

A defense of a defense of abortion

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



A Defense of A Defense of Abortion In her article, A Defense of Abortion, Judith Jarvis Thomson argues that in some though not all cases, women have a right to abortion due to property rights in regards to their body, and the undue burden against these rights that would be placed on women if they are to be made responsible for any and all pregnancies. Thomson uses a variety of sometimes strange analogies to make her point that even if we give in to the argument that a fetus is a person, and thus has a right to life, this right to life does not necessarily ensure a right to sustain that life by using another person's property, in this case the mother's body, against her will. Thomson first asks us to consider the following case. You wake up and find yourself in a hospital bed hooked up to a famous violinist. It is then explained to you that you've been kidnapped by the Society of Music Lovers because you happen to be the only person whose blood type is compatible with the violinist's, who is suffering from a kidney disease, and will die unless you remain plugged into him for nine months. Keeping in mind that both you and the violinist are innocent parties, and that both you and the violinist will walk out of the hospital alive and unharmed when the nine months are up, are you morally obligated to remain connected to the violinist, who in the case of pregnancy would be the fetus? First we must consider the given analogy and its relativity to the primary scenario, being the morality of abortion. There are no other cases quite like pregnancy, where one's ability to sustain life is directly dependent on the use of another's body. This is why Thomson must create the violinist analogy. There are surely many similarities between the case of the violinist and the case of the fetus. As stated before, both parties, the fetus/violinist and the mother/donor are

innocent. The cause of their connection is based on the actions of a third party, in this case the Society of Music Lovers. The fact that the donor was kidnapped presents a distinguishing factor, allowing the analogy to be applied in cases such as pregnancy because of rape, where it is clear that the mother did not consent in any way to becoming pregnant. There are also dissimilarities. The kidnapping itself has not traumatized the donor, while in the case of a young girl being raped and becoming pregnant, the rape itself is very traumatic. However, Thomson discounts this by saying that if those who oppose abortion based on the grounds that a person's right to life is more important than a mother's property right to her body, make an exception in the case of rape, they are saying that those who come into existence because of rape have less of a right to life than others, which sounds somehow wrong. Furthermore, many who oppose abortion on this ground do not make an exception for rape. Thus, the primary question remains, is it morally permissible to disconnect yourself from a person, even if doing so will kill them? Thomson then takes the violinist scenario a step further, asking us to imagine that it turns out that supporting the violinist is putting additional strain on you, and if you continue to remain plugged into him, you will die. Some would say that it is still impermissible, because unplugging yourself would be directly killing the innocent violinist which is murder, and always wrong. Thomson vehemently denies that you are obligated to sacrifice your own life in order to save the violinist, saying that in this case " if anything in the world is true, it is that you do not commit murder, you do not do what is impermissible, if you reach around to your back and unplug yourself from that violinist to save your life. " (Vaughn, 175)

Many of Thomson's other analogies deal with the concept of a woman's property rights to her body making a case for abortion being permissible. She gives the analogy of a young boy being given a box of chocolates, and eating them before his envious brother. Of course the boy ought to share his chocolates with his brother, as most of us would agree. However, Thomson claims that if he doesn't, he is simply being selfish and greedy, but not unjust. He is not unjust in denying his brother the chocolates simply because they were given to him, and thus are his property. If the box had been given to both of the brothers, it would be a different story. Distinguishing between what one ought to do and what one is morally obligated to do ties back to the violinist analogy. Even if the violinist only required use of your body for one hour, while you ought to allow him to use your body, as it requires little effort on your part, you are not unjust if you refuse. You are perhaps callous and selfish, yes, but not unjust. As Thomson states " Except in such cases as the unborn person has a right to demand it-and we were leaving open the possibility that there may be such cases-nobody is morally required to make large sacrifices, of health, of all other interests and concerns, of all other duties and commitments, for nine years, or even for nine months, in order to keep another person alive. " (Vaughn, 181) The criticism I would make of this argument is that she does not specify in which cases the unborn person has a right to demand use of a mother's body, only that they can occur. She does clearly state however, that having a right to life does not inherently give one the right to be given the use of or allowed continued use of another's body, even if one needs it for life itself. (Vaughn, 178) Some who oppose abortion argue that because pregnancy is preventable, if one happens to become

pregnant they must take responsibility, which gives the fetus special rights that a stranger, such as the violinist would not have. Thomson points out that this theory only gives a fetus a right to a mother's body if the pregnancy resulted in a voluntary act, leaving out instances of rape. She uses the people-seed analogy to further discuss the implications of holding women responsible for all pregnancies. She asks us to imagine people as seeds, innocently drifting around the world, sometimes even into your home, getting stuck to furniture and carpets. To prevent this from happening to you, you put the best screens on your windows you can buy. As we all know, sometimes screens are defective, and a seed finds its way in and takes root, despite your preventative measures. Does that seed have a right to use your house to develop into a person? It is true that it could have been prevented from taking root if you lived your life in a house without furniture or carpeting, but this seems ridiculous. By the same token you could say that women who are raped have a responsibility to the fetus because rape could be prevented by never leaving home without a reliable army, or never leaving home at all. This is far too high of a burden to put on individuals. When evaluating these analogies and the argument Thomson uses them to make, certain questions arise. For example, if I am not morally obligated to give my property to someone who depends on it for survival, is it morally permissible to let someone starve to death because I refuse to share my food that I bought earlier from the grocery store? Given her analogies, such as the instance of the boy who refuses to share his chocolate, it would seem that Thomson would say that it is permissible to let someone die of starvation. After all, you are not morally obligated to share what is rightly

yours. She would say you are selfish and greedy, like the little boy, but not unjust or immoral. However, letting an innocent person starve to death, when doing something as little as giving them some of our food, does not sit well with the average person. This is where Thomson's concept of the Good Samaritan vs. the minimally decent Samaritan comes into play. In the biblical story, the Good Samaritan saw a man dying in the road, abandoned by others who passed. He cleaned the dying man's wounds and took him to an inn, paying for his stay. He went out of his way to help someone in need, at some cost to himself. Thomson illustrates the other extreme by using the case of Kitty Genovese, who was murdered while thirty-eight people stood by and did nothing to help. In this case the Good Samaritan would have rushed to her aid, putting his own life on the line in order to save a stranger's. While Thomson seems to say that this is too much to ask of people, and they are not morally required to risk their own life to save another's, she does say that the Minimally Decent Samaritan would have at least called the police. Because no one even called the police, they are not even minimally decent Samaritans, and their actions are monstrous. While the Good Samaritan gives aid they are not obligated to give, the Minimally Decent Samaritan fulfills their minimal obligations. Just as watching a person be murdered and doing absolutely nothing to help is falling below the standard of minimally decent Samaritan, I would have to believe that watching a person starve and doing nothing to help is also monstrous. After all, using Thomson's analogies we could say that the people who watched Kitty Genovese get murdered ought to have used their cell phones to call the police at the very least, but being that their cell phones are their property, they can use them as they

wish, and are not morally obligated to use them to save a life, even if the cost it would bring to them seems extremely insignificant. Thomson seems to distinguish between situations such as letting someone starve to death because you refuse to share your food, or letting someone be murdered because you refuse to use your phone, and aborting a fetus. She claims that many laws prohibiting abortion compel women to be Good Samaritans (Vaughn, 181) as opposed to minimally decent. This claim suggests that she believes that harboring a fetus is an act of a Good Samaritan, not a minimally decent one. Furthermore, by calling the people who watched Kitty Genovese die “monstrous” it suggests that she does in fact believe that watching a person die and doing nothing to help is immoral. By these tokens, it seems that she would in fact view letting another starve as immoral, suggesting that her argument of property rights is inconsistent. Thomson somewhat accounts for these inconsistencies in her closing argument, simply by conceding that the analogies she uses are not fool proof or meant to be applied to all cases. She states “while I do not argue that abortion is not impermissible, I do not argue that it is always permissible. There may well be cases in which carrying the child to term requires only minimally decent Samaritanism of the mother, and this is a standard we must not fall below.” (Vaughn 182) For example, she believes it would be immoral for a woman to abort her child late in the pregnancy because she had a vacation planned. By asserting that her analogies and arguments are not meant to make an absolute case for or against abortion, they do in fact only help her to prove her somewhat tentative point that women do have a right to abortion, in some though not all cases, because of property rights and the undue burden

against these rights that would be placed on women if forced to carry all pregnancies to term. Works Cited: Vaughn, Lewis. Doing Ethics. Ed. Peter J. Simon. New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2010. 173-183. Print.