark of viable life outside the womb to be twenty-four weeks. Gynecologist Dr. Bernard Nathanson clarified that this benchmark was not significant to obstetrics and suggests the court chose that timeline without using medical experts available to them. If this is the case, it is inappropriate and bad lawmaking to use that time frame. However, the idea of choosing a benchmark allowing for abortion when the fetus is not able to survive outside the womb is an understandable concept that Arkes does not explore further. She moves on to acknowledge that even if abortions are illegal, people who want them will still find a way to obtain them, safely or not. She provides

questionable statistics that show abortion numbers continue to rise each year and uses them to oppose the claim that making abortions legal will not raise abortion numbers. She further argues that since abortions are getting safer, it is unlikely a lot of women will die from illegal abortions. These arguments are used for her to say that despite illegal abortions happening, there is not justification for legalizing them.

Arkes clearly did not like how the Supreme Court handled *Roe v. Wade*. She is also under the assumption that most Americans were unhappy with its result as well, though the reasons for opposition are mixed. The major barrier in Arkes' argument is that her and an abortion supporter simply have different definitions of life. Thomson combats this by creating an argument defending abortion that does not depend on the humanity of a fetus. Thomson opens "A Defense of Abortion" by acknowledging the main claim main anti-abortionists make— life begins at conception. Thomson rejects this idea, comparing it to calling an acorn an oak tree. Instead of arguing it, however, she instead delves into the topic of the right to life. She believes anti-abortionists often acknowledge the fetus's right to life more strongly than the woman's right to life, and a woman, when her life is threatened by pregnancy, has the right to save her own life. For these reasons, she claims to have disproved the "extreme view of abortion" (that all cases of abortion are morally wrong). She then goes on to say that if someone's life depends on another person being able to provide them something, the dependent person does not have the right to the other person and their resources. It would be a morally good deed, but it is not an obligation that must be fulfilled. Therefore, if a fetus depends on the mother to live, the mother does not owe it to the fetus to carry out their life. While it would be morally good, it should not be legally required; there are many morally wrong things that are legal.

Thomson then examines the argument that everyone has the right to not be killed by anybody; does that mean that a fetus is granted the right to also use the mother's body? She clarifies her belief that people do not have a right to not be killed, but instead possess a right to not be killed unjustly. That being said, for abortion to be a right, it must be proven that abortion is not killing the fetus unjustly. Thomson does not give a direct answer to this. She suggests it would be unjust if the fetus was not given permission to sustain itself in a woman's body and gives anecdotes of pregnancy due to rape or faulty birth control as examples. However, it is her personal belief that it is not unjust, and arbitrary arguments can be made for whether or not a woman has given permission for her body to house a fetus. She further claims that if anti-abortionists want to make abortion illegal, there are many other things they should make illegal on the grounds of simply being immoral. Should the law be able to force us to be good people?

Thomson closes her argument by acknowledging that she does believe there are some cases in which abortion is unjust. She clarifies that while she believes a woman is not responsible for sustaining a fetus if she does not want to, she does not have the right to kill it once it can survive outside the womb. If it is aborted but somehow survives outside of the womb, that does not mean the mother can kill it. Her final statement is a reminder that she personally does not believe an early fetus is a person, so therefore abortion is not killing it.

Abortion has been arguably one of the most debated topics in the United States. It is a very personal and deeply sensitive topic for so many people, one which may never have a resolution. Arkes and Thomson both stand firmly in their personal opinions, but neither can resolve the debate over abortion. It would be easy to say an individual should just choose their belief on what is right or wrong when it comes to abortion, and while that is true, it does not change the fact that this is a legal issue that directly impacts the health of almost half of the

population. Though it is obvious there is much opposition to abortion, it is my hope that abortion can finally be viewed as healthcare and women are not obligated to sustain a fetus if they do not want to.

References

- Hadley Arkes, "The Question of Abortion and the Discipline of Moral Reasoning." First Things: An Inquiry Into the First Principles of Moral Reasoning (Princeton University Press, 1986).
- Judith Jarvis Thompson, "A Defense of Abortion." Philosophy and Public Affairs 1 (1971): 47-66.