

# The ethics of abortion: utilitarianism, buddhism and kant. assignment

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Examine how different ethical theories/religious viewpoints approach the issue of abortion. To what extent do you think they are successful in resolving the controversies? Abortion is a very controversial subject in today's society, and although it is now legal in most Western countries, there are as many viewpoints and arguments opposing abortion as there are in favour of it. Many questions must be asked when contemplating abortion; When does a human life begin? ' At what point is the foetus morally equal to us? ' Does the mother have the right to choose to end the life of her unborn child? re a few of the major issues which arise. Contrary to Utilitarianism, Buddhism has a very clear view on when life begins: conception. Like Kant, Buddhists believe that life is sacred and have a very positive view of human beings. However Buddhism extends this idea, believing that every living creature has Tathagatha-Garba (perfection in embryonic form), suggesting that every living being has the potential to reach a perfect state and ultimately become a Buddha.

Therefore even if you have an early abortion, it is still destroying the potential for something perfect, which is not acceptable. Buddhists have come to the conclusion that life begins at conception, as they teach that one incarnates in the mother at the moment of conception, meaning that destroying an embryo is equal to murder. Buddhism would say that the mother does not have the right to destroy the Tathagartha-Garba as it is a completely different entity, it is simply living inside her body for the time being, not an actual part of the mother's body over which she has control.

A main principle in Buddhism is that of the Tri-Pitaka (three baskets), it is the first of these baskets - Vinaya-Pitaka - which concerns the issue of abortion <https://assignbuster.com/the-ethics-of-abortion-utilitarianism-buddhism-kant-assignment/>

as it deals with laws governing moral life for example Pratimoksha, which represents the way to freedom, and consists of Five Primary Precepts. One of these precepts is ' I undertake the training principle of refraining from harming living beings', rendering abortion immoral and linking to the Buddhist idea that mental attitude is very important.

They believe that one must have a calm mind in death in order to enter the next life in a high realm; harming the tathagartha-garba before it's born will undoubtedly cause it severe mental trauma and so causing it to be reincarnated in a lower realm, enforcing the belief that the mother does not have the right to abort a child, as this would inflict pain and the unfortunate consequences upon an innocent being. The Bardo-Thodol (Tibetan Book of the Dead) gives a very accurate and descriptive insight into what happens between two lives - from death to reincarnation.

It teaches how we can attain Nirvana by recognizing the heavenly realms instead of entering into the lower realms where the cycle of birth and rebirth continue. A main principle in the Buddhist religion is Karma - they believe that between lives you meet Lord Yama, who holds up a mirror in which you see all of your past deeds which are then measured on a balance to determine where you go in your next life. Each negative deed adds a black stone to the balance, and every positive deed, a white.

Your karma acts as a magnet drawing you to future rebirth and you are reincarnated in a certain realm, according to how the balance is tipped, if there are more white than black stones you will enter a high realm and vice versa. By having an abortion you are disregarding the sacred value of life

and so are likely to be reborn in a low, hell realm. Buddhist belief is that abortion is intrinsically wrong as it contradicts all of their key teachings. Kant, like the Buddhists, has an absolutist view on ethics and again, as in Buddhism, believes that abortion is always wrong.

His view is very unique; he believes that just as the universe is underpinned by laws of nature, human behaviour is controlled by a moral law. He teaches that in order to work out these moral laws you must use a kind of ethical mathematics, synthetic a priori'. The 'mathematic' principle of Kantian ethics is known as the 'Principle of Universalisability, basically when making a moral decision you must imagine the outcome if everyone in the world did the same thing. One of Kant's examples was lying - what would happen if everybody lied?

Well, the world would become a very corrupt place and it would be impossible to distinguish right from wrong, therefore it is wrong to lie. If we apply this principle to abortion it is logically impossible, that is to say if everyone had an abortion there would be nobody left to get pregnant and have an abortion and the human race would ultimately die out, furthermore it isn't actually possible for every human in the world to have an abortion as men and infertile women are unable to become pregnant in the first place.

So according to the Principle of Universalisability, abortion is intrinsically wrong. Kant's second principle states that as humans we must treat others as ends not means', in other words we should not use people for our own benefit, instead we should use actions in order to benefit other people. For example, a pimp uses prostitutes in order to gain wealth, to Kant this

behaviour is intrinsically wrong as it involves using others for personal gain. This principle verifies that Kant would be against abortion as people would be using the foetus so as to reduce their own suffering.

The third of Kant's principles is known as 'The Kingdom of Ends'. He makes it clear that you should act as though everyone is following the moral law, that is to say, you should not change your moral behaviour because other people do. His Justification is that things will fall apart if you take this attitude. A final important point to consider when studying Kant is that he does not believe emotions, feelings or circumstances should affect the decisions you make, this is due to his belief that there is a rational order undergirding the world.

Disobeying a moral law is equivalent to disobeying a physical law: you can't, no matter how you feel about gravity it still acts, and in Kant's view, moral law is no different. Kant's theory is worthy for consideration as it is just, it has a positive view of human life and as humans we intuitively agree with much of what he says. On the other hand however, his theories are perhaps too rigid and unemotional, and it is possible for moral laws to contradict each other, for example one moral law is that you cannot lie, and another states that you cannot hurt people, but sometimes the truth hurts.

Unlike Buddhism and Kant, Utilitarianism is a relativist theory and states that nothing is intrinsically right or wrong. Basically, it is a consequentialist theory which judges the consequences of our actions rather than the actions themselves, meaning that unlike the others it does not say that abortion is always morally wrong. Utilitarianism considers each individual circumstance

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separately, coming to reasonable conclusions which suit the particular circumstance.

In this respect it can be very useful, for example in cases of incest and rape where the mother feels she could not bear to go through with the pregnancy, utilitarianism would justify an abortion on the grounds that the mother's wellbeing is of utmost importance. This theory would sympathise with the mother, believing that preventing the emotional trauma from which she would suffer is more important than the rapist/family member's child, as it is not an actual human being yet and so cannot feel happy, which is the basis of utilitarianism.

Unlike Kant, utilitarianism takes into account the thoughts and feelings of people involved, to produce the outcome that will bring the greatest happiness. For this reason, it does not forbid abortion as in some cases the abortion is likely to have a better outcome than the birth of the child. For example, when a couple discovers their child is to be born disabled, many choose to have it aborted for the benefit of both themselves and the baby.

If the baby was to be born, it would likely struggle through life and would not have the quality of life that many people believe a child deserves, also it is often the case that the parents cannot afford to give the child the help and support it needs, as this requires a full time commitment. Utilitarianism would justify the abortion of the child in situations such as these as it is likely that the child would suffer, which is, needless to say, unfair.

A popular utilitarian principle is Jeremy Bentham's Principle of Pleasure - he argues that all human actions and decisions are governed by the desire to gain pleasure and escape pain. Abortion is perhaps difficult to apply to this principle, as on one hand it may bring the mother pleasure to have the abortion, but in many cases the pain of the child overrides this, suggesting that an abortion would be wrong. Therefore, as with all of utilitarianism, it is largely down to human judgement, meaning it is subjective and so could easily be seen by many as wrong.

In this respect, Buddhism is arguably a better theory when it comes to abortion as there is no uncertainty. There are two main branches of utilitarianism - act and rule. When contemplating abortion, most would argue that Rule Utilitarianism is a more useful guide as, unlike Act, it does not base the verdict on every single individual case, instead it forms a set of rules which aim to please the greatest number of people.

For example the rules for abortion would be something along the lines that abortion is wrong except in cases of rape, incest, disability etc. The final form of utilitarianism is known as Preference Utilitarianism, aptly named it is based upon the preference of those involved. In terms of abortion especially, this is a very weak way to consider it, as often people do not know what they would prefer and even when they do, they may wish to have the abortion out of ease or a similar reason, which would be unfair on the baby and generally frowned upon.

A notorious example of this type of utilitarianism is Peter Singer's example that a mature chimpanzee has greater self-consciousness than a newborn

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infant and therefore has a more legitimate right to life; this statement would of course be used in favour of abortion, a very controversial view. The most useful ethical theory concerning abortion is in my opinion, Buddhism. The Buddhists' approach to the issue is the most complex and reasoned, although it believes that abortion is intrinsically wrong and forbids it in all cases which is an issue for many people, it is the most valid argument.

Their belief in the Tathagatha-Garba means that to them there is no situation in which abortion would be Justifiable, as no matter the circumstance, the Tathagatha-Garba is always being destroyed which is an evil act. Kant's theory is not as compelling as that of the Buddhists as despite it being along similar lines, his Principle of Universalisability seems much more trivial than the idea of the Tathagatha-Garba, as it is unrealistic and though it is a relatively strong argument, to me the Buddhist approach is much more persuasive as it deals with a very real possibility.

To me, Utilitarianism on the whole is a very fickle theory, but particularly when applied to abortion it does not give strong enough Justifications for such a crucial issue. Abortion is a matter of life and death and the subjective conclusions that are drawn by utilitarianism are not substantiated enough to provide a reason to make a decision either way, as conclusions could easily be made either in favour of or against the abortion. For this reason I don't consider it to be a valid theory to apply to such challenging moral issues as abortion.