Thomson's "A Defense of Abortion": Lesson Plan

Topic

In “A Defense of Abortion,” Thomson points out that there is a logical gap between the insistence of a fetus’ right to life and the immorality of abortions. One’s right to life doesn't give them the right to that which isn't theirs, namely another’s body. The owner of said body must voluntarily grant another that right. While a third party may choose not to interfere and thus pick between the child and the mother, they cannot prevent the mother from trying to save her own life. However, if the sacrifice is not too great, killing the fetus would be indecent. Thus, Thomson argues that abortion is sometimes permissible and, at other times, impermissible.

Possible subjects/classes | Time needed
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Philosophy, Ethics, Religion, Sociology, Government, Politics | 30-45 minutes

Video link:


Objective: What will students know/be able to do at the end of class?

Students will be able to...

- List common logical flaws committed in debates over abortion.
- Explain what is and is not meant by stating that a person has “a right to life.”
- Explain why abortion can be permissible in some cases and impermissible in others.

Key Concepts & Vocabulary

Abortion, Pro-life, Pro-choice

Materials Needed
Worksheet, Copies of Thomson's "A Defense of Abortion"

Before you watch

Describe the following scenario to your students:

“You wake up one morning in a hospital room, hooked up to an unconscious man you don't recognize. It turns out he is a famous violinist who has a fatal kidney disease. While you slept, some avid fans of his broke into your home and carried you to the hospital. Why? You are the only person who has his exact blood type. Thus, you are the only person who can help save him. The violinist's circulatory system was plugged into yours last night, and, even now, your kidneys are extracting the poison from his body as well as your own. If he is unplugged from you, the man will die. In nine months, he will be fully recovered and the two of you can be safely disconnected from each other.”

Ask students what they would do in this situation. Have them explain their reasoning. Then ask students what they think would be the morally correct decision. See if their answers or reasoning changes.

While you watch

1. According to Thomson's analysis, what does the argument over abortion routinely ignore?
2. Name a flaw with insisting that a person's right to life entitles them to whatever they need to survive.
3. What right does the mother not possess over the unborn child?

After you watch/discussion questions

1. What does the right to life mean to you? Can you find any flaws when trying to apply your definition?
2. Do you find the hypothetical examples used (either directly taken from Thomson's essay or inspired by them) persuasive? Why or why not?
3. Can you think of any other cases in which abortion would be permissible, according to Thomson's definition? What about impermissible?

Activity Ideas

- Write a short reflection essay on Thomson’s critiques in the modern abortion debate. Do you find that the female perspective is still often ignored? Why do you think this is or isn't the case? Your response should
be roughly two to four paragraphs long.

- Work in groups and critique Thomson's essay. What are the flaws with her comparisons (most notably, the violinist and expanding-child ones)? How convincing are they? How could you improve upon her work? Is there anything important she didn’t address? If so, how would you go about doing so? Groups should take notes during their critiques and share some of their findings with the class.
- Individually complete the Worksheet. Then review answers as a class.

### Sources/places to learn more