

Opinion

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Are Some People Nuts? Refuting an Inappropriate Argument from Analogy

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In her famous paper 'A Defense of Abortion' Judith Thomson presented the following brief argument against the claim that an embryo is a human being from conception. For the purposes of this paper, I will use the term 'embryo' rather than Thomson's preferred 'fetus' or the technically incorrect 'fertilized ovum'.

*"Most opposition to abortion relies on the premise that the fetus is a human being, a person, from the moment of conception. The premise is argued for, but, as I think, not well. Take, for example, the most common argument. We are asked to notice that the development of a human being from conception through birth into childhood is continuous; then it is said that to draw a line, to choose a point in this development and say "before this point the thing is not a person, after this point it is a person" is to make an arbitrary choice, a choice for which in the nature of things no good reason can be given. It is concluded that the fetus is, or anyway we had better say it is, a person from the moment of conception. But this conclusion does not follow. Similar things might be said about the development of an acorn into an oak tree, and it does not follow that acorns are oak trees or that we had better say they are."*¹

*"...I think that the premise is false, that the fetus is not a person from the moment of conception. A newly fertilized ovum, a newly implanted clump of cells, is no more a person than an acorn is an oak tree."*²

Thomson's argument is clearly an argument from analogy, yet it is not phrased in a consistent way. In fact, Thomson's phrasing of this argument is one of the reasons why it initially appears convincing. Thomson's paper uses ambiguous language and the conflation of terms to turn a straightforward yet unconvincing argument into something that captures the imagination of participants on both sides of the abortion debate.

The analogy is presented in a confused form, trailing after the presentation of a particular pro-life argument. This discourages more careful analysis of the analogy, which would undoubtedly show up its weaknesses. The general argument opens with a conflation of two of the most important terms:

¹ Thomson, J. J. *A Defense of Abortion* in LaFollette, H. (ed). *Ethics in Practice: An Anthology – 2nd Edition*. Blackwell Publishers Ltd. Oxford. 2002. p 63.

² *ibid.*

“Most opposition to abortion relies on the premise that the fetus is a human being, a person, from the moment of conception”

“Human being” is a biological category that includes any member of the human species. “Person” is an ambiguous philosophical category that attempts to redefine the basis of moral significance. How much these two categories intersect with each other depends on how the term ‘person’ is defined. According to the pro-life definition, any human being is also a person since being human is the sole qualifier of such moral categories. This is the definition of ‘person’ that Thomson implies when she treats the terms ‘person’ and ‘human being’ synonymously. (Other philosophers have given definitions of ‘person’ that exclude human beings with limited functions, and even include some non-human animals.)

If all human beings are persons, and all embryos are human beings from conception, then it follows that all embryos are also persons from conception. Yet Thomson somehow reaches the opposite conclusion. From her conclusion we can see that Thomson must in fact be dealing with a different, but unspecified definition of person. Thomson cannot deny that embryos are human beings from conception as this is an established scientific fact; hence she must have at some point rejected the premise that all human beings are persons, to support her conclusion that embryos are not persons from conception.

But Thomson does not openly deviate from her original conflation of human being and person, which seemed to endorse the pro-life definition. There is in fact more than one concept of ‘person’ at work in Thomson’s argument – one that includes embryos, and one that excludes embryos – as we shall see later, yet the reader is not alerted to this. Lacking any definition beyond the conflation of ‘person’ and ‘human being’ the reader is left with such an ambiguous concept of ‘person’ that the argument seems plausible. Furthermore, the conflation of ‘person’ and ‘human being’ is reinforced at a third point in Thomson’s paper, with the use of the term ‘human person’.³ This conflation adds to Thomson’s conclusion the implication that since the embryo is not a person, it also is not a human being.

This is all made possible because of the particular pro-life argument that Thomson chose to use. Using this argument means that Thomson can avoid directly confronting both the fact that embryos are human beings from conception, and the pro-life premise that all human beings are persons. She even avoids offering an alternative concept of personhood. Instead, she is able to offer a highly convincing argument from analogy that seems to disprove the claim that embryos are persons from conception, without getting into any of the difficult details of addressing the real basis of the pro-life position – respect for the sanctity of human life.

³ *ibid*

We have touched on the ambiguity of Thomson's argument, and now we will see what is wrong with the argument itself. Thomson's argument from analogy contains an example of ambiguous phrasing that is indispensable to its apparent success:

"We are asked to notice that the development of a human being from conception through birth into childhood is continuous"

The phrase 'development of a human being' is ambiguous because it leaves us uncertain of whether Thomson is referring to the development of something non-human into a human being, or the continual development of something already human. The uncertainty is vital, since clarity could either render Thomson's argument untenable or meaningless. In the context of this pro-life argument briefly mentioned by Thomson, we would naturally be inclined to assume that 'development of a human being' refers to the continual development of something already human. This suits Thomson's purposes in the construction of her counter-argument – her argument from analogy.

By tacking her counter-argument analogy onto the end of a pro-life argument, Thomson avoids having to clarify her first premise, avoids having to explicitly claim that an embryo develops into a person. If Thomson was forced to make this claim independent of the pro-life argument, and in accordance with the appropriate structure of her analogy argument, then its failings would be far more obvious. Thomson would have to make the claim that an embryo develops into a person, which is clearly begging the question. That is, her first premise takes for granted the very issue that is being disputed: whether or not an embryo is a person.

An embryo developing into a person is like an acorn developing into an oak tree.

An acorn is not an oak tree.

Therefore an embryo is not a person.

Here I have rephrased the essential argument that Thomson makes, and it is easy to see why she did not present the argument in this form. It is simply irrational to claim that an embryo could both 'be' and also 'become' a person. (These mutually exclusive states of 'being' and 'becoming' a person are the alternative definitions of 'person' that we alluded to in the previous section). The analogy is therefore unnecessary; Thomson could simply state that an embryo becomes a person therefore an embryo is not a person. Yet phrasing the argument so directly would equally allow people to contend that the embryo does not become a person, because it already is a person. Instead, Thomson constructs her argument in a convoluted way, concealing the first component of her analogy within a presentation of a common pro-life argument. The reader follows the pro-life argument, only to find that they have unwittingly been drawn into an argument from analogy. Untangling this argument requires more stringent examination of Thomson's creation.

“We are asked to notice that the development of a human being from conception through birth into childhood is continuous; then it is said that to draw a line, to choose a point in this development and say “before this point the thing is not a person, after this point it is a person” is to make an arbitrary choice, a choice for which in the nature of things no good reason can be given. It is concluded that the fetus is, or anyway we had better say it is, a person from the moment of conception. But this conclusion does not follow.”

Here we have Thomson’s rendition of a pro-life argument. It is easy to follow, and there is the expectation that Thomson will subsequently offer a counter-argument. But at this point, the reader has already been exposed to the ideas that form the first half of Thomson’s counter-argument: the concept that the development of a human being from conception through birth into childhood is continuous, and that there is no point at which it can be said with good reason that the ‘the thing’ becomes a person.

“Similar things might be said about the development of an acorn into an oak tree”

Here Thomson establishes an analog for human development. This phrase implies that the development of an acorn into an oak tree is continuous, and that there is no point at which ‘the thing’ can definitively be said to become an oak tree. As we expand on Thomson’s idea, we can already see that there are problems emerging between the analogs as depicted by Thomson. For example, does the acorn correspond with the ‘conception’ point, and does the oak tree correspond with either the grown child, or the human being? If we took this line of thought further, we would find that there is no easy correspondence between the elements mentioned by Thomson. Nevertheless, the basic analogy of continuous and gradual development is close enough to sustain the argument without too much analysis.

“ it does not follow that acorns are oak trees or that we had better say they are.”

Now the argument is complete, since Thomson has already told us that the conclusion that a fetus is a person from the moment of conception also does not follow, and we now have an analogy to support that claim. This analogy can only convince people because it is presented in such an ambiguous way. Any attempt to further clarify the analogy reveals its inconsistencies. While analogies are never perfect, they must at least be strong enough to stand up to scrutiny, or to slight changes in their presentation. As we have already seen, clarifying the ‘development of a human being’ concept can leave us with the claim that ‘an embryo develops into a human being’, which is an indefensible premise for the purposes of Thomson’s argument. That an embryo develops into a human being is the conclusion Thomson is hoping to reach.

The problems continue if we attempt to fix Thomson’s argument by bringing the two analogs into corresponding form. If we make the analogy truly correspond, then surely the

acorn must correspond with the human embryo, and in turn the oak tree must correspond with the human adult? Yet such an analogy is useless for Thomson's purposes, since its conclusion would merely tell us that an embryo is not a human adult. The issue that Thomson hoped to address was whether or not the embryo is a person from conception.

An embryo developing into an adult is like an acorn developing into an oak tree.

An acorn is not an oak tree.

Therefore an embryo is not an adult.

Nobody needs an analogy to show that an embryo is not an adult; an embryo is not an adult by definition. Nor is Thomson trying to prove that an embryo is not an adult. Her ideal conclusion that an embryo is not a person is supposed to lend weight to a further conclusion, that abortion is morally permissible. Yet we have shown that her analogy can have no bearing on the personhood discussion, since the analogy cannot successfully utilise the concept of personhood.

We have seen that there are fundamental flaws in Thomson's argument, flaws so strong as to make the argument useless. Yet in spite of its flaws, variations of Thomson's argument are quite common, featuring as throw-away arguments in on-line forums and opinion pieces. Clarifying the flaws in this argument does not really add much to the abortion debate, but it does show that even intrinsically flawed arguments can be very convincing. Perhaps seeing this argument unravelled will encourage us all to be more careful in forming our own arguments, and in accepting the arguments of others.