ISSN (Online): 2455-3662
EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR) - Peer Reviewed Journal
Volume: 11| Issue: 11| November 2025|| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2013 || SJIF Impact Factor 2025: 8.691 || ISI Value: 1.188

BODILY AUTONOMY AND THE RIGHT TO LIFE: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY WITH REFERENCE TO J.J. THOMSON

Madhusmita Dobai
Department of Philosophy, Prananath College (Autonomous), Bhubaneswar, Khordha

Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.36713/epra24783
DOI No: 10.36713/epra24783

ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines J.J. Thomson's arguments in "A Defense of Abortion" (1971), focusing on her defense of bodily autonomy against anti-abortion claims. It argues that while Thomson successfully demonstrates through her famous Violinist Analogy – that a fetus's right to life does not automatically override a woman's right to control her own body, her position remains incomplete when addressing the moral implications of consent and fetal agency. Using deductive analogies, the paper first reconstructs Thomson's reasoning to show how her arguments challenge the assumption that abortion is always morally impermissible. It then introduces the hypothetical case of the "self-aborting fetus," a thought experiment that reverses the dependence relation between mother and fetus, to test the limits of Thomson's framework. The analysis suggests that, although Thomson's defense of abortion compellingly upholds the principle of bodily autonomy, it leaves unresolved questions concerning mutual rights and moral responsibility in cases of shared vulnerability.

KEYWORDS: *Violinist, Analogy, People-Seed, Life, Right, Defense, Permission, Abortion, Body, Fetus, Responsibility*

INTRODUCTION

The morality of abortion remains one of the most enduring and contentious issues in contemporary ethical discourse. At the heart of the debate lies a profound moral dilemma: whether abortion is ever morally acceptable and, if so, under what conditions. Abortion, commonly understood as the deliberate termination of a pregnancy by artificial means, raises complex ethical and philosophical questions that go far beyond medical procedure. Central to the discussion are competing conceptions of personhood and human life, which provoke further inquiry: Does the fetus possess a right to life? Does life begin at conception or at birth? And, crucially, does a woman's right to autonomy over her own body override or become subordinate to—the fetus's right to life?

In attempting to answer these questions, philosophers and moral theorists have divided largely into two groups: the pro-choice advocates, who defend a woman's right to terminate a pregnancy, and the pro-life advocates, who uphold the sanctity of fetal life. It was within this polarized debate that J.J. Thomson, in her seminal 1971 essay "*A Defense of Abortion*," introduced a radically new approach. Rather than denying fetal personhood, Thomson granted it for the sake of argument and still concluded that abortion could be morally permissible. Through a series of imaginative thought experiments—most famously, the Violinist Analogy—she argues that even if a fetus is considered a person with a right to life, that right does not entail the right to use a woman's body to sustain its existence. By reframing the issue from the perspective of bodily autonomy and consent, Thomson transformed the moral landscape of the abortion debate, shifting attention away from metaphysical definitions of life toward the ethics of personal freedom, responsibility, and moral duty. It is famous not only because of its imaginative use of several analogies but most importantly because Thomson provides a case for "abortion rights" that pro-life advocates assert that the "fetus is a person." This paper is a paradigm of the discussion of abortion in terms of competing rights.[1]

Does the Fetus's Right to Life Override the Mother's Right Over Her Body?

The rights of the fetus and those of the pregnant woman are often portrayed as being in direct moral conflict. Public and philosophical debates on abortion tend to frame the issue as a contest between two entities—each possessing rights that seem mutually exclusive, where the exercise of one necessarily infringes upon the other. The central question, therefore, arises: Does the fetus's right to life override the woman's right to autonomy over her own body?

In "*A Defense of Abortion*" (1971), Thomson's answer is an emphatic 'No'. She argues that a fetus's right to life, even if fully granted, does not automatically entail a right to use another person's body to sustain that life. In other words, the moral recognition of fetal personhood does not nullify a woman's moral and bodily sovereignty. Thomson's position shifts the focus of the abortion debate away from the metaphysical question of when life begins to the ethical question of whether one person's right to life can justly impose involuntary physical burdens on another. Through this reframing, she establishes that a woman's control over her body remains a fundamental moral right, one that cannot be overridden merely by the existence of another's right to life.

[1] *Gatens-Robinson, G. A DEFENSE OF WOMEN'S CHOICE: ABORTION AND THE ETHICS OF CARE, The Southern Journal of Philosophy (1992) Vol. XXX, No. 3, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.*

ISSN (Online): 2455-3662
EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR) - Peer Reviewed Journal
Volume: 11| Issue: 11| November 2025|| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2013 || SJIF Impact Factor 2025: 8.691 || ISI Value: 1.188

She aptly summarized the anti-abortion position as generally understood as follows:

> "Every person has a right to life. So, the fetus has a right to life. No doubt the mother has a right to decide what shall happen in and to her body; everyone would grant that. But surely a person's right to life is stronger and more stringent than the mother's right to decide what happens in and to her body, and so outweighs it. So, the fetus may not be killed; an abortion may not be performed."[2]

The Violinist Analogy

In her magnum opus "*A Defense of Abortion*" (1971), Thomson presents the celebrated Violinist Analogy to illustrate the moral complexity of abortion and the principle of bodily autonomy. She invites the reader to imagine waking up in a hospital bed to find themselves connected to a world-renowned unconscious violinist suffering from a fatal kidney ailment. Without your consent, the Society of Music Lovers has kidnapped you and attached the violinist's circulatory system to your kidneys so that your body can sustain his life. You are informed that if you remain connected for nine months, he will recover; if you disconnect, he will die.

Thomson uses this thought experiment to parallel cases of pregnancy resulting from non-consensual circumstances, such as rape. Even if the fetus is regarded as a person with a right to life, she argues that this right does not automatically entail the right to use another's body for survival. The crucial moral insight derived from the analogy is that a right to life does not include the right to be kept alive by another person's bodily resources without consent. Therefore, while disconnecting from the violinist would lead to his death, it would not be morally unjust to do so, since remaining attached would impose an involuntary and extraordinary physical burden.

The analogy represents, in a vivid and accessible way, the conflict between the fetus's right to life and the woman's right to bodily autonomy. Thomson acknowledges the moral significance of both rights but rejects the claim that the right to life always overrides the right to control one's own body. By "unplugging" from the violinist, one is not committing murder but merely withdrawing physical support that was never morally or contractually owed. Through this analogy, Thomson reframes abortion as a question not of killing but of consent and bodily sovereignty, arguing that moral permissibility depends on whether the use of one's body has been voluntarily granted.

The moral question is: **Are you morally obligated to remain connected to the violinist for nine months?**

- It would certainly be kind or generous to stay attached, but are you morally required to do so?
- **Thomson argues**: No — because even though the violinist has a right to life, that right does not include the right to use your body without your consent.

Thomson thus concludes that, although every person may possess a right to life, this right does not necessarily override another person's right to determine what happens within their own body. The right to life, she argues, cannot be interpreted as a right to use another's bodily resources for survival. By drawing an analogy between the violinist's dependency and the fetus's reliance on the pregnant woman, Thomson maintains that a woman may be morally justified in choosing to terminate a pregnancy—even if doing so results in the death of the fetus. What the analogy ultimately supports is not a disregard for life, but the recognition that bodily autonomy places moral limits on the demands that one individual may make upon another, even when life itself is at stake. Thomson argues that even though the violinist is a person with a right to life, you nevertheless have a right to unplug yourself from him. (*Thomson*, 1971, p. 49).

She admits that the violinist case is analogous to pregnancies resulting from rape, but then guides us through a number of other thought experiments in order to establish that a woman has a broad, but not unlimited, right to abortion, there are drastic limits to the right of self-defense (*Thomson*, 1971, p. 53). In case of violinist, she did not consent to having the violinist plugged into her and she did nothing to cause the violinist to be plugged in, just as a woman who is pregnant due to rape did nothing to cause her pregnancy. In her article she expresses that:

> "Suppose a woman has become pregnant, and now learns that she has a cardiac condition such that she will die if she carries the baby to term. What may be done for her? The fetus, being a person, has a right to life, but as the mother is a person too, so has she a right to life. Presumably they have an equal right to life. How is it supposed to come out that an abortion may not be performed? If mother and child have an equal right to life, shouldn't we perhaps flip a coin? Or should we add to the mother's right to life her right to decide what happens in and to her body, which everybody seems to be ready to grant-the sum of her rights now outweighing the fetus' right to life?" (*Thomson*, 1971, p. 50).

In sum, Thomson's argument establishes that a woman has the moral right to defend her own life against the threat posed by an unborn fetus, even if such an act results in the fetus's death. If a fourteen-year-old schoolgirl is pregnant due to rape, in that case abortion is not impermissible, what Thomson says, that any law which rules this out is an insane law (*Thomson*, 1971, pp.65-66). She maintains that a pregnant woman is under no moral or legal obligation to preserve the fetus's life when doing so endangers her own. In this way, Thomson reaffirms the principle that the right to life does not entail the right to demand life-sustaining support from another's body, particularly when such support comes at the cost of the individual's own survival.

The Thought Experiment — "People-Seed": Consent and Responsibility

In "*A Defense of Abortion*," Thomson introduces the "People-Seed" thought experiment to explore cases of pregnancy resulting from voluntary sexual activity. The scenario is designed to address the argument that engaging in consensual sex automatically entails moral responsibility for any resulting pregnancy. In this imaginative world, "people-seeds" drift

[2] *Thomson, J.J. "A Defense of Abortion". Philosophy & Public Affairs, Autumn, 1971, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Autumn, 1971), p.48*

ISSN (Online): 2455-3662
EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR) - Peer Reviewed Journal
Volume: 11| Issue: 11| November 2025|| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2013 || SJIF Impact Factor 2025: 8.691 || ISI Value: 1.188

through the air like pollen and, if they enter a house, take root in the carpets and upholstery, eventually developing into persons. To prevent this, individuals install fine mesh screens on their windows. Despite such precautions, a seed occasionally slips through and begins to grow.

Thomson asks whether a person is morally obligated to allow the seed to continue developing simply because they opened their windows or despite having taken reasonable steps to prevent its entry. Her answer is no. Taking precautions does not equate to granting consent for the use of one's space, just as consensual sexual intercourse does not constitute consent to pregnancy. The woman's act of engaging in sex does not give the fetus the moral right to use her body, particularly when she has acted responsibly to avoid conception.

Thomson's People-Seed analogy thus reinforces her central claim that bodily autonomy limits the moral claims of others, even when one's actions have foreseeably contributed to another's dependence. The thought experiment emphasizes that moral responsibility arises from consent, not merely from causation. Just as a homeowner is not required to nurture an invasive seed despite having opened a window, a woman is not obligated to sustain a pregnancy that occurs despite precautions. If one of these seeds enters a house and takes root in the carpet, a tiny person will begin to grow.
Now, suppose you take every reasonable precaution to prevent this:

- You install fine mesh screens on your windows,
- You keep them closed most of the time,
- Yet, by chance, one seed manages to slip through and take root.

The moral question is that: Are you morally obligated to let the person-plant continue to grow inside your home?

By using the People-Seed analogy, Thomson posits that pregnancies resulting from consensual sexual acts (symbolized by opening windows in the heat) with faulty contraception (holes in the screens) can still be morally and legally terminated. Her point is that consent to sex does not constitute consent to pregnancy; taking precautions indicates a refusal to allow the fetus the use of the woman's body. Thus, even in cases where sexual activity is voluntary, the woman retains the moral right to decide whether to continue the pregnancy. After demonstrating through the Violinist and People-Seed analogies that the fetus's right to life does not override the woman's right to bodily autonomy, Thomson turns to what is sometimes called the Chocolate Analogy. This analogy illustrates that, while a person may have a right to refuse to share something (like chocolates), moral decency might still encourage generosity. Likewise, Thomson suggests that although a woman may have no moral obligation to sustain the fetus, choosing to do so could be an act of kindness or virtue. In this way, Thomson distinguishes between what is morally permissible and what is morally admirable, grounding her defense of abortion in the principle of bodily autonomy without denying the value of moral compassion.

Rights and Moral Obligations in Thomson's Ethical Framework

In the Chocolate Analogy, Thomson presents a simple yet powerful illustration of the distinction between rights and moral obligations. She asks us to imagine two brothers: the elder receives a box of chocolates that has been given exclusively to him, without any instruction to share it with his younger brother. When the younger brother demands some, the elder refuses. According to Thomson, the older boy is under no moral obligation to share, because the chocolates were given solely to him; consequently, the younger brother has no right to them. The elder's refusal may be selfish or unkind, but it cannot be deemed unjust since injustice requires the violation of a legitimate right, and no such right exists in this case. If he does not have a right, withholding the chocolate is not a violation of a right and if it is not a violation of a right, it is not unjust (*Thomson*, 1971, pp. 56-57). If an act is not unjust, Thomson argues, then it cannot be considered morally wrong. In the Chocolate Analogy, because the younger brother has no right to the chocolates, the elder brother's refusal to share, though perhaps unkind, does not constitute an ethical wrongdoing. Consequently, the elder brother has no moral obligation to share, even if generosity would be morally commendable. We may believe that he ought to share, but such an expectation is a matter of moral decency, not moral duty. This distinction between what is admirable and what is obligatory is familiar in ordinary moral life; for instance, we may think that forgiveness is virtuous, yet we do not possess a right to demand it from others.

Building on this reasoning, Thomson distinguishes between what is morally permissible and what is morally praiseworthy. In the context of abortion, this means that while continuing a pregnancy may be an act of kindness or self-sacrifice, it cannot be considered a moral requirement. However, Thomson's argument leaves unresolved questions, particularly regarding the moral status and potentiality of the fetus, and the extent of responsibility in pregnancies resulting from consensual sexual activity. These issues complicate the moral landscape, suggesting that further philosophical reflection is necessary to reach a comprehensive understanding. Nonetheless, Thomson's work remains groundbreaking: by grounding the permissibility of abortion in the principle of bodily autonomy, she redefined the ethical framework of the abortion debate and opened new avenues for philosophical inquiry into the relationship between rights, duties, and moral compassion.

CONCLUSION

J. J.Thomson's "*A Defense of Abortion*" remains one of the most influential and provocative contributions to contemporary moral philosophy. Through a series of vivid thought experiments—the Violinist Analogy, the People-Seed Scenario, and the Chocolate Analogy—Thomson reconfigures the moral discourse on abortion from a debate about the status of fetal life to one about the limits of personal obligation and bodily autonomy. Her central insight that the right to life does not entail the right to use another person's body for survival—challenges the foundational assumption of many anti-abortion arguments. By distinguishing between what is morally required and what is morally admirable, she shows that moral decency

ISSN (Online): 2455-3662
EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR) - Peer Reviewed Journal
Volume: 11| Issue: 11| November 2025|| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2013 || SJIF Impact Factor 2025: 8.691 || ISI Value: 1.188

cannot be transformed into moral duty, nor can compassion override consent. Thomson's analysis, however, does not claim that abortion is always morally right; rather, it reveals that the question of permissibility is more nuanced than pro-life and pro-choice dichotomies suggest. Her framework invites further reflection on issues such as consent, responsibility, and the moral status of potential life, which remain contested even within her own logic. Nevertheless, her work stands as a philosophical watershed: it shifts the ethical focus from metaphysical debates about personhood to the practical and moral implications of bodily sovereignty, consent, and justice. In doing so, Thomson not only defends a woman's moral right to choose but also broadens our understanding of what it means to act justly in a world of competing rights and imperfect obligations. While Thomson persuasively demonstrates that a fetus's right to life does not automatically override a woman's right to bodily autonomy, her framework leaves few unresolved questions concerning mutual rights and moral responsibility in cases of shared vulnerability. Pregnancy is not a purely adversarial condition but a complex state of interdependence, where both the woman and the fetus share moral and physical stakes. Thomson's rights-based model, though compelling in defending autonomy, does not fully capture this relational dimension of moral life — a gap later explored by feminist philosophers through the ethics of care.

REFERENCES

1. *Gatens-Robinson, G. (1992). A Defense of women's choice: Abortion and the ethics of care. The Southern Journal of Philosophy, 30(3), 261–275. Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.*
2. *Kaczor, C. (2022). Introduction. In The ethics of abortion (pp. 1–12). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003305217*
3. *McMahan, J. (2002). The ethics of killing: Problems at the margins of life. Oxford University Press.*
4. *Steinbock, B. (1992). Life before birth: The moral and legal status of embryos and fetuses. Oxford University Press.*
5. *Thomson, J. J. (1971). A Defense of abortion. Philosophy & Public Affairs, 1(1), 47–66.*