

Mary Anne Warren's Personhood Argument in Favor of Abortion

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Abortion in History

- 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 adultà 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 cant 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?