Mary Anne Warren’s Personhood Argument in Favor of Abortion

Presentation by: Claire King
Before antibiotics, abortions were an incredibly dangerous procedure for women

Legal until the late nineteenth century

1973 states became able to legalize abortion, considering the following three arguments:

- To discourage illicit sex
- To protect the mother
- To protect pre-natal life
Defining Human

Two ways to look at abortion:

- 1. Every human has a right to life, a fetus is a human, killing humans is wrong, abortion is wrong.
- 2. Every person has a right to life, a fetus is not a person, killing people is wrong, there is nothing wrong with abortion.

Noonan’s traditional anti-abortion argument assumes that a fetus is human in the moral sense.
Defining Personhood

• Warren claims that the moral community consists not of human beings, but only of people
• But how do we define personhood?
  † Imagine that you are a space traveler who ends up on a foreign planet and must determine whether or not you are obligated to treat the alien species with full moral rights, or if you could eat them
  † What characteristics would you deem necessary for one to possess in order to in fact be a person?
  † Is someone in a vegetative state, or a coma a person? Or only a human being?
Warren’s Definition

- Warren suggests the following traits:
  - Consciousness
  - Reasoning
  - Self motivated activity
  - Capacity to communicate
  - Presence of self-concepts, and self-awareness

- Acknowledging someone as a person ensures said person the right to be treated as a member of the moral community
What Does it Mean to NOT be a Person?

• In order to prove that a fetus is not a person, Warren seeks to make the claim that any being who cannot meet the characteristics listed before, is not in fact a person.
  - “Some human beings are not people, and there may well be people who are not human beings”
    - A human in a vegetative state
    - Robots in future generations

• A fetus is not yet a person, and does not possess the full moral rights of a member of the moral community. In particular, the fetus does not possess the right to live
Fetal Development and the Right to Life

• There have been some legal efforts to place no restrictions on an abortion in the first trimester, but more later on
  ◦ How far into development must a human be to have a right to life?

• It seems reasonable to suggest that the more like a person the being is, the more of a right to life it should have
  ◦ Physically, a human being develops continuously, shouldn’t the rights of that person do the same?
  ◦ What attributes would you personally consider in deeming a being enough like a person to be regarded as having some moral rights depending on its development?
  ◦ Are you more of a “person” as Warren defines it, now then you were years ago?

• “Though it may feel pain, or possess some form of consciousness, this consciousness is certainly not that of an adult à it seems that rationally if the right to life of a fetus is to be based upon it’s resemblance to a person, then it can’t be said to have any more right to life than a newborn guppy”
Potential Personhood

- Although a fetus may not be a person, it will most likely be a person in the future.
  - Does this potential grant it a right to life?