

# Introduction to The Ethics of Abortion: At Issue

*The Ethics of Abortion*, 2001  
From Opposing Viewpoints in Context

The controversy over the **ethics** of **abortion** centers around the question of when human **life** begins. Abortion opponents, believing the **fetus** to be a human being from the moment of **conception**, regard abortion as murder. As the editors of *Christianity Today* write, "abortion is one of those monumental issues of justice that comes along once in a lifetime. It is **violence** against children, a hideous act of poisoning or dismembering tiny bodies, then dumping them in a landfill or garbage disposal."

Those who advocate legal abortion, on the other hand, argue that a fetus is only a potential human being. Therefore, they contend, the rights of the mother—including the right to choose whether she has a baby or not—supersede the rights of the fetus. John M. Swomley, professor of social ethics at the St. Paul School of Theology in Missouri, writes that "because the fetus feels no pain, a function of the brain as yet undeveloped, and the woman acts under her own will and conscience, [abortion is] not violence to a human being.... It is not enough to say that abortion is not violent. Abortion is a positive decision and not a lesser evil. It gives **women** control over their lives, their fertility, their education, their vocations, and their responsibility to their families."

This conflict of opinions over whether or not the fetus is a human life—and thus deserving of the protections afforded to humans—has fueled vociferous and sometimes violent debate about the legality of abortion. However, an increasing number of activists on both sides concede that abortion, as a moral issue, is not entirely clear-cut. Some proponents of abortion rights, for example, condemn late-term abortions—abortions that take place in the third trimester of pregnancy, when the fetus is highly developed. As Catherine Weiss, director of the American Civil Liberties Union's Reproductive Freedom Project, explains, "the fetus grows in moral stature—the importance of recognizing its potential life and protecting its potential increases—as the pregnancy advances." In addition, some pro-life advocates agree that abortion is morally acceptable if a woman's life or health may be endangered by taking a pregnancy to term.

Another important point of agreement between pro-choice and pro-life advocates is so obvious that many have failed to recognize it: Both groups would like to see a society in which fewer abortions are performed. Based on this assumption, a group of pro-life and pro-choice individuals have formed Search for Common Ground, a nonprofit organization that works to promote dialogue between both sides of the abortion conflict. The philosophy behind Common Ground is that the angry rhetoric of the current abortion debate creates a deadlock that prevents people from engaging in rational dialogue. As Frederica Mathewes-Green, a pro-life advocate and member of Common Ground, says, "We say 'It's a baby' and our friends on the pro-choice side say, 'No, it's her right,' and the arguments don't even engage each other. It's an endless, interminable argument that can go on for another 25 years if we don't find a way to break through."

Common Ground advocates a new approach to resolving this perpetual disagreement: Instead of trying to agree upon the ethical status of abortion, members attempt to understand why women choose to have abortions and work to reduce the demand for abortion.

At the same time that groups like Common Ground are working to simplify the abortion debate, however, advances in biotechnology are making it more complex. Two recent scientific developments have raised new ethical questions about abortion. One of these developments is doctors' ability to determine, through amniocentesis or blood tests, whether a fetus in the womb might have a serious birth defect such as Down syndrome. A large proportion of **pregnant women** who are told that their child is likely to be born with Down syndrome elect to have abortions; according to one statistic provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the number of Down syndrome children born to white women in Atlanta decreased by 70 percent during the 1980s as the result of abortions. This fact appalls most pro-life proponents, who believe that aborting disabled fetuses is akin to killing off babies judged to be unworthy of life. Pro-choice activists, in contrast, argue that a woman should never be forced to have a child she doesn't want—especially if that child may require hundreds of thousands of dollars in medical care.

Further advances in the ability to detect inherited traits in the womb intensify this controversy. Experts in genetics predict that it will soon be possible to predict the entire genetic makeup of an unborn child. As David Shenk writes in *Harper's Magazine*,

Will we know too much? Fetal and embryonic karyotypes may ultimately be as legible as a topographical map: Your son will be born healthy; he will be allergic to cashews; he will reach five foot ten and a half inches; math will not come easily to him; in his later years, he will be at risk for the same type of arteriosclerosis that afflicted his greatgrandfather.

Shenk and others contend that such capabilities create a new moral predicament. He writes that "the abortion debate, historically an issue in two dimensions (whether or not individuals should have the right to terminate a pregnancy), suddenly takes on a discomfiting third dimension. Should prospective parents who want a child be allowed to refuse a particular type of child?"

The second development in biotechnology that complicates the issue of abortion is interest in conducting scientific research on **stem cells**. Stem cells, which are culled from human embryos, can be prompted to grow into a wide variety of tissues, which, some researchers believe, could be transplanted into people **suffering** from such ailments as Alzheimer's disease, diabetes, and certain heart conditions. Although the medical potential of **stem cell research** is astounding—William Hasletime, head of Human Genome Sciences, states that "this is the first time we can conceive of human immortality"—anti-abortion groups consider embryo research of any kind to be unethical because it kills living embryos. Furthermore, pro-life advocates worry that the practice of embryo research could destigmatize abortion. Commentator John J. Miller states, "Just imagine an abortion counselor telling a young woman that ending her pregnancy will help scientists improve another person's life." Many scientists, on the other hand, contend that there are no moral problems with stem cell research because an embryo is merely a cluster of cells that cannot experience pain.

In the case of stem cell research, many scientists state that human embryos may eventually not be needed, and that stem cells could potentially be extracted from adult humans. However, the debate over whether—and in what cases—abortion is ethical shows no sign of resolution. In *The Ethics of Abortion: At Issue*, ethicists, scholars, and political commentators offer a variety of perspectives on this challenging issue.

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