

INTRODUCTION TO ETHICS

11 Common Arguments about Abortion

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1 Introduction

Abortion is often in the news. In the course of writing this essay in early 2019, Kentucky, Mississippi, Ohio, Georgia, Alabama and Missouri passed legislation to outlaw and criminalize abortions starting at six to eight weeks in pregnancy, with more states following. Federal law, however, generally permits abortions, so it is unclear what the legal outcome here will be.

Abortion is a political issue – with different political parties *tending* to have different perspectives on the issue – because abortion is a *moral* or *ethical* issue. (These two words mean the same thing).

Some believe that abortions are typically *morally permissible*, or *not wrong*, and so believe that abortions should be legal. If doing something isn't wrong, it shouldn't be illegal: criminalizing actions that aren't wrong is a form of *injustice*.

Other believe that abortion is morally wrong, that it's *often* wrong, maybe *nearly always* or even *always*.

Some people argue that even though they believe abortion is wrong, it should remain legal: after all, if *every* morally wrong action was illegal, we would all be in jail! Seriously though, there are many actions that are morally wrong, even really hurtful, that the government shouldn't try to prevent or punish. (You can supply the potential examples to make the point). They might also think that, for a variety of other reasons, their personal moral views on the issues shouldn't be made into law for all.

Others argue that abortions are wrong and should be illegal. What *types* of wrongdoing should be illegal? This question isn't easy to answer: it's abstract and general. One answer is that *seriously, extremely wrong actions should be illegal*. This might seem plausible, since many illegal actions *are* seriously wrong, but since there are other very wrong actions that shouldn't be illegal, this answer isn't perfect.

2 Defining “Abortion”

Abortion might personally affect you or someone you know: you or a partner, spouse, relative or friend may have had an abortion, have considered abortion, or will have an abortion. But what is an abortion?

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There are a number of common definitions, some of which are better and others which are worse:

Definition 1: An abortion is the *murder* of an unborn *baby* or *child*.

Definition 2: An abortion is the intentional *termination* of a fetus to end a pregnancy.

Definition 3: An abortion is the intentional *killing* of a fetus to end a pregnancy.

Definition 3 is best. We'll explain why after we show the problems with the first two definitions.

2.1 “Murdering Babies”

Definition 1 is common with certain groups of people, but even people who think abortion is wrong should reject it.

“Murder” *means* “wrongful killing,” and so this definition implies that abortion is wrong *by definition*, which it isn't. This definition means that to know that abortion is wrong, we'd just need to reflect on the meaning of the word, and not give any reasons to think this. Murder *is* wrong by definition, but to know that any particular killing is murder, we need arguments. (Compare someone who calls the death penalty *murder*: we know it's killing, but is it *wrongful* killing? We can't just appeal to the definition of “murder”: we need arguments that this is wrongful killing). This definition also means that someone who claims that abortion is *not* wrong says that “Wrongful killing is *not* wrong,” which makes no sense. We can even call this a “question-begging” definition, since it *assumes* that abortion is wrong, which can't be *assumed*. So this definition is problematic, *even if* abortion is wrong.

Definition 1 also describes fetuses as “babies” or “children.” While people are usually free to use whatever words how they want, people *can* say things that are false: calling something something doesn't mean it's really that thing. And the beginnings of something are usually not that thing: a pile of lumber and supplies is not a house; fabric, buttons and thread are not a shirt, and an embryo or early fetus is not a baby or child. So it's false and misleading to call embryos and early fetuses “babies” or “children.”

Defining abortion in terms of “babies” seems to again result in a “question-begging” definition that *assumes* that abortion is wrong, since it is widely and correctly believed that it's wrong to kill babies. We understand, however, that it's wrong to kill babies because we think about *born* babies who are *conscious* and *feeling* and have other baby-like characteristics: *these* are the babies we have in mind when we think about the wrongness of killing babies, *not* early fetuses. Describing early fetuses as “babies” characterizes them either as something they are not or, at least, assumes things that need to be argued for, which is misleading, both factually (in terms of what fetuses are like) and morally (insofar as it's assumed that the rules about how babies should be treated *clearly* and *straightforwardly* apply to, say, embryos).

Part of the problem with this definition is that terms like “babies” and “children” encourage strong emotional responses. Babies and children are associated with value-laden terms such as *innocence*, *vulnerability*, *preciousness*, *cuteness*, and more. When we refer to unborn human beings as *fetuses*, some

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people become defensive because they see the word “fetus” as cold and sterile. But “fetus” is merely a helpful, and accurate, name for a stage of development, as is “baby,” “child,” “adolescent,” and “adult.” Distinguishing different stages of human development doesn’t commit anyone to a position on abortion, but it does help us understand what an abortion *is*.

In sum, defining abortion in terms of “murdering babies” is a bad definition: it misleads and assumes things it shouldn’t. Even those who think that abortion is wrong should not accept it.

2.2 “Termination”

The second definition describes abortion as an *intentional* action. This is good since a pregnant woman does not “have an abortion” if her pregnancy ends because of, say, a car accident. And “spontaneous abortions” or miscarriages are not intentional actions that can be judged morally: they just happen.

Definitions, however, are supposed to be informative, and the vague word “termination” doesn’t inform. If someone had literally no idea what an abortion was, it would be fair for them to ask what’s *exactly* involved in a “termination” of a pregnancy. A discussion between persons A and B – who knows nothing about abortion – might go like this:

“There is a pregnant woman (or girl) who does not want to have a baby, a *living* baby, obviously. And so we are going to do *something* to something insider her – that is developing into that living baby – so she does not have that baby. The action we are going to do is the ‘termination.’”

“*That something inside her, developing into that living baby, it is living?*”

“Yes. It started from a living egg and sperm cell.”

“So you are making something living *not living*, right? That sounds like *killing* something, right?”

Person B’s reasoning seems correct: abortions *do* involve killing. The word “termination” obscures that fact and so makes for an unclear definition. This doesn’t make the definition *wrong*; to “terminate” something means *to end it in some way*, and abortion ends the development of a fetus. But it doesn’t say *how* abortion ends that development and so is not ideal.

Why might someone accept this definition? Probably because they are reasoning this way:

Killing is wrong. So if abortion is killing, then it’s wrong. But I don’t believe that abortion is wrong, or I am unsure that abortion is wrong, so I don’t want to call it a ‘killing,’ since that means it’s wrong.

The problem here is the first step. *Not all killing is wrong*. Lots of killing is perfectly fine and raises no moral issues at all: killing mold, killing bacteria, killing plants, killing fleas, killing random cells and tissues (even ones that are human, say cheek cells or skin cells), and more. We don’t even need to observe that it’s *sometimes* not wrong to kill adult human beings to make the point that not all killing is

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wrong.

This means that it's *not* problematic to define abortion in terms of "killing." The important questions then are, "Is abortion *wrongful* killing, or killing that's not wrong?" and "When, if ever, might it be wrongful killing and when, if ever, might it be permissible killing? And *why*?"

2.3 "Killing"

A final definition understands abortion in terms of *an intentional killing of a fetus to end a pregnancy*. This definition is *accurate, informative* since it tells us *how* the fetus would be "terminated", and *morally-neutral*: it doesn't assume that the killing involved in abortions is not wrong *or* that it's wrong. This is a good definition.²

3 Why Most Abortions Occur

The Guttmacher "Fact Sheet"³ provides an overview of the research on why abortions occur and other relevant information:

- The reasons patients gave for having an abortion underscored their understanding of the responsibilities of parenthood and family life. The three most common reasons—each cited by three-fourths of patients—were concern for or responsibility to other individuals; the inability to afford raising a child; and the belief that having a baby would interfere with work, school or the ability to care for dependents. Half said they did not want to be a single parent or were having problems with their husband or partner.
- Fifty-one percent of abortion patients were using a contraceptive method in the month they became pregnant, most commonly condoms (24%) or a hormonal method (13%).
- Fifty-nine percent of abortions were obtained by patients who had had at least one birth.
- Some 75% of abortion patients in were poor or low-income. Twenty-six percent of patients had incomes of 100–199% of the federal poverty level, and 49% had incomes of less than 100% of the federal poverty level (\$15,730 for a family of two).

This information suggests, at least, that if women were economically better off, had better access to affordable child-care and other forms of support, and had ready access to more reliable forms of contraception, there would likely be fewer abortions.

4 Bad Arguments: "Question-Begging" Arguments & "Everyday" Arguments

We'll now discuss some commonly given arguments about abortion that, unfortunately, are rather poor.

² Later, however, we will see another definition of abortion as *the intentional withholding of what a fetus needs to live, to end a pregnancy*.

³ <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/induced-abortion-united-states>

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4.1 “Question-begging” Arguments

Many common arguments about abortion are what’s called “question-begging,” which means the reason given for the conclusion *assumes* that conclusion. This means that you wouldn’t accept the reason as a good reason to believe the conclusion *unless* you already believed that conclusion! This is circular reasoning, and arguments like this are always bad.

4.1.1 “Against” Abortion:

Many common arguments against abortion are question begging. Here are some:

Abortion – *killing fetuses to end pregnancies* – is wrong because:

- (1) abortion is *murder*;
- (2) abortion is killing babies or children;
- (3) adoption is a *better* option than abortion;
- (4) pregnant women just *must* keep the pregnancy and give birth;
- (5) abortion should not be used as ‘birth control’;
- (6) women who have abortions are *irresponsible*;
- (7) a *good person* wouldn’t have an abortion;
- (8) women who have abortions feel guilty.

These premises all *assume* that abortion is wrong. To explain:

- (1) assumes that killing fetuses is wrong, since “murder” *means* wrongful killing;
- (2) assumes that fetuses are *like babies and children* and so are similarly wrong to kill;
- (3) assumes that abortion is a worse or bad option, since it assumes it is wrong;
- (4) assumes that women *must not* have abortions since it assumes they are wrong;
- (5) assumes that abortion is wrong: but if it is *not wrong*, while it might not be an ideal form of “birth control” it could permissibly be used for that purpose;
- (6) assumes that women who have abortions are doing what they are not supposed to do, doing wrong, and so are “irresponsible”;
- (7) assumes that abortion is wrong and so good people, who avoid wrongdoing, wouldn’t have one;
- (8) assumes that abortion is wrong and so assumes that *some* women feel guilty *because* they have done something wrong: however, people can *feel* guilty even if they haven’t done anything wrong, so guilt feelings aren’t perfect evidence of wrongdoing (just as *not* feeling guilty doesn’t mean you did something that was OK).

People would believe these claims *only if* they already believed abortion is wrong, so these claims should not sway anyone who wants to think critically about the issues.

4.1.2 “For” Abortion:

People who think abortion should be allowed also sometimes give question-begging arguments. Here are

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a few:

Abortion is *not* wrong because:

- (1) abortion is a *personal choice*; couples *should be able to* make that choice;
- (2) women have a (*moral*) *right* to have abortions;
- (3) women have the right to do what they want with their bodies;
- (4) well, if you don't *like* abortions, *then don't have one!*
- (5) those who oppose abortions just want to control women.

These premises likewise *assume* their conclusions. To explain:

- (1) the idea of a “personal choice” seems to be a choice that's *not wrong* to make: e.g., we wouldn't call a choice to be an ax-murderer a “personal choice” because that's wrong, whereas what color socks to wear is a “personal choice.” So claims like this *seem* to just *assume* that abortion is not wrong or that it should be legal;
- (2) *sometimes* when people say that they have a moral right to do something, they are merely saying that *it's not wrong for them to do it*. So this claim amounts to saying that abortion is not wrong because it's not wrong, which is question-begging. (If it's explained *why* women have this right, the argument might cease to be question-begging, however);
- (3) there are limits to rights, and *sometimes* we don't have the right to do what's wrong. If abortion were wrong, then *perhaps* women wouldn't have the right to have them, and this claim just *assumes* abortions are not wrong;
- (4) consider an analogous slogan, “Don't like arson? *Then don't burn down any buildings!*” This is absurd, because arson is wrong, and we don't offer slogans like this about actions that are wrong. “Don't like strawberries? *Then don't eat them!*” makes sense since not eating strawberries is not wrong. The slogan here assumes that abortion is not wrong;
- (5) since *some* wrongdoing *should* be “controlled,” those who offer this reason *might* merely *assume* that abortion is *not* a type of wrongdoing that should be illegal. They are also focusing on other people's motives, which is often unwise: people who allegedly wish to “control” women *might* respond or suspect that abortion advocates are motivated by the desire to “engage in immorality without consequences!” (*Is that true?* No, pro-choice advocates argue.) Accusations about motives are fruitless: it's better to engage the basic questions of whether abortion is wrong or not and *why*, like we are doing here, instead of speculating about motives.

Question-begging arguments are common, on many issues – not just abortion, and they should be rejected, by everyone, always.

4.2 “Everyday” Arguments

Now we will discuss some other common arguments, that you might often hear or read about, that are also poor but often *not* because they are question-begging. We'll begin with some arguments against abortion.

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4.2.1 “Against” Abortion

4.2.1.1 “Abortion ends a life.”

People often ask, “When does *life* begin?” Some people wonder if fetuses are “alive,” or when they become “life.” Some argue abortion is wrong because “life begins at conception,” whereas those who support abortion sometimes respond that “fetuses aren’t even alive!” There are a lot of debates here, and to get past them, we need to ask what is meant by *alive*, *living* or *a life*.

This is often considered a “deep” question, but it’s not. Consider this: are eggs (in women) alive? Are sperm cells alive? Yes to both, and so when a sperm fertilizes an egg, what results is a *biologically living* thing. Above, we defined abortion as a type of killing and, of course, you can only kill living things. So, yes, fetuses are alive, *biologically alive*, from conception: they are engaged in the types of life processes reviewed on page 1 of any biology textbook.

Some people think that fetuses being alive *shows* that abortion is wrong, and so they enthusiastically argue that fetuses are biologically alive. Some who think that abortion is not wrong try to argue that fetuses are not even alive. These responses suggest concern with an argument like this:

- (1) Fetuses are biologically alive.
- (2) *All things that are biologically alive are wrong to kill.*
- (3) Therefore, fetuses are wrong to kill.

The second premise, however, is obviously false: uncontroversial examples show it. Mold, bacteria, mosquitos and plants are biologically alive, but they aren’t wrong to kill. So, just as acknowledging that abortion involves *killing* doesn’t mean that abortion is wrong, recognizing that *biological life* begins at conception doesn’t mean that abortion is wrong either.

Now, perhaps people *really* mean something like “morally significant life” or “life with rights,” but that’s not people what say: if that’s what they mean, they should say that.

4.2.1.2 “Abortion kills babies and children.”

Classifying fetuses as babies or children obscures any potentially relevant moral differences between, say, a 6-week old fetus and a 6-day old baby or 6-year old child. This claim *assumes* that fetuses – at any stage of development – and babies are the same sort of entity. This claim involves loaded emotional language, is inaccurate and is question-begging, as we discussed above in the section on definitions: this saying doesn’t contribute to a good argument.

4.2.1.3 “Abortion is murder.”

Murder is a term for a specific kind of killing. As a moral term, it refers to especially wrongful killing. As a legal term, it refers to intentional killing that is both unlawful and malicious. Since abortion is legal in the US, most abortions cannot be *legally* classified as murder because they are not illegal or unlawful. Moreover, abortions don’t seem to be done with malicious intent. When people claim that abortion *is*

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murder, what they seem to mean is either that abortion *should be re-classified as murder* or that *abortion is wrong*, or both. Either way, *arguments* are needed to support that, not question-begging slogans.

4.2.1.4 “Abortion kills innocent beings.”

Fetuses are often described as “innocent,” meaning that they have done nothing wrong to *deserve* being killed. Since killing anyone innocent is wrong, this suggests that abortion is wrong. “Innocence,” however, *seems* to be a concept that only applies to beings that *can* do wrong and choose not to. Since fetuses can’t *do* anything – they especially cannot *do* anything wrong that would make them “guilty” – the concept of *innocence* does not seem to apply to them. So saying that banning abortion would “protect the innocent” is inaccurate since abortion doesn’t kill “innocent” beings: the concept of innocence just doesn’t apply.

4.2.1.5 “The Bible says abortion is wrong.”

People often appeal to religion to justify their moral views. Some say that God thinks abortion is wrong, but it’s a fair question how they might *know* this, especially since others claim to *know* that God doesn’t think that. In reply, it is sometimes said that the Bible says abortion is wrong (and that’s how we know what God thinks).

But the Bible doesn’t say that abortion is wrong: it doesn’t discuss abortion at all. There is a commandment against *killing*, but, as our discussion above makes clear, this requires interpretation about *what* and *who* is wrong to kill: presumably the Bible doesn’t mean that killing mold or bacteria or plants is wrong. And there are verses (Exodus 21:22-24) that, on some translations, suggest that fetuses lack the value of born persons, since penalties for damage to each differ. This coincides with common Jewish views on the issue, that the needs and rights of the mother outweigh any the fetus might have.

However any verses are best interpreted, they still don’t *show* that abortion is wrong. This is because the Bible is not *always* a reliable guide to morality, since there are troubling verses that seem to *require* killing people for trivial “crimes,” *allow* enslaving people (and beating them), *require* obeying *all* government officials and more. And Jesus commanded loving your neighbor as yourself, loving your enemies and taking care of orphans, immigrants and refugees, and offered many other moral guidelines that many people regard as false.⁴ Simple moral arguments from the Bible assume that that *if the Bible says an action is wrong, then it really is wrong* (and *if the Bible says something’s not wrong, it’s not wrong*), and both premises don’t seem to be literally true.

This all suggests that people sometimes appeal to the Bible in selective and self-serving ways: they come to the Bible with their previously-held moral assumptions and seek to find something in the Bible

⁴ Appeals to the Bible and other sources (and people) considered to be an *authority*, leads to this dilemma: *either there are good reasons to accept that what that authority claims or not*. If *not*, then we should not accept what the authority says. If there are good reasons, then those reasons – which we all can discuss and debate – would be why we should accept what it says, *not* because the “authority” says so. These insights are applied to morally problematic verses of the Bible, since we have good reasons to reject the moral guidance suggested by those verses. For discussion of these issues, which are related to the “Euthyphro dilemma” that Socrates addressed, see Spencer Case’s “Because God Says So: On Divine Command Theory,” at <https://1000wordphilosophy.com/2014/03/31/because-god-says-so/>

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to justify them.

There is an interesting Biblical connection here worth mentioning though. Some argue that if women who want abortions are prevented from having them, that *forces* them to remain pregnant and give birth and that this is like *forcing* women to be like the “Good Samaritan” who went out of his way, at expense to himself, to help a stranger in great need (Luke 10:25-37). (The analogy is imperfect, as analogies always are).

The problem is in no other area of life is anyone *forced* to be a Good Samaritan like a pregnant woman would: e.g., you can’t be *forced* to donate an organ to anyone in need (even to your child or parent); you can’t even be forced to donate your organs after you are dead! Nobody other than pregnant women would be *forced* by the government – under threat of imprisonment or worse – to use their body to help sustain someone else’s life. It is unfair to require women to be Good Samaritans but allow the rest of us to be like the “priest” and “Levite” in the story who helped nobody.

Nevertheless, it’s important to remember that laws should not be based on any particular religions. If you are not, say, a Hindu, or a Buddhist, or a Rastafarian, you *probably* don’t want laws based solely on one of those religion’s values. Laws should be religiously-neutral; on that we all should agree.

4.2.1.6 “Abortion stops a beating heart.”

This claim, if given as an argument, assumes that *stopping a beating heart is wrong*. The assumption, however, is just obviously untrue: e.g., during open heart surgery, surgeons temporarily stop the patient’s heart so that repair can be made to the still heart: they would permanently stop that heart if they replace it with an artificial heart. If there were somehow an independently beating heart, attached to nobody, that heart wouldn’t be wrong to stop. Whether a heart is wrong to stop or not depends on who is around that heart and their value or rights, not anything about that heart by itself. Finally, embryos and early fetuses *do not even have hearts*, as critics of recent “heartbeat” bills have observed! (The heart fully develops much later in pregnancy.)

If, however, this widely expressed concern about a heartbeat isn’t meant to be taken literally, but is merely a metaphor or an emotional appeal, we submit that these are inappropriate for serious issues like this one.

4.2.1.7 “How would you like it if . . .?”

Some ask, “How would you like it if your mother had had an abortion?” Others tell stories of how their mother almost had an abortion and how they are grateful she didn’t. Questions and stories like these sometimes persuade, but they shouldn’t. Consider some other questions:

- (1) *How would you like it if your mother had been a nun, or celibate, all her life?*
- (2) *How would you like it if your mother had moved away from the city where she met your father, and they never met?*
- (3) *How would you like it if your father had decided early in life to have a vasectomy?*

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All sorts of actions would have prevented each of our existences – if your parents had acted differently in many ways, *you* wouldn't be here to entertain the question: at best, *someone else* would be⁵ – but these actions aren't wrong.

Some might reply that if you had been murdered as a baby, you wouldn't be here to discuss it. True, but that baby was conscious, had feelings, and had a perspective on the world that ended in being murdered: an early fetus is not like that. We can empathetically imagine what it might have been like for that murdered child; we can't do that with a never-been-conscious fetus, since there's no perspective to imagine.

In sum, these are some common arguments given against abortion. They aren't good. Everyone can do better.

4.2.2 Common Arguments “For” Abortion

Many common arguments “for” abortion are also weak. This is often because they simply don't engage the concerns of people who oppose abortion. Consider these often-heard claims:

4.2.2.1 “Women have a right to do whatever they want with their bodies . . .”

Autonomy, your ability to make decisions about matters that profoundly affect your own life, is very important: it's a core concern in medical ethics. But autonomy has limits: your autonomy doesn't, say, justify *murdering an innocent person*, which is what some *claim* abortion is. The slogan that “women can do what they want . . .” does not engage that claim or any arguments given in its favor, so it's inadequate.

4.2.2.2 “People who oppose abortion are just trying to control women.”

They *might* be trying to do this. But they *might* be trying to ban abortion because they believe that *abortion is wrong and should be illegal*. Speculations about motives don't engage or critique any arguments they might give to think that. (If you doubt that thinking critically about arguments and evidence here would do any good, do they have any *better ideas* that might do *more* good?).

4.2.2.3 “Men shouldn't make decisions about matters affecting women.”

Insofar as women profoundly disagree on these issues, some women *must* be making bad decisions about matters affecting women: all women can't be correct on the issues. And *some* men can understand that some arguments (endorsed sometimes by both women and men) are bad arguments and give good arguments on the issues. Someone's sex or gender has little to no bearing on whether they can make good arguments about matters that affect them or anyone else. Furthermore, the existence of transgender men who have given birth further undermines the thought that one sex or gender is apt to have more correct views here.

⁵ For discussion of this question of what could have been different about the past such that you never existed, see Chad Vance's “Origin Essentialism: What Could Have Been Different about You?” at *1000-Word Philosophy: An Introductory Anthology* at <https://1000wordphilosophy.com/2014/04/28/origin-essentialism/>

4.2.2.4 “Women and girls will die if abortion isn’t allowed.”

This is true. However, this fact is apt to not be persuasive to some people who think that abortion is wrong: they will respond, “If someone dies *because they are doing something wrong like having an abortion*, that’s ‘on them,’ *not* those who are trying to prevent that wrong.” Observing that women will die if abortions are outlawed doesn’t engage any arguments that abortion is wrong or give much a reason to think that abortion is *not* wrong. Again, this type of engagement is necessary for progress on these issues.

In sum, while we agree that people who think that abortion is generally not morally wrong and should be legal are *correct*, they sometimes don’t offer very good reasons to think this, just like the opponents of abortion. An analysis of the more nuanced reasons in favor of abortion provided by philosophers will yield proper support for this viewpoint.

For Review and Discussion:

1. Do the reasons that people get abortions matter for its moral permissibility? Why or why not?
2. Describe the common arguments *against* abortion and assess them. Are they good or bad arguments? Do they make assumptions or claims that are problematic? Do the reasons provided actually provide evidence and reasons to oppose abortion?
3. Describe the common arguments *for* abortion and assess them. Are they good or bad arguments? Do they make assumptions or claims that are problematic? Do the reasons provided actually give evidence and reasons to support abortion?