

Response to don marquis' why abortion is immoral

[Family](#), [Abortion](#)



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Don Marquis' "Why Abortion is Immoral" In his essay "Why Abortion is Immoral," Don Marquis argues against the morality of abortion on the premise that the value of a fetus' future is so great that it is immoral to take that potential future away from it. Essentially, he contends, abortion is tantamount to murder: killing an individual is *prima facie* wrong because the loss of the goods of one's future is the worst loss a human can suffer. He calls this potential future a "future-like-ours," which is the basis for his contentions.

In the next few pages I will delineate the general progression of his argument, and later, will evaluate the plausibility of said argument. Though Marquis makes both logical and compelling claims, there are several concerns and weaknesses that arise from his argument that must be considered. Marquis establishes his argument with the exploration of why killing humans is wrong, in any case. The clear answer, he says, is that killing is wrong because of its "effect on the victim" (*Ethical Issues in Modern Medicine*, 558).

Taking one's life deprives the victim of "all the experiences, activities, projects, and enjoyments that would otherwise have constituted one's future," and this is the greatest loss that any human can suffer (558). This theory of wrongness can account for why it is also wrong to kill infants and young children, whereas other theories that make narrower claims (e. g. "It is *prima facie* wrong to kill only rational agents) do not stand in such cases. There are obvious implications concerning the ethics of abortion with this theory in place.

Marquis contends that " The future of a standard fetus includes a set of experiences, projects, activities, and such which are identical with the futures of adult human beings... " (559). It follows then, that because it is wrong to kill humans, it is also wrong to kill potential humans, and so abortion is *prima facie* seriously wrong. Fetuses have a viable, valuable future, which Marquis calls a " future-like-ours. " So, he adds, whether one has " immediate past experiences or not" does not matter when it comes to killing, because it is the value of the potential future that must be taken into consideration (561). Marquis goes on to refute other theories of wrongness of killing. One such example is that valuing one's future implies a valuer, but fetuses obviously cannot value their futures, and so their futures are not valuable to them. However, Marquis counters this notion by providing us with an example: one may think during a time of despair that his " future is of no worth whatsoever," but he is wrong to think so because " others rightly see value... in it" (561).

So, just because a fetus cannot appreciate its own future, we are aware of the value of its potential future, so abortion is still wrong. Other claims put forth that to be an actual victim, one requires mentation. However, we still recognize that it is wrong to kill those that are unconscious or in a coma (who have prospects of emerging out of their states), so it follows that mentation is not a necessary condition to be a victim. Marquis' refutations provide for his very strong and compelling argument against abortion.

I will grant Marquis that his progression of logic is rational; if a fetus were allowed to fully develop, it would indeed become a sentient being with the capacity of enjoying a prosperous future. However, some ambiguities arise

as a result of his claims and it is difficult to say how Marquis would respond. The first concern I would like to address regards the case of a fetus with a debilitating disease. With today's technology, it is quite easy to detect any abnormalities in a fetus very early on in the pregnancy.

Say, for example, a couple finds out that their fetus has some sort of affliction that will make him terminally ill. They want to abort the fetus because they cannot stand the notion of bringing a child into the world that, although sentient and rational, will have a markedly reduced life span and suffer greatly throughout whatever life he has. How would Marquis respond in this case? He might argue that though the child will suffer, he still has a potential future in which he formulate goals, and have experiences and projects.

However, we must note that during his argument, Marquis says " If the patient's future is intolerable... we want our account to allow killing the patient" and that " it is the value of the patient's future which is doing the work in rendering the morality of killing the patient intelligible" (561). Obviously, a quandary arises. Does the fetus in our example have a future that is less valuable than that of a normal one? Can we justify aborting this fetus, because although he will be rational and most likely capable of having experiences, the scope of his suffering will be exceedingly great?

Are we in any sort of position to prescribe the value of someone else's future without knowing exactly how it will play out? So while it is plausible that Marquis would still argue from an anti-abortionist stance due to its potential future, this decision will very probably not sit well with the parents who have to watch their child suffer throughout his shortened life. This is one ambiguity that exists in Marquis' argument that has no easy answer, and is

worth noting. We must recognize that cannot say with such conviction that we know what a future-like-ours entails.

It seems presumptuous to assert that a future-like-ours is always a positive thing; how can we account for the fetus in the previous example, or an inner-city child essentially having to raise himself because his parents are absent? What about the child who is stuck in a situation with abusive parents, with no one to turn to for help? Though I grant Marquis the soundness of his general argument, and the premise that all fetuses have a potential future, we cannot infer from this claim that this future will necessarily be a positive one.

It becomes a murky and essentially taboo dilemma to even ask if the lives of these children are worth living, and if they would have been better off being aborted in the womb. Marquis may still claim that every fetus has a right to life no matter what, but because he does not consider these cases in his argument, it is worth noting that the answers might not be so straightforward and that more complicated cases do exist. The main concern I would like to note regarding Marquis' argument is that he does not once consider the rights of the mother and the value of her future.

Although Marquis treats the fetus as an independent being, we must at least recognize that the fetus' life depends on its mother's: it receives all of its nutrition from her and it develops in her womb. So, how would Marquis respond to a situation in which the mother will surely (or even has the remote chance) of dying in childbirth, even if the fetus will not? Here, we have two potential futures contesting each other, because this is a one or the other situation - either the fetus must die or the mother will in delivering it.

Similar to the example mentioned previously of the sick fetus, it is not easy to simply prescribe one of their futures with more value than the other one. An anti-abortionist could possibly make the argument that the fetus' life should be saved because it has a longer future to attain, since the mother has already lived a significant portion of her life. However, one could contend that because the mother is already a sentient, rational being and already has goals and projects set in place for her life, her right to life should take precedence over the fetus, who still has no capacity to value its future.

To take away the future of the mother would be more cruel than to take it away from the unaware fetus. Furthermore, what about a situation in which the mother is a teenager, and adoption is out of the question? Say, for example, she has to drop out of school and get a low-paying job, and struggles greatly for a significant amount of time trying to provide for herself and her baby. What has happened to her future-like-ours? Both the mother and the child are in dire situations, and it is obvious that the mother would have been in a better current situation had the fetus been aborted, as uncomfortable as that contention may make us.

The case of the child, however, is much more complex because again, it is difficult to weigh his suffering with his capacity for potentiating a future. I would not like to argue one way or another, but would simply like to note that it is unclear how Marquis would respond to these predicaments and should have noted such in the essay. As I conclude enumerating the ambiguities that arise from Marquis' contentions, I would like to consider the hypothetical case in which Marquis did allow for an abortion, in, for example, the case of the fetus that has some sort of debilitating disease.

He might contend that the inevitable suffering in the fetus' " future-like-ours" outweighs the positive value of his potential future, so an abortion in this case would be permissible. However, what does this do for the integrity of the future-like-ours argument? If we can begin to make exceptions like this, where can we draw the line of what constitutes a " good" or " bad" future-like-ours? If Marquis begins to allow for such xceptions, it seems to diminish the value of his theory as a whole, because it connotes that the futures of some fetuses are less valuable than others even if they are both capable of having potential experiences, dreams, projects, etc. On a broader and related scope, if an anti-abortionist who argues on the sanctity-of-life theory makes an exception for the abortion of a fetus who was the product of a rape or is in a situation where the mother cannot provide for it, it invalidates their entire premise. Both fetuses are innocent and have equal rights to their future.

So, if Marquis did make an exception, it would compromise the integrity of his argument. Marquis makes very compelling and interesting claims in his essay, and takes a novel approach in the controversy over abortion. He uses a strong premise that is not too broad or too narrow in scope, as some anti-abortionists and pro-life activists end up doing in their reasoning. However, as mentioned above, ambiguities do arise from his argument, the most significant of which being the consideration of the mother's right to a future.

With this considered, it becomes clear that a " future-like-ours" may not be as clear-cut of an idea as Marquis would like us to think. The essay would have been stronger and more lucid if Marquis considered " futures-like-ours" that are not exactly futures like ours. By virtue of the sheer breadth and

variety of experiences that humans experience as a species, it is much more difficult to define a future-like-ours than Marquis delineates in his essay.