

December 2014

## Virtue Ethics and Abortion

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### Recommended Citation

Countryman, Jacob (2014) "Virtue Ethics and Abortion," *CedarEthics: A Journal of Critical Thinking in Bioethics*: Vol. 14 : No. 1 , Article 1.

DOI: 10.15385/jce.2014.14.1.1

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/cedarethics/vol14/iss1/1>

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## Abstract

Singer suggests that the argument of abortion has missed the point. He asserts that the debate should focus on if it is wrong to kill an innocent human being instead of arguing whether a fetus is or is not an innocent human being. The Pro-Choice arguments of when personhood begins are vague and, therefore, cannot provide a concrete moment of when personhood starts. Since reason can only go so far in its ability to determine ethics, this paper will explain that Singer also misses the point; rather, striving to be virtuous demonstrates that abortion is morally wrong.

## Keywords

Ethics, abortion, virtue ethics

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## Virtue Ethics and Abortion

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Singer suggests that the argument of abortion has missed the point. He asserts that the debate should focus on if it is wrong to kill an innocent human being instead of arguing whether a fetus is or is not an innocent human being. The Pro-Choice arguments of when personhood begins are vague and, therefore, cannot provide a concrete moment of when personhood starts. Since reason can only go so far in its ability to determine ethics, this paper will explain that Singer also misses the point; rather, striving to be virtuous demonstrates that abortion is morally wrong.

Singer lays out the argument against abortion as a formal argument. Singer states the syllogism, “First premise: It is wrong to kill an innocent human being. Second premise: A human fetus is an innocent human being. Conclusion: Therefore it is wrong to kill a human fetus” (Honderich, 1995, pg. 2). Singer goes on to say that the disagreement usually concerns the second premise. He says that Pro-Life people stand on firm ground with this argument since it is hard to pinpoint a moment in time, besides conception, when a developing fetus becomes a person because human development is gradual. Pro-Choice people would usually say that viability, birth, quickening, or consciousness is the moment in time when the fetus becomes a person (Singer, 2011).

These four views are nebulous regarding the exact moment a fetus becomes a person. Viability is quite ambiguous, because it depends on medical technology. If medical technologies increase, a younger fetus is able to live and, according to this view, the fetus becomes a person younger. Also, access to these medical technologies would alter the moment the fetus became a person. It would be morally wrong for a woman to abort a fetus in a modern city with good medical technologies. On the other hand, according to this view, it would be morally permissible to abort the same fetus if the woman was in an underdeveloped area without access to adequate medical technologies. Birth is also unclear, because it only concerns the location of the fetus; a person is still a person no matter what space he occupies. A child one week before birth is not much different than a child one week after birth. Quickening is the first time the mother feels the fetus move. The mother, however, may not feel the first movement of the fetus. The mother may be asleep at the time of the first movement or, maybe, the movement was too small to notice. Ultrasound is able to detect movements even earlier than a mother. Consciousness is the ability to feel pain and pleasure. It is uncertain when the fetus begins to feel pain. Some studies argue that a fetus is able to feel pain at 7 weeks. Because all of these views are vague, Singer looks at the problem of abortion in a different way (Singer, 2011).

Singer argues that these arguments miss the point; he believes that the first premise, that it is wrong to kill an innocent human being, should be challenged. The aforementioned four views argue against the second premise, that a human fetus is an innocent human being. The first premise, also known as the sanctity of life, is widely accepted. Singer challenges this acceptance. Singer contends that the term “human” in the syllogism is ambiguous and, therefore, allows the

sylogism to work. “Human” may either refer to “a member of the species *Homo sapiens*” or “being a person” (Singer, 2011). If “human” refers to a “person,” a rational or self-conscious being, then the first premise is true, but the second one is false since fetuses are not rational or self-conscious. If “human” refers to a “member of the *Homo sapiens*,” the second premise is true, but the first premise is false since abortion would be no different than killing a member of another species (Singer, 2011).

Singer maintains that the characteristics of the fetus define its moral significance. Singer believes that the characteristics necessary are rationality and self-consciousness. Until these capacities are achieved, he says that the life of the fetus has no intrinsic value and it is morally permissible to abort it. He even goes as far to say that it is morally permissible to kill an infant until they are one month old, since it is not yet self-conscious or rational (Lenow, 2013). Even if the fetus is conscious, but not self-conscious, the mother would decide the value of the fetus on utilitarian terms. According to this view, if she finds it valuable, she keeps it. Conversely, if she finds it not valuable, she may abort it. Singer, however, does not account for the potential of the fetus to become self-conscious and rational. If the fetus is let alone to naturally mature in the womb of the mother and to be born, then it can attain these characteristics. Singer gives a simple rebuttal to this argument by asserting that something that has potential to become something with value has less value than something that already has value (Singer, 2011). The maturation to attain self-consciousness and rationality, however, will happen to every child, except for a handful of exceptions.

Singer’s argument pertains only to reason; however, there is a limit to reason in the debate of the morality of abortion. Even if abortion were morally permissible, abortion would still be considered wrong. For example, Singer talks about a woman who discovers that she is two months pregnant and has determined to undergo an abortion on the basis that she wanted to do something first. Then, she finishes what she wanted to do and has another pregnancy. Therefore, the world is not deprived of another human. Singer argues that the woman made the right choice. The action of the woman, however, is vicious in her virtues; the rationale for her to have an abortion is simply selfish. For a utilitarian, this reasoning is useless since the abortion would add the most happiness to the most people since the fetus would not be considered a person. Yet, an abortion negatively affects the value of family relationships and the events of birth and death (Crome, 2008).

A utilitarian who has a callous attitude on abortion, believing that is merely the act of removing unwanted tissue, is acting in a way that would not lead to a happy or fulfilled life. The scenario of the woman having an abortion while two months pregnant seems to bring more happiness to the woman since she believed that the pregnancy would have been an inconvenience. “Happiness” and “fulfillment” are hard to define. A modern definition would define these terms as subjective and temporary. These terms, however, refer to the person’s life as a whole (Chrome, 2008).

The virtues of a person correlate with his happiness and fulfillment. Virtues, such as kindness, courage, selflessness, and many more, are not merely attributes; they are not things some humans have and others do not; everyone possesses them. They are “possible ways of being” and, therefore, define humans (Crome, 2008). Therefore, happiness and fulfillment is not a fleeting feeling. They are attained by an individual, through his actions, and fulfill the highest possibility of his being. In other words, being virtuous will help one have a happy and fulfilled life (Crome, 2008).

Abortions go against one’s virtues and, therefore, hinder one’s ability to have a fulfilled and happy life. This occurrence happens because integral with one’s virtues are relationships with others, the capacity to care for others, and sacrificing one’s own pleasures for others. Abortion goes against all of these virtues.

Abortion is harmful to one’s virtues, and, therefore, impedes one’s ability to have a happy and fulfilled life. Pro-Choice views of the beginning of personhood are ambiguous since the development of humans is gradual. Therefore, conception is the only precise beginning of life. Yet, Singer argues that both of these arguments miss the point. Singer’s argument only contains reason. Reason, however, is only an aspect that helps establish proper ethics. Upholding virtues are another aspect that determines proper ethics. Abortion is vicious to one’s virtues and, therefore, is not capable of promoting a happy and fulfilled life.

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