Abortion involves the intentional killing of a fetus to end a pregnancy. These fetuses are human, biologically. It seems that fetuses are beings, albeit completely dependent beings: what else would they be? So, abortion involves the intentional killing of a human being. Killing human beings is often deeply wrong, so is abortion wrong? If so, when? And why? In this essay, we’ll look at some influential answers to these questions.

1. Human Organisms?

Fetuses are not just biologically alive, like cells or organs. They are lives; each is a human life. Some argue that this is because they are organisms: while hearts are parts of beings, the being is the whole organism.

Fetuses seem to be “beings” on this definition: they are complex and developing. Some thinkers argue that our being human organisms physically continuous with fetuses who were human organisms makes abortion wrong. They seem to argue that since it is wrong to kill us now, i.e., we have properties that make it wrong to kill us now (prima facie wrong to kill: wrong unless extreme circumstances justify the killing), it was wrong to kill us at any stage of our development, since we’ve been the same organism, the same being, throughout our existence.

While this argument is influential in some circles, it is nevertheless dubious. You are likely over three feet tall now, but weren’t always. You can reason morally, but couldn’t always. You have the right to make autonomous decisions about your own life, but didn’t always. Many examples show that just because we have some property or right now, that doesn’t entail that we’ve always had that right. This argument’s advocates need to plausibly explain why, say, the right to life is an exception to this rule.

2. (Human) Persons?

We, readers of this essay, are human beings or lives (unless there are any extraterrestrial readers!), and it is prima facie wrong to kill us. Is the reason why it wrong to kill us because we are human beings or lives?

Perhaps not. It is wrong to kill us, arguably, because killing us prevents us from experiencing the goods of our future: accomplishments, relationships, enjoying our lives and so on, which is distinct from being a human being.

Many philosophers describe these capacities needed for experiencing our lives, present and future, in terms of us being persons. A theory present from at least the time of John Locke can be expressed roughly as: persons are beings with personalities: persons are conscious beings with thoughts, feelings, memories, anticipations and other psychological states. (When people insist, mistakenly, that fetuses aren’t human beings, they might be claiming that they are not human persons). If we die or even become permanently comatose, we cease to be persons, since we permanently lose consciousness.

This theory of personhood has explanatory power: it helps us understand why we are persons and how we (or our bodies) can cease to be persons. It justifies a growing belief that some non-human animals are (non-human) persons. It explains why rational space aliens, if there are any, would be (non-human) persons. It explains why divine or spiritual beings are or would be (non-human) persons.

On this theory of personhood, early fetuses are not persons. This is because their brains and nervous systems aren’t sufficiently developed and complexly interconnected enough for consciousness and personhood. The medical and scientific research reports that this developmental stage isn’t reached until after the first trimester, or, more likely, until mid-pregnancy. Nearly all abortions occur very early in pregnancy, killing fetuses that are not yet conscious, and so are not yet persons.

Any later abortions, affecting conscious and feeling fetuses who are persons or close to it, however, would likely be wrong unless done for a justifying medical reason.
3. Potential Personhood?
But just because something (or someone) is *not* a person, that doesn’t obviously mean that it is *not* wrong to kill them.

If fetuses aren’t persons, they are still *potential* persons. (And merely potential persons are never actual persons). Does that potential give fetuses, say, the right to life or otherwise make it wrong to kill them?

If potential things have the rights of actual things, then potential adults, spouses, criminals, doctors, and judges would have the rights of actual ones. Since they don’t, it is plausible that potential personhood doesn’t yield the rights of actual personhood. At least, we are due an explanation of why it would, since potentiality never does that for anything else.

4. Valuable Futures?
Doesn’t abortion prevent a fetus from experiencing its valuable future, *just like* killing us does, even if it is not yet a person?\(^6\) But aren’t our futures plausibly valuable, in part, because we can, presently, look forward to them? Fetuses have no awareness of their futures whatsoever, and this is one important difference between their futures and our futures.

Further, an *egg-and-a-sperm-that-would-fertilize-it* arguably has a future akin to that of a fetus. Contraception (even by abstinence!) keeps this future from materializing.\(^6\) But contraception and abstinence aren’t wrong. Thus, it is not wrong to perform some action that prevents such a future from materializing.

5. The Right to Life?
Finally, suppose these arguments are all wrong and all fetuses are persons with the right to life. Does that make abortion wrong?

Not necessarily, Judith Thomson famously argued in her 1971 “A Defense of Abortion.”\(^9\) If I must use your kidney to stay alive, do I have a right to your kidney? No, and you don’t violate my rights if you don’t let me use it and I die. This shows that the right to life is not a right to bodies of others, even if those bodies are necessary for our lives to continue.

Fetuses, then, might not have a right to the pregnant woman’s body and so she doesn’t violate their rights by not allowing a fetus to use it. So until fetuses can be removed from women and placed in new wombs, abortion may not violate the rights of fetuses and may be permissible.

6. Conclusion
The philosophical issue of the moral status of abortion is complex. These are just a few philosophical arguments concerning the moral status of abortion. Each is worthy of further discussion and reasoned debate.

Notes
1. Unless we are doing veterinary ethics and are thinking about aborting feline or canine or other non-human fetuses.
2. This argument is developed in Beckwith (2007), and in George and Tollefsen (2008).
3. This response is developed in Boonin (2003) and in Nobis (2011).
4. This influential theory of personhood is developed in Warren (1973).
6. This argument is developed in Marquis (1989).
7. For development of these arguments, see McMahan (2002).
8. For development of these arguments, see Norcross (1990).

References


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