

Moral Dilemmas in Abortion: Conflicting Duties, Rights, and Consequences

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.90700019>

Received: 16 June 2025; Accepted: 20 June 2025; Published: 26 July 2025

ABSTRACT

Abortion is one of the longest standing moral dilemmas in modern ethics and it has certainly summarized the conflicts between the obligation of protecting life, the right to make personal choices about their own bodies and the social implications of reproduction thus attracting moral controversies. The pivotal ethical question that is explored in this article is the following: how can societies explore the ethical playing fields in which the rights of a pregnant person can openly contravene what is viewed as the rights of a fetus? The research problem is concentration on the ethical disintegration that occurs during the implementation of the deontological, rights, and consequentialistic approaches to the issue of abortion that frequently result in irreconcilable conclusions. This paper intends to critique the manner in which these moral frameworks outlay duties and rights when applied in the context of abortion, and evaluate the impact they have in policy making, legal interpretations, and personal choices in various cultural, and legal environments.

In an attempt to accomplish this, a qualitative methodology is adopted by the article by applying nuts and bolts of philosophical argumentation and comparative analysis in which it relies on legal texts, literature works on ethics, and cross-cultural views. Secondary data comprise of peer-reviewed scholarly writing, jurisprudence and analysis of case studies in different countries that have different laws related to abortion. These two key research questions will help in answering the following: (1) How are moral duties and rights as presented in the ethics theories as applied in abortion? and (2) How well can these theories be reconciled in the real world legal and policy contexts?

These findings suggest that the reasoning between morality of abortion is highly contextual, and each ethical theory has some perks and limitations. Although the deontological approaches emphasize on moral absolutes like the sanctity of life, rights-based reasoning centers on claims of self-determination and preservation of life, and consequentialist approaches calculate the effects of allowing or prohibiting abortion. These conflicting terms mostly lead to legal and moral differences between jurisdictions.

Finally, the article proposes the morally pluralistic and empathetic stance in which the validity of competing moral claims can be recognised. Through dialogue between moral systems, instead of giving preference to one of them, societies will be able to develop less restrictive and fair abortion policies. This paper will help develop further talks on bioethics by explaining why the solution to the issue of abortion should begin with moral complexity rather than with moral clarity.

Keywords: Abortion, Ethics, Moral Dilemma, Human Rights, Consequentialism.

INTRODUCTION

Abortion is considered one of the most problematic ethical questions in the whole world and creates hot discussions in the ethics, law, religion, and politics spheres. This problem is so personal and still inevitably the one to be carried in the public, because it concerns such aspects as the autonomy and sense of moral responsibility, as well as the place of the state into the personal life. Deep moral dilemmas that are at the center of these debates surface: the competing responsibilities to the pregnant individual, the fetus and the society as a whole. Such conflicts are also related to medical technological developments, the changing law, and changing

social norms. Moral complications are also enhanced by inequity on access to healthcare, economic disparity, and cultural stigma, making the experience of abortion not the same in any cluster of people. The present article focuses on ethical tensions behind abortion decision-making process, aiming to decompress the complicated interrelation of duties, rights and consequences. It seeks to promote an ethical dialogue which is morally principled and humane. To start with, we can describe the most frequent ethical frameworks used in case of abortion, i.e. deontological ethics¹, rights-based theory², and consequentialism³ prior to discussing real-life implications in terms of a comparative and cross-cultural perspective.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Discussion of abortion in ethical terms is centuries-old, and it is developed by religious specialists, philosophers and law theorists. Conventional religious beliefs normally lay stress on the purity of life and abortion is considered a sin. On the contrary, secular views adopt contemporary attitudes that emphasize individual sovereignty and bodily sovereignty. Such philosophers as Judith Jarvis Thomson⁴ and Don Marquis⁵ have had such far-reaching an impact on the abortion debate. In hypothetical argument presented as the famous analogy of Thomson regarding the rights of the woman to self-decision even assuming that the fetus has a right to life, whereas Marquis tends to defend the point of view that abortion is an unethical act, which deprives the child of a future life such as ours. Empirical instances also indicate that contexts play a greater role in forming attitudes regarding abortion, which further reiterates the necessity of taking context into consideration in ethical decision-making.

Theoretical Framework

This analysis has three main ethical theories including deontological ethics, rights-based ethics, and consequentialism. Deontological ethics, as referred to by Immanuel Kant¹, determines consequences of actions by their compliance to duties and guidelines. Abortion in this perspective can be simply wrong in the sense that it infringes on a moral obligation of upholding life. Rights based ethics² withdraws lassitude on individual rights and concentrates on the right of woman to the control of her body over and above the right of fetus to live. Consequentialism, including utilitarianism³, replaces the morality of abortion by determining the outcomes, like the welfare of the mother, the child, and the society. These theories provide conflicting but complementary ideas of the moral problems in abortion.

Conflicting Duties

A conflict of a duty to protect life and a duty to respect autonomy is one of the most problematic issues of abortion ethics. Doctors and other medical practitioners can find themselves in moral dilemma in situations whereby the personal convictions or the institutional rules and regulations do not match with the request that a pregnant woman makes that she is interested in an abortion. In the same way, policymakers have to keep up with both the resurgence of a healthy population and the personal rights of individuals. These two responsibilities sometimes come into conflict, especially when it comes to acts of rape, incest, or possible danger to the life of the mother and societies need to choose one or the other.

Rights-Based Perspectives

Modern arguments regarding abortion are based on rights. Freedom of the choice of a pregnant person, access to privacy, and health care are pointed by the supporters of legal abortion. The pro-life campaign groups believe that the fetus has a right to life even at conception. It is a conflict of perception, since a protocol of acceptance of one set of rights may appear to rebarbarize the other. Different cultures and philosophies have varying concerns and have solutions in terms of deciding the rights in conflict with each other and this is manifested in the various legal systems that exist. Other jurisdictions take a trimester system where as the pregnancy gathers momentum the rights of the fetus get enhanced.

Consequentialist Perspectives

The theory of consequentialism argues abortion based on its effects. A utilitarian approach³ takes into account the question whether abortion is the cause of the maximized general well-being. As an example, permitting

abortion under such conditions as an extreme deformity of the unborn child, or under circumstances of financial and social distress might alleviate suffering. The critics however say that consequentialism may allow morally abhorrent acts so long as the results are positive. As an example, utilitarian defense of forced abortions by authoritarian regimes can be provided since the fundamental rights are violated.

Cross-Cultural Perspectives

Culture is very important in abortion discourse in its concepts of moral and legal interpretation. In such countries that are Catholic dominated such as Poland and the Philippines, abortion is greatly limited through religious principles. However, Nordic countries have more liberal abortion legislation that highlights equality in gender and access to healthcare. Abortion is highly stigmatized in certain African and Asian cultures yet it can be secretly committed out of sheer practicality. Such differences show that the reasonability of abortion cannot be separated into cultural, legal, and social regions.

DISCUSSIONS

The moral dilemmas surrounding abortion are shaped by the intricate intersection of duties, rights, and consequences—three ethical pillars that, while powerful in isolation, often clash when applied simultaneously to real-world scenarios. Each framework offers important moral insights: deontology demands moral consistency and the protection of life; rights-based ethics insists on individual autonomy and legal fairness; and consequentialism evaluates the tangible outcomes of moral choices. However, none of these approaches, taken alone, offers a fully adequate solution to the abortion question.¹

A purely deontological approach, such as one grounded in Kantian duty, may uphold the moral imperative to protect all human life, including that of the fetus. Yet this position can become ethically inflexible when it disregards complex circumstances like rape, incest, or serious health risks to the pregnant individual. It also often overlooks the disproportionate burdens carried by women and marginalized groups, thereby failing to account for ethical justice in practice.²

Similarly, a strict rights-based approach may focus entirely on the pregnant person's right to choose, ignoring the fact that for many, the moral status of the fetus carries significant weight. It also risks reducing the ethical conversation to a binary contest between rights, without adequate consideration of relational ethics, community responsibilities, or the broader social and economic consequences of reproductive choices.

Consequentialist arguments, on the other hand, offer valuable flexibility, focusing on minimizing harm and promoting overall well-being. They allow for pragmatic decision-making based on health, economic, and psychological outcomes. However, consequentialism can be ethically problematic if not properly constrained—particularly when decisions that seem “optimal” on a societal level result in unjust treatment of individuals. History provides cautionary examples of coercive policies justified through utilitarian logic, such as forced abortions or eugenic practices.

These limitations highlight the need for ethical pluralism—a recognition that no single theory has a monopoly on moral truth. Ethical decision-making regarding abortion must be context-sensitive, weighing personal narratives, social dynamics, and structural inequities. It must also be transparent, involving clear reasoning and justifications, especially in policy and law making. Importantly, it must be compassionate, grounded in empathy for the real people behind the ethical abstractions people who often face these choices under intense emotional, cultural, or financial pressure.³

Moreover, the abortion debate should not be limited to academic or legalistic arenas. It must include the voices of those most affected especially women, trans and non-binary individuals who can become pregnant, healthcare

¹ O'Neill, O. (1989). *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy*. Cambridge University Press.

² Dworkin, R. (1993). *Life's Dominion: An Argument about Abortion, Euthanasia, and Individual Freedom*. Knopf.

³ Buchanan, A. E., & Brock, D. W. (1989). *Deciding for Others: The Ethics of Surrogate Decision Making*. Cambridge University Press.

professionals, and communities facing reproductive injustice. Their lived experiences are essential to ethical understanding, offering insight that theory alone cannot supply.

Ultimately, this discussion calls for a dynamic, inclusive ethical framework, one that navigates the moral terrain not with rigid rules but with openness to dialogue, respect for diversity, and a commitment to dignity and justice for all involved.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Abortion remains a deeply complex and divisive moral issue, entangled in layers of ethical, legal, cultural, and emotional considerations. This article has examined these dilemmas through multiple ethical lenses—duty, rights, and consequences—highlighting that no single framework offers a universally acceptable or morally sufficient answer. Each ethical perspective contributes a unique but partial viewpoint, demonstrating that rigid, one-dimensional approaches fail to address the full moral landscape.

The morality of abortion cannot be resolved through strict doctrines or abstract principles alone; rather, it requires a deep sensitivity to context, to the lived realities of those facing such decisions, and to the emotional and psychological dimensions often left unspoken in policy and law. People's moral intuitions vary based on culture, religion, socioeconomic status, and personal experience—any attempt to universalize a moral stance on abortion without acknowledging this diversity risks oversimplification and injustice.

The findings suggest the need for ethical pluralism, which not only tolerates but actively engages with moral difference. Moral reasoning around abortion should be flexible, compassionate, and inclusive rooted in an understanding that ethical truth may be multi-faceted rather than singular. A just and humane society must strive to construct reproductive policies that honour both the autonomy of the pregnant individual and the ethical weight many assign to fetal life, while minimizing suffering and harm.

Recommendations

1. **Legislative Inclusivity:** Policymakers should craft abortion legislation that recognizes the complexity of ethical pluralism, allowing individuals the freedom to make decisions guided by their own conscience, while maintaining public health safeguards.
2. **Equitable Healthcare Access:** Healthcare systems should guarantee equal access to safe and legal abortion services, especially for vulnerable and marginalized populations who may face structural barriers.
3. **Comprehensive Education:** Institutions should integrate ethical, legal, and health education on reproductive rights into school, university, and professional training programs to foster informed and empathetic discourse.
4. **Holistic Support Systems:** Support services including mental health counseling, social work, and family planning should be readily available to those navigating abortion decisions, recognizing the emotional weight such choices often carry.
5. **Cultural and Contextual Research:** On-going cross-disciplinary research is essential to explore the cultural, psychological, and socioeconomic dynamics that influence abortion experiences, enabling evidence-based policymaking.
6. **Preventive Health Services:** Governments and NGOs should strengthen access to contraception, sexual health education, and maternal care, to reduce the frequency of unwanted pregnancies and the resulting ethical dilemmas.
7. **Dialogue and Mediation:** Platforms for public dialogue should be encouraged, where differing moral views on abortion can be shared respectfully, fostering mutual understanding rather than polarization.

Footnotes

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