

Applying of mill's philosophy to the problem of abortion

Sociology



The topic of abortion has been one of the most heavily debated topics in the United States today. Generally it is seen as a two-sided debate, a person can be "pro-life" or "pro-choice". Ultimately the abortion topic comes down to the legality and moral aspect of abortion. In this paper I will attempt to apply John Stuart Mill's philosophy to the complex modern problem of abortion. I will link Mill's defense of individual rights with the utilitarian principle of producing the greatest happiness for the greatest amount of people. I am going to state how well Mill understands the issue of abortion and why his philosophy would help resolve the moral evaluation of abortion in today's society. I specifically concentrate on Mill's writing of *On Liberty* and *Utilitarianism* in this paper.

Pro-choice activists believe that an individual should be allowed to make choices regarding their own body. Mill wrote *On Liberty* to try and resolve the struggle between liberty and authority, which is present in every society. Mill demands, that in regard to an action that only concerns oneself, "independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign". Mill may not necessarily say abortion is always moral or immoral but Mill would say that stripping our ability to have control of our own bodies is immoral. When an individual is engaged in self-regarding activities that have no effect on the rest of society, he or she has a right to do what they desire. It should be an individual's choice because they know best what will make them happy. It is socially useful for free choice because it permits people's best faculties to blossom. Mill suggests that human capacities only flourish when left alone and to hinder individual freedom would be to jeopardize both individual and social well being.

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Restraining the freedom of a human diminishes the principle foundation of human happiness and leaves the species less rich and makes life less valuable to the individual. Imposing virtues on others often diminishes their capacity for exercising their own judgment and self control and this can make them worse people who resent both the government and people who tell them what they are doing is wrong. Mill introduced the Harm Principle to help govern the dealings of society. This principle states " that the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others". The government and authority should only exert its power over personal freedom if it is going to threaten the well being of others. Getting an abortion does not harm the greater society, it can only harm two potential people: the mother and the fetus.

An ethical dilemma arises concerning whose rights should prevail, the women's versus the rights claimed for the fetus. One of the first things we need to consider is the status of a fetus or at what point the fetus should be accorded the same protection against being killed as other human beings. A pro-choice advocate such as Peter Singer would claim that the fetus does not have a capacity to feel and understand pain. It is difficult for those who want to defend abortion to establish a morally significant dividing line between the earliest stages of life when abortion would be permissible and the point at which the life turns into a properly human life and when it would not. At a very early stage of its development, say two or three months, it is probably barely conscious and hardly able to feel pleasure and pain at all. Singer claims that such a fetus shows fewer signs of consciousness than a fish. A

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fetus has no interests and rights of its own. It will have interests and rights once it evolves into a person but the act of abortion prevents this from ever happening. If we argue that a fetus should not be considered a person, then the Harm Principle, introduced in *On Liberty*, would support the claim that the ability to decide whether or not to get an abortion is moral because it is not causing any harm to others. The only harm being done is by the mother, to herself. Deciding whether or not a fetus is self-aware and worthy of human rights, and whether an abortion has a "victim" or not is very controversial with wide spectrum of views. Regardless of its physical development, pro-life believers may justify that by choosing to have an abortion, you are robbing a potential human life. If we consider the fetus as having rights we need to look at the whether an abortion will actually harm the fetus and whether it is comparable to the harm that others would experience.

Laws prohibiting abortion do not stop abortions but merely drives them underground. Women who want abortions may use unqualified medical practices, which often result in serious medical complications and sometimes death. If an abortion is performed by a qualified medical professional it can be as safe as any medical operation. Therefore the effect of prohibiting the choice of abortion does not necessarily reduce the number of abortions performed but actually increases the difficulties andangers for women with unwanted pregnancies. If an illegal abortion is performed on a fetus, it may cause much more pain for both the mother and the child, than an abortion performed by a professional. Therefore, according to the Harm Principle prohibiting abortion could actually cause more harm even if we consider the life of the fetus as important as the mothers. Regarding the legality of

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abortion, Mill would argue that prohibiting abortion is immoral because it can cause harm to both the mother and child and it can jeopardize the mother's well being. Next, I will discuss the morality of abortion by using Mill's arguments presented in Utilitarianism.

John Stuart Mill is one of the earliest supporters of utilitarianism.

Utilitarianism judges each consequence by pleasure and pain. We want to experience the most pleasure with little pain and this will give us happiness. The rightness of an action can be determined by the amount of pleasure it creates and the pain it prevents. The wrongness of an action is determined by how much pain it creates and the pleasure it prevents. Pleasures are also quantifiable. Mill describes two types of pleasures that differ in qualities; there are higher pleasures and lower pleasures. Higher pleasures include intellectual and moral pleasures while lower pleasures are physical pleasures that can be experienced by humans and animals. Mill argues that these higher pleasures outweigh the lower pleasures due to their animalistic nature. Mill would argue that the decision on whether or not to have an abortion should be based on the greatest amount of pleasure for the greatest amount of people, not just on the potential future of the fetus. Every circumstance is different and warrants a separate evaluation to determine the correct action. I am going to apply this issue with Mill's utilitarian philosophy under multiple situations.

The first situation I am going to consider is if the mother's health is in jeopardy. In this position it is an issue of the right to life for the fetus versus the right to life for the mother. Because Mill is not only concerned with the

quantity of people involved but with the quality he would say the choice should be up to the mother. In Utilitarianism Mill states, " It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of different opinion, it is because they only know their side of the question". Mill argues that the life of a human who has experienced both the higher and the lower pleasures is more valuable than the life of a being that has only experienced the lower. The qualities such as intellect are favored and considered more valuable. Therefore in this situation you would have to determine whose life holds more value. In this case, the mother's life would hold more value because she is already a part of society, and has preexisting relationships with the community. The mother experiences more " higher" pleasures, which outweighs the value of the fetus. Singer argues that you need to look at the fetus for what actual characteristic it possesses and that those are on the same scale of animals. If you compare the moral characteristics like awareness, pleasure and pain between a fetus and a chicken or pig, the animals would come out ahead during any stage of pregnancy. Because a fetus does not have the same valued qualities as rational humans, Mill would say the life of the mother holds more value than the fetus and therefore abortion would be moral if the mother's health was in jeopardy.

The quality of life for the fetus is very important. It would be immoral to have a baby and not be able to raise it correctly and give it the best chance to succeed at life than having an abortion and waiting until you are in a position to raise a child correctly and put it in a position to succeed. In the circumstances of rape, severe disability or illness and financial strain Mill

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would find abortion moral, due to the quality of life the child would face. If a mother is raped, the psychology damage done to the mother must be taken into consideration. If prohibited from having an abortion the women would be given no choice of her own and be linked to this fetus. Having an unwanted child conceived from rape could lead to a hostile environment where the mother and child are more likely to become unhappy or even depressed. In this situation there would be a father who is a dangerous offender and a mother who is extremely traumatized and may not be able to show her maternal feelings normally. The amount of pain that would correlate with raising a child after being raped would not agree with the principles of the Greatest Happiness Principle due to the pain that both the mother and child would experience.

If the parents of a potential child were facing a financial burden then the baby could become disadvantaged over time, and so aborting the baby would forgo the possibilities of grief and stress in the future. The inability to function as a good parent is a painful thing for the child and the parents. If the baby is a financial burden to the parents you can look at it quantitatively, two humans versus one fetus, and qualitatively. If the parents would feel pain due to this baby and not be able to provide a good life to the child then pain may be inflicted on all three individuals. If they are unable to take adequate care of children they already have, then another mouth to feed will reduce their ability to provide for their existing family. If the child is expected to have some sort of disability or illness Mill would argue that at the expense of the child and parent's quality of life, an abortion would be moral. We would have to look at what would produce less pain, an abortion or a

physically, emotionally and financially unstable life. If it were expected that a child is going to suffer all of his or her life, Mill would argue that you should choose a better way and quicker way to relive that pain. In situations like these, giving the gift of death could be viewed, for the parents, as a better gift than giving the gift of a bad and troubling life. However, Mill would argue that if an abortion happens, in any situation, it should be done by the most painless method possible. I believe it is safe to say that no one derives pleasure from an abortion, however the prevention of pain is equivalent to pleasure under Mills philosophy.

If an unplanned pregnancy occurs and the baby is unwanted simply because it is an inconvenience we have to look at the impact on the whole society. We are living during a time of overpopulation and our resources are slowly dwindling. In the case of overpopulation, if the baby is not intended and we are facing scarce resources than the birth of the baby would be harmful to the greater society. Abortion is defended in the case of overpopulation because we need to consider the greatest happiness of the greatest amount of people, especially the avoidance of misery for the masses of people. K. B Welton speaks to this point, " Millions of families and the many children that result from unregulated procreation, are becoming dependent on public assistance in cities throughout the world Millions now grow up in poverty and miss an equal chance in life." Unfortunately, they are likely to repeat the mistakes of their parents, intensifying the pace of demands upon our community and the world. Utilitarianism focuses much on the effects individuals play amongst the community and requires that you consider the long-term benefits and issues that face the general population.

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There are so many different arguments and positions a person can take when discussing abortion. Mill would have no reason to reject a policy simply because it will result in burdening for those that are pro-life. Burdening some more than others can end up contributing the greatest happiness for the greatest amount of people. A utilitarian point of view is somewhat simple because it relies on this greatest happiness principle. In the case of abortion, Mills utilitarian philosophy would state that all unwanted pregnancies that would cause physical, emotional, mental or financial hardship should be terminated. A utilitarian considers the position of the fetus in relation to the society as a whole. The morality of abortion is situational, which I think is important, rather than just saying abortion is always moral or always immoral. Mills theory offers the flexibility of choosing the action based on the evaluations of outcomes. Most women who decide to get an abortion make a conscious decision based on their circumstances and outcomes. Abortion is generally not a decision that needs to be made in a short amount of time, it allows of consideration and time to evaluate the benefits and disadvantages. They evaluate the psychological and financial situation they are presently in and the situation they will be in at the time the baby is born. In accordance to Mills moral standards, women may desire abortion as a means to their happiness. I strongly agree with the evaluation of moral issues I presented above and believe that Mills theory gives the right assessment of the abortion debate in particular. In todays society utilitarianism reminds us that morality calls us to look beyond just individuals and to the benefit of all or the majority.