

# A Technical Analysis of Judith Jarvis Thomson's "A Defense of Abortion": Rights, Autonomy, and Normative Logic

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In the landscape of 20th-century moral philosophy, few documents have exerted as much influence as Judith Jarvis Thomson's 1971 essay, "**A Defense of Abortion**." Published at a time when the legal and ethical status of abortion was under intense scrutiny globally, Thomson's work departed from the standard biological and ontological debates of the era. Instead of focusing exclusively on the personhood of the fetus—a point many of her contemporaries viewed as the insurmountable crux of the argument—Thomson utilized a series of innovative **thought experiments** and **normative logic** to challenge the assumption that the fetus's right to life automatically overrides the pregnant person's right to bodily autonomy.

## The Strategic Pivot: Granting the Premise of Personhood

Thomson's analytical brilliance begins with a strategic concession. Most anti-abortion arguments rely on a syllogism that begins with the premise that the fetus is a person from the moment of conception. Philosophers typically spent decades arguing over whether a zygote possesses a soul, a brain, or the capacity for suffering. Thomson, however, chooses to **grant this premise** for the sake of argument. By assuming that the fetus is a person with a full right to life, she moves the goalposts to a more complex ethical territory: the conflict between two competing rights.

This technical maneuver allows her to isolate the specific variable of **bodily integrity**. If it can be shown that abortion is morally permissible even if the fetus is a person, then the ontological debate over personhood becomes secondary to the ethics of property rights over one's own body.

## The Syllogistic Structure of the Traditional Argument

To understand Thomson's intervention, one must first map the technical structure of the argument she seeks to dismantle. The traditional conservative argument typically follows this logical flow:

- Premise 1: Every person has a right to life.
- Premise 2: A fetus is a person from the moment of conception.
- Premise 3: Therefore, a fetus has a right to life.
- Premise 4: A person's right to life is stronger than another person's right to decide what happens in and to their body.
- Conclusion: Therefore, the fetus may not be killed; an abortion may not be performed.

Thomson identifies **Premise 4** as the logical weak point, arguing that the right to life does not inherently include the right to use another person's body for survival.

## Technical Breakdown of the Famous Violinist Analogy

The centerpiece of Thomson's defense is the **Violinist Analogy**. This thought experiment is designed to test the limits of the right to life through a scenario involving a non-voluntary, life-sustaining physical connection between two adults.

The scenario is as follows: You wake up in a hospital bed, and a world-famous, unconscious violinist is plugged into your circulatory system. The Society of Music Lovers has kidnapped you because only you have the right blood type to filter the violinist's fatal kidney ailment. If he is unplugged now, he will die. However, if he stays plugged into you for nine months, he will recover, and you can be safely disconnected.

### **Mathematical and Logical Modeling of the Scenario**

In this model, we can assign values to the actors and their rights:

| Variable       | Description         | Analogy Component           | Abortion Context        |
|----------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|
| Subject A      | The Dependent Party | The Violinist               | The Fetus               |
| Subject B      | The Host Party      | The Kidnapped Person        | The Pregnant Person     |
| R1             | Right to Life       | Violinist's need to survive | Fetus's right to exist  |
| R2             | Right to Autonomy   | Your right to your body     | Bodily integrity rights |
| Constraint (C) | Duration            | Nine Months                 | Gestation Period        |

Thomson argues that although the violinist has **R1** (Right to Life), this does not grant him **R3**(the right to use Subject B's kidneys). Thus, unplugging the violinist is not an act of "unjust killing," but rather a withdrawal of a "privilege" or a use of Subject B's body to which the violinist has no prior claim.

## Defining the Limits of the 'Right to Life'

A critical component of Thomson's technical analysis is the semantic and legal deconstruction of what it means to have a "right to life." She posits that the right to life is often misunderstood as a **positive right** (the right to be given the minimum required for survival) rather than a **negative right** (the right not to be killed unjustly).

### Positive vs. Negative Rights in Thomson's Framework

Thomson uses the example of **Henry Fonda's Cool Hand** to illustrate this distinction. If I am dying, and the only thing that will save me is the touch of Henry Fonda's cool hand on my fevered brow, I still have no *right* to his hand. He would be incredibly kind to fly across the country to save me, but he is under no moral obligation to do so. My "right to life" does not generate a right to Henry Fonda's time, body, or physical presence.

- Negative Right: A right that requires others to refrain from interfering with you (e.g., the right not to be punched).
- Positive Right: A right that requires others to provide you with a good or service (e.g., the right to healthcare).

Thomson argues that the right to life is essentially a negative right. It is a right not to be killed *unjustly*. Killing a fetus (or unplugging a violinist) is only unjust if the fetus has a right to the use of the mother's body. Thomson concludes that in cases of rape, or even where reasonable precautions were taken, no such right has been granted.

## The 'Extreme View' and the Logic of Self-Defense

Thomson addresses what she calls the "**Extreme View**," which holds that abortion is impermissible even to save the mother's life. This view often relies on the distinction between "killing" (an active intervention) and "letting die" (a passive failure to act). In this view, performing an abortion is directly killing an innocent person, which is considered a greater evil than letting the mother die naturally.

### The Expanding Child Thought Experiment

To counter the Extreme View, Thomson proposes the scenario of the **Expanding Child**. Imagine you are trapped in a tiny house with a rapidly growing child. The child is growing so fast that within minutes, you will be crushed to death against the walls. The child is "innocent," as he is not intentionally trying to kill you. However, Thomson argues that you have a right to defend yourself. You do not have to wait for a third party (like a doctor or the law) to

grant you permission to save your own life.

This section of the essay establishes the **Right to Self-Defense** as a foundational principle of bodily ownership. It challenges the idea that a third party (the state) must remain neutral when two lives are at stake. A person has a right to protect their own body, even if it results in the death of another innocent person who is inadvertently threatening that body.

## The 'People-Seeds' and the Issue of Consent

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One of the most complex aspects of Thomson's defense is how it handles voluntary intercourse where contraception fails. Critics argue that even if the violinist analogy holds for rape, it fails when the pregnant person voluntarily engaged in an act that they knew could result in pregnancy. This is often termed the "**Tacit Consent**" objection.

Thomson responds with the **People-Seeds Analogy**. Imagine that people-seeds drift in the air like pollen. If one drifts into your house, it will take root in your upholstery and grow into a human. You don't want children, so you put up high-quality mesh screens. However, due to a rare defect in one screen, a seed gets in and starts growing. Does the resulting person have a right to your house just because you opened your windows knowing that people-seeds exist and screens sometimes fail?

### Matrix of Responsibility and Liability

| Scenario        | Precautionary Level  | Analogy                    | Moral Liability             |
|-----------------|----------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Forcible Entry  | None (Coercion)      | The Violinist (Kidnapping) | Zero Liability              |
| Failed Barrier  | High (Contraception) | People-Seeds (Screens)     | Negligible Liability        |
| Open Invitation | Zero (Intentional)   | Open Windows (No Screens)  | Full Liability? (Debatable) |

Thomson suggests that simply knowing a risk exists does not equate to granting a right to another party. If a person takes reasonable precautions to prevent an outcome, they cannot be said to have "invited" the dependent party in a way that confers a right to their bodily resources.

## Good Samaritanism vs. Minimally Decent Samaritanism

A final technical distinction in Thomson's essay is her discussion of **Samaritanism**. In most legal systems, there are no "Good Samaritan" laws that require individuals to make large sacrifices to save others. You are not legally required to run into a burning building to save a stranger, nor are you required to donate a kidney, even if it is the only way to save someone's life.

Thomson points out a gross legal inconsistency: in many jurisdictions, laws would force a pregnant person to be a "Good Samaritan" (carrying a pregnancy for nine months at great physical cost), while no other class of person is legally required to provide even minimal bodily assistance to another. She argues that we should aim to be **Minimally Decent Samaritans**, but that the law should not force **Splendid Samaritanism** upon one specific group (women) while exempting everyone else.

### Comparison of Legal Obligations

- Scenario A: A man sees a person drowning in a shallow pool. Legal Obligation: In most states, none. Moral Status: Failing to help is indecent.
- Scenario B: A person requires a bone marrow transplant to live. Legal Obligation: None. No person can be forced to donate tissue.
- Scenario C: A woman is pregnant due to failed contraception. Legal Obligation (in restrictive states): Must provide entire body for 9 months.

Thomson highlights this as a failure of **distributive justice** and legal consistency.

## The Scope and Limits of the Defense

It is important to note what Thomson's defense is *not*. She is not arguing that abortion is always permissible or that the fetus has no value. She explicitly states that there may be cases where an abortion is "morally indecent." For example, if a pregnancy only lasted seven hours and caused no discomfort, refusing to carry it might be indecent, even if it is not a violation of a "right."

Furthermore, she distinguishes between **unplugging** (withdrawing support) and **direct killing** after the fact. If a fetus is aborted but miraculously survives, the mother has no right to demand that the doctor then kill the infant. Her right is to the *cessation of the use of her body*, not to the *death of the fetus* per se, though the latter is usually an unavoidable consequence of the former.

## Legacy and Theoretical Implications

The technical legacy of "A Defense of Abortion" lies in its shift toward **Autonomy-Based Ethics**. By moving the argument away from "What is a fetus?" to "What are the limits of one person's obligations to another?", Thomson provided a framework that remains central to bioethics, medical law, and feminist theory.

Her use of thought experiments revolutionized the **Analytic Tradition** of philosophy, proving that complex moral problems could be broken down into discrete variables and tested against our intuitions. Even critics who disagree with her conclusions—such as those who argue for a "special obligation" between mother and child—must do so using the logical vocabulary she established.

In summary, Judith Jarvis Thomson's work provides a rigorous, technical demonstration that the right to life is not a "blank check" that permits the use of another person's body. Through the Violinist, the Expanding Child, and the People-Seeds, she illustrates that bodily autonomy is a primary right, and its preservation is consistent with the highest standards of logical and moral reasoning. The essay remains a cornerstone of the defense of reproductive freedom precisely because it meets the opposition on their own ground and wins through superior logical architecture.

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