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## A humanist discussion of... ABORTION

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Humanists seek to live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs. They use reason, experience and respect for others when thinking about moral issues, not obedience to dogmatic rules. So in thinking about abortion a humanist would **consider the evidence**, the **probable consequences**, and the **rights and wishes of everyone involved**, trying to find the kindest course of action or the one that would **do the least harm**.

### What does the law say?

- The law in England, Scotland and Wales permits abortion before **the twenty-fourth week of pregnancy** if two doctors agree that there is a risk to the life or the mental or physical health of the mother if the pregnancy continues, or there will be a risk to the mental or physical health of other children in the family.
- However, there is **no time limit if there is a substantial risk** that the baby will be born severely disabled, or there is a grave risk of death or permanent injury (mental or physical) to the mother.
- In effect this means that **almost every woman who wants an abortion before the twenty-fourth week can obtain one**. However, some women who do not realise that they are pregnant till too late (perhaps because they are very young or because they are menopausal) may not be able to have abortions though they would have qualified on other grounds.

Abortion is an issue that demonstrates the **difficulties of rigid rules in moral decision making**. Medical science has advanced to the point where we have options that were unthinkable even a few generations ago and where old rules cannot cope with new facts.

### Some medical facts

- Some very premature babies can now be kept alive, which has altered ideas about when foetuses become human beings with human rights. The law in England and Wales is based on the fact that after 24 weeks the foetus is often **viable**, in that with medical assistance it can **survive outside the womb**.
- Many illnesses and disabilities can now be diagnosed **long before birth**.
- Some very ill or disabled babies who would probably once have died before or shortly after birth **can now be kept alive**.
- The **sex of a foetus** can be known well before birth (and some parents would like to be able to choose the sex of their child).
- Genetic research makes it increasingly likely that parents will be able to know, or even to choose, other **characteristics for their unborn child**. A few will want to reject some foetuses.
- Abortions can be performed **safely**, though they can occasionally cause medical or psychological problems.

These are in themselves **morally neutral** medical facts, but they bring with them the necessity to make moral choices and to consider who should make those choices. Doctors? Politicians? Religious leaders? Medical ethics committees? Individual women? Their partners?

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## Some views on abortion

Regardless of our advanced medical understanding of the procedure itself, **abortion remains a complex moral issue**; with contemporary views on the matter differing greatly. Here are some common starting points useful for thinking about the ethics of abortion -

### *The sanctity of life*

Some religious people think that **all human life is sacred**, that **life begins at conception**, and so **abortion is always wrong**. The idea of life at conception often leads to the belief that **contraception** is also wrong.

But a **humanist** would argue that the idea of "sacredness" is unhelpful if one has to choose between risking the life of the mother or the life of the unborn foetus. This is very rare these days so the choice most often concerns the **quality of life** of either the mother or the foetus or both. The humanist would also oppose the related belief that contraception is wrong since this leads to even **more unwanted pregnancies** as well as heightened **risk of sexually transmitted illnesses**.

### *"Playing God"*

People often argue that it is not for the woman undergoing or the doctor carrying out the abortion "to play God" and that **it is for God to decide matters of life and death**.

But it could be said accordingly that **all** medical interventions are "playing God" since any medication, vaccination or operation may have kept you alive longer than "God" planned. Thus a **humanist** says we have to **decide for ourselves how we use medical powers**. Arguments which invoke God are unconvincing to those who do not believe in gods, and **laws should not be based on claims which rely on religious faith as this excludes people who hold other belief systems**.

### *The rights of the woman and the foetus*

Those who believe that **life begins at conception** argue that **foetuses therefore have full human rights**, including **the right to life**. This basic right, it is argued, overrides the right of the woman to choose if she wants to be pregnant or not.

For **humanists** the **issue of rights is more complex**. Some (non-religious) moral philosophers have argued that full consciousness begins only after birth or even later, and so foetuses and infants are **not full human beings with human rights**.

Other humanists may work on a **kind of sliding scale**, believing for example that the zygote one day after conception has no rights but the foetus one day before birth does have a right to be protected. Views of when abortion is morally permissible might be defined (as the law on abortion is) by the idea of **viability** (when the foetus can survive outside of the womb). Alternatively, evidence of when the foetus can feel **pain** may be considered by the humanist to be an important factor (a recent article in medical journal *JAMA* estimated that foetuses are not developed enough to feel any pain until after about 29 weeks. *JAMA Vol 294, p 947*)

Even if certain rights are given to foetuses, humanists believe we must never forget **the rights of the woman** involved. Some people believe that a woman has **absolute rights over her own body** which override those of any unborn foetus. You might like to read Judith Jarvis Thomson's "A Defence of Abortion" (see bibliography below) which states a feminist case for abortion very clearly.

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## The humanist view

Through reasoned consideration of the issues above, humanists conclude that **abortion is often a morally acceptable choice to make**. This choice is personal; the law does not impose abortion on anyone who does not want one or want to perform one. Humanists value life and value happiness and personal choice, and many actively campaigned for legalised abortion in the 1960s. Although humanists do not think all life is "sacred" **they do respect life**, and much in this debate hinges on **when one thinks human life begins**. We have seen that humanists tend to think that **a foetus does not become a person, with its own feelings and rights, until well after conception**.

Because humanists take happiness and suffering into consideration, they are usually more concerned with the **quality of life rather than the right to life**, if the two come into conflict. The probable quality of life of the baby, the woman, rights and wishes of the father and the rest of the family, and the doctors and nurses involved, would all have to be given due weight. There is plenty of room for debate about how much weight each individual should have, but most humanists would probably put **the interests of the woman first**, since she would have to complete the pregnancy and likely care for the baby, whose happiness would largely depend on hers. She also exists already with other responsibilities and rights and feelings that can be taken into account - unlike those of the unborn foetus which cannot be so surely ascertained.

Of course all possible options should be explored and **decisions should be informed ones**. Adoption of the unwanted baby might be the best solution in some cases, or on reflection a woman might decide that she could look after a sick or disabled child. Or she might decide that she cannot offer this child a life worth living and abortion is the better choice. She will need to **consider the long-term effects as well as the immediate ones**. It is unlikely to be an easy decision, and requiring an abortion is a situation that most women would prefer to avoid.

For society as a whole, as well as for the children themselves, **it is better if every child is a wanted child**. However, abortion is not the best way of avoiding unwanted children, and improved sex education, easily available contraception, and better education and opportunities for young women, can all help to **reduce the number of abortions**. But as long as abortion is needed as a **last resort**, most humanists would agree that society should provide safe legal facilities. The alternatives, which would inevitably include illegal abortions, **are far worse**.



*Efficient sex education is crucial in reducing unwanted pregnancies*

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## Questions to think about and discuss

- o Is abortion in the case of pregnancy after rape more justified than other abortions?
- o Would a humanist favour abortion if a woman wanted one because her pregnancy was interfering with her holiday plans? Why (not)?
- o Why do humanists think contraception is better than abortion?
- o Are there any good arguments against adoption of unwanted babies?
- o Should doctors and nurses impose their moral views on patients? Yes? Sometimes? Never?
- o Should religious people impose their views on abortion on non-religious people? Yes? Sometimes? Never?
- o Should parents be able to choose the sex of their child? Should they be able to abort a foetus of the "wrong" sex?
- o At what point does a foetus become a human being? Does this affect the humanist view of abortion? Does this affect your view of abortion?
- o Can infanticide (the killing newborn infants) ever be right?
- o Should abortion ever be carried out on a non-consenting woman, e.g. one too young to give legal consent or one in a coma?
- o How are you deciding your answers to these questions? What principles and arguments influence your answers?
- o How is the humanist view on this issue similar to that of other worldviews you have come across? How is it different?

### Further reading

A more concise version of this perspective, together with many others designed for easy photocopying and much useful information for teachers, can be found in *Humanist Perspectives 2* available to buy at [www.humanism.org.uk](http://www.humanism.org.uk)

Also available from the BHA's website –

Other BHA briefings: *Thinking about ethics* ; *Euthanasia* ; *Suicide* , etc.

Humanist Philosophers' Group (2002), *What is Humanism?* (BHA)

Barbara Smoker (1998), *Humanism* (BHA)

Judith Jarvis Thomson (1971), "A Defence of Abortion" widely reprinted e.g. in Michael Palmer, *Moral Problems* (Lutterworth)

Mary Warnock, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Ethics* (Duckworth)

Jonathan Glover, *Causing Death and Saving Lives* (Penguin)

Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge University Press)

Craig Donnellan, *Abortion (Issues)* (Independence)



The two sides of the abortion debate – Pro-Choice (left) vs. Pro-Life (right) activists