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**RMPS (Advanced Higher)**

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**Candidate evidence - Dissertation**

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# Dissertation 1

*“Divinity lies all around us, but society remains too hidebound to accept that fact... the mother sea and the fountainhead of all religion lies in the mystical experiences of the individual.”*

*-William James (Varieties of Religious experiences 1902)<sup>1</sup>*

James viewed religious experiences as central to religious belief, and his view was common, the belief that there is more to the world than we can see has been evident in humanity for millennia, the reasons for and against this belief have been developed over time. Many argue that the best evidence for God comes from religious experience which is when someone experiences a personal communion with a divine presence, implying there is an external divine presence to the world to the person experiencing it and everyone who believes. This is important because if proven, it presents an opportunity to understand more about the world we live in. In addition to the argument from religious experience, there is also the cosmological argument and the teleological argument. The cosmological argument argues from the creation of the world and the apparent world order.<sup>2</sup> The teleological argument comes from the apparent purpose of the world.<sup>3</sup> This essay will support the belief that religious experience is the best evidence for God to a greater extent than the cosmological and teleological arguments.

During a religious experience, people usually say they have had some form of communion with God with religious insight<sup>4</sup>, if their religious experience is empirically proven, it would confirm they had communion with God and therefore God exists. An example of religious experience is the Biblical conversion, in Acts 9, of Saul (who later became St Paul). Saul was on the road to Damascus to persecute Christians when ‘a light from the sky flashed around him’ followed by the voice of Jesus asking ‘Saul, Saul! why do you persecute me?’ he then told Saul what he must do. The men whom he was travelling with also heard the voice. When Saul got up, he was blind for the next three days and he neither ate nor drank until the Lord appeared to the believer

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<sup>1</sup> James, William., *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (United Kingdom: Longman’s Green, 1902). P6

<sup>2</sup> Dewar, Greg., *Philosophy & Ethics: Through Diagrams*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). P21

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* p26

<sup>4</sup> Cole, Peter., *Philosophy of Religion*, 3rd ed. (London: Hodder Murray, 2008). P10–12

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Ananias and gave him the power to heal Saul's blindness. By Acts 13, Saul changed to the Christian name Paul to complete his conversion.<sup>5</sup>

Firstly, to explain Saul's conversion, it is important to know conversion experiences are a life-changing experience in regards to a person's religiosity. 19<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher William James defines a conversion experience: *'To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain assurance.'*<sup>6</sup> James also defined religious experience to have 4 characteristics: Passive, Ineffable, Noetic, and Transient. Meaning it must have a sense of powerlessness, be impossible to put into words, insightful, and short-lasting.<sup>7</sup> In addition to this, 16<sup>th</sup>-century Carmelite nun and theologian Saint Teresa of Avila developed a 3 step 'protocol' for religious experience after her transverberation, during which she felt an angel of the lord piercing her heart with a golden dart, and while praying she felt so overwhelmed by God's presence, she felt like God would levitate her.<sup>8</sup> Based on her experience, Teresa decided religious experiences must be life-changing, within church traditions, and discussed with a spiritual advisor. Teresa fits the protocol because she started praying again, she was a catholic nun, and discussed it with her spiritual advisor. Saul partly fits the protocol: he converted to Christianity, and he was vital to church traditions as he wrote the letters to Corinthians, however, he did not discuss the experience with advisors.<sup>9</sup> Since Saul only fits two-thirds of the protocol, Teresa would say his experience is invalid. However, James is more relevant and up to date, he would instead say it is valid because it fits all four of his categories because it inspired him to stop killing Christians, it was short, he was powerless, and could not explain it. While Saul's experience is unreliable because the witnesses were blind and sick, and it was over 2000 years ago, Saul's conversion is evidence for the existence of God because it is an example of God's benevolent interventions to prevent unnecessary bloodshed and therefore there is a benevolent God because by converting Saul from Judaism, it shows God cares about more than just Christians, he was even willing to care for someone who had made himself an enemy of the Christians.

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<sup>5</sup> American Bible Society, *Good News Bible: [Illustrated Bible]*, 2nd ed. (London: The Bible Societies, 1994), p161-67

<sup>6</sup> William. op. cit. p189

<sup>7</sup> Dewar op. cit p34

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p88

<sup>9</sup> Dewar op. cit p88

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St Teresa would also verify the visions of 19<sup>th</sup>-century American, co-founder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Ellen. G. White who believed Christ will return.<sup>10</sup> Ellen's visions lasted up to three hours and sometimes people reported she would stop breathing while having the visions, in one vision she saw Australian printing presses and an angel telling her she must spread the word of God worldwide. It was within church traditions, she was altered after her experience to feel a closer relationship with God, and she discussed this with a spiritual advisor, her pastor. Her experience is a stronger argument because it led to an increased belief in the second coming of Christ, and so God exists because He sent visions to Ellen to confirm his existence, making her a prophet. This is important because her visions inspired more people to believe in God and made religion accessible to more people worldwide with her charismatic leadership.

In contradiction to this, Neuroscientist VS Ramachandran would argue that Saul and Ellen were instead suffering from a medical issue called temporal lobe epilepsy (TLE). TLE theoretically creates religious experiences through crossing wires in the brain, causing seizures. The seizures are then interpreted as visions because the brain cannot process the intense emotions caused by the seizure.<sup>11</sup> However, neurotheologian Andrew Newberg would argue that whilst his SPECT imaging and brain scans show the areas involved in religious experiences are primarily in the temporal lobe, he still cannot determine whether the brain is creating the religious experience or receiving it from a higher being who activates that part of the brain to carry out His will. Newberg believes that religious experiences cannot be invalidated with science alone, both science and religious experiences are needed to explain the existence of God.<sup>12</sup> Therefore religious experience is the best evidence for God because the case of Saul as analysed by Andrew Newberg shows that God interacts with humanity to improve the lives of anyone regardless of whether they believe in Him or not.

Religious experience is limited evidence for the existence of God because it cannot be empirically verified by current scientific technologies, we can only identify where the experience is happening in the brain. Another limitation of the argument from religious experience is that it can be argued that the only reason they are

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<sup>10</sup> Tucker, Liz., "God on the Brain," *News.bbc.co.uk*, March 20, 2003, <https://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/2865009.stm>.

<sup>11</sup> Tucker op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> Newberg, Andrew., "This Is Your Brain on Religion," *USA Today*, 2009, [http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/printedition/news/20090615/column15\\_st.art.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/printedition/news/20090615/column15_st.art.htm).

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religious experiences is that it happened to a conditioned religious person. This is developed by 21st-century evolutionary biologist, Richard Dawkins<sup>13</sup> who argues in his book, *'The God Delusion'* that the only reason religious experiences occur is because of conditioning. He uses the example of the 'ghost' mumbling he heard as a child, he believed that if he had been raised in a religious household, he would have heard more than mumbling such as prayer or demonic voices.<sup>14</sup> This suggests religious experience is not the best evidence for the existence of God because it comes from a biased and unreliable source due to psychological priming. For example, in the case of the parting of the Red Sea<sup>15</sup>, Dawkins would argue it is not proof of God because all those who experienced it were either the Hebrew's conditioned to believe God was saving them or drowning pharaoh's men (who did not survive), invalidating the witness accounts. In addition to this, 18<sup>th</sup>-century Scottish Enlightenment philosopher and empiricist, David Hume believed that all 'miracles' must be verified to have broken the laws of nature through observation, hypothesis, and evidence, however, the miracle of the Red Sea didn't break the laws of nature. This is supported by a study done by the University of Colorado which showed that a 63mph wind lasting for 12 hours could create a passage 2-2.5 miles long and 3 miles wide, the water could be parted long enough to escape and if the wind stopped, whoever was still in seabed risked drowning.<sup>16</sup> However, religious experience is still the best evidence for God because the Red Sea miracle shows how it can prove to thousands that God exists with certainty by intervening and saving their lives.

The example of former gang member Nicky Cruz is free from religious conditioning<sup>17</sup>. Like Saul, he wasn't Christian and wanted to commit violence against believers. He was converted by David Wilkerson after turning up to one of his rallies, intending to assaulting him, Wilkerson's kindness, and trust overwhelmed Cruz with guilt that he began to pray to God for forgiveness. This is an example of how not all religious conversions occur

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<sup>13</sup> Dawkins, Richard., 2006 ©, *The God Delusion*, London: Bantam Press p90 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London, England: Transworld Publishers, 2006). p90

<sup>14</sup> Insert reference to Dawkins

<sup>15</sup> American Bible Society op. cit p71-72

<sup>16</sup> National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) and University of Colorado at Boulder (CU), "Parting the Waters: Computer Modeling Applies Physics to Red Sea Escape Route," CU Boulder, September 21, 2010, <https://www.colorado.edu/today/2010/09/21/parting-waters-computer-modeling-applies-physics-red-sea-escape-route>

<sup>17</sup> Philosophy Dungeon, "Types of Religious Experience," Philosophy Dungeon (Weebly, 2010), "><https://philosophydungeon.weebly.com/types-of-religious-experience.html>

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to those who are primed to believe. Dawkin's argument is narrow because the focus of most religious experiences is on the lasting effects they have. This view is supported by St Teresa of Avila who says when defining and validating religious experience it must change their life.<sup>18</sup> While Nicky's experience is limited in making religious experience the best evidence for God's existence as his conversion could be a result of longing to escape the gang life instead of a genuine connection to God, religious experience is still the best evidence because his experience led to him converting to other gang members in his old neighbourhood and spreading God's love.<sup>19</sup>

Although religious experience is limited because individual experiences have little influence on larger groups of people, it is still dependable evidence for God's existence because corporate experiences can do what personal experiences cannot. For example, the Toronto Blessing was an outpour of the holy spirit on churchgoers in Toronto, Canada, creating a numinous experience for the whole congregation. Therefore religious experience is the best evidence of God because it provides infallible evidence to masses. This is supported by 21<sup>st</sup>-century English philosophy professor, Richard Swinburne with his principle of testimony which means the default position should be believing an experience happened the way a person described it.<sup>20</sup>

The Greek word Cosmos<sup>21</sup> means the universe, this means the cosmological argument is based on the observation and questioning of the universe, making it an a posteriori<sup>22</sup> argument as it is based on observations. Aquinas proposed a cosmological argument through the first three of his five *Quinque Viæ*: – Motion, causes, contingency. His argument is inductive because if all his premises were proven, the conclusion is likely not false.<sup>23</sup> The Unmoved mover: Newton observed something with remain at rest unless acted upon by an unbalanced force. This is developed with domino theory, the dominos will remain stationary until acted upon. This means it is unreasonable that the sequence of motion extends ad infinitum<sup>24</sup>This implies

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<sup>18</sup> Dewar op. cit p88

<sup>19</sup> Philosophy Dungeon Op. cit

<sup>20</sup> Insert Swinburne's book here and find page number

<sup>21</sup> Cole op. cit p33

<sup>22</sup> Ibid p19

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p19

<sup>24</sup> Ibid p33-34

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the cosmological argument is compelling evidence for god because it reveals the universe has not been in infinite continuous motion because something must have pushed the first domino. However, British philosopher and logician Bertrand Russel believes it more unreasonable to think just because all people have a mother that the universe should have one too, invalidating the first premise of Aquinas and potentially disproving God.

In the universe we observe a series of cause and effect, nothing causing itself, all brought into the world by contingent beings.<sup>25</sup> This leads us to believe that the universe did not cause itself and thus God is the un-caused causer. However, this is undermined by Hume who argued that cause and effect are separate events and the causer cannot be argued from the effect produced.<sup>26</sup> This is further undermined by 18<sup>th</sup>-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant who believes since the beginning of the universe is out of human experiences and so it is too extreme a leap to apply current experience to something that far in the past. Therefore the cosmological argument is weaker than religious experience because it is more within human experience and so more reliable.<sup>27</sup>

The third argument is based on nature: how things are brought into the world by contingent beings but are not caused by themselves, this implies all beings are contingent. Aquinas then argues therefore a being must exist of its own necessity, and this is God.<sup>28</sup> This is refuted by Russel who believes the universe's existence is brute fact: it simply exists and therefore there is a non-contingent being who creates contingent beings.<sup>29</sup> Therefore the universe had no creator, it just exists and so there is no God.

The Cosmological argument was developed by 12<sup>th</sup> century Muslim Scholar Al Ghazali with the Kalam cosmological argument. Which states that everything has a cause, including the universe, and therefore the cause is the non-contingent and personal God<sup>30</sup> The kalam argument is developed by 21<sup>st</sup>-century American

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid p34

<sup>26</sup> Ibid p38

<sup>27</sup> Ibid p33

<sup>28</sup> Ibid p35&36

<sup>29</sup> Philosophy Overdose, "Russell-Copleston Debate on God (1948)," www.youtube.com, May 19, 2017, insert timestamp <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kz2GjKPbQds&t=112s>

<sup>30</sup> Ibid p38-40

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philosopher and Christian theologian, William Lane Craig, developed this with his two-part argument in 1979 with his book '*The Kalam Argument*'. In the book, he argues a two-part argument: The first part argues that the universe has a beginning because life consists of three tenses: past, present, and future. This means the universe is finite because infinite regress would imply time can be added infinitely onto the tenses, this is too paradoxical and unlikely. This is explained by Craig with the analogy of Hilbert's Hotel: a hypothetical fully booked hotel with infinite rooms, if another guest wanted a room, even though it is fully booked they would still be able to get a room because another room would be created. The finite aspect of the universe implies God's existence because there must be a creator of the universe and this creator is God. While the cosmological argument is reliable because based on scientific knowledge: tenses, creation theory. Religious experience is the best evidence because experience proves the God of classical theism however, cosmological argument doesn't prove that the creator is God.

The second part of Craig's argument is if the universe was caused then it was a personal being who freely chose to create it. God created the universe Ex Nihilo because He is Omnipotent and able to break the laws of physics. For example, God created the laws of time and nature while also creating the Universe, this breaks the law that matter cannot be created or destroyed. Therefore the cosmological argument is reliable evidence of God's existence because it is implied that something more powerful than nature was required in order to create nature. This is developed in the 1948 radio debate between English Catholic priest Frederick Copleston, and Bertrand Russel. Russel believes that the universe just exists, there is no beginning, and certainly no personal creator. For example, he took the view that looking for the beginning is pointless, it shouldn't be found nor expected<sup>31</sup>. This implies there is no personal God because there was no free choice to create the universe, it just happened. Copleston's rebuttal was that the existence of God had no meaning to Russel and therefore he was in no position to discuss it.<sup>32</sup> Russel, like many empiricists, took the negative position that believers need to prove God exists instead of them disproving God's existence. This is a narrow view, especially the belief that humans need to experience something to understand and pass judgement on

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<sup>31</sup> Insert reference to the debate

<sup>32</sup> Insert reference to debate



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it. this is developed by Kierkegaard, 19<sup>th</sup>-century Danish theologian, who says a 'leap of faith' is needed, and it is only faith if there is uncertainty. Therefore while the cosmological is still dependable because it gives enough evidence from both religion and science to sway both scientists and theologians to believe in God, religious experience is the best evidence because it is the only way to convert those who do not believe in God, such as the conversion of Nicky Cruz.

Although the cosmological argument is trustworthy because it can prove God's existence without needing a personal relationship with God, religious experience is the best evidence for God's existence because Swinburne's principle of credulity shows that religious experiences are definitive proof, not just to the individual but other too because we should trust that the experience is credible unless there is good reason to believe otherwise.<sup>33</sup>

The teleological argument originates from the Greek word Telos meaning with purpose because the argument assumes from the purposeful design of the universe that there is a purposeful designer whom we call God.<sup>34</sup> 20<sup>th</sup>-century British Theologian, F.R Tennant's developed the a posteriori<sup>35</sup> design argument, arguing that we observe the universe to have purposeful design, therefore the universe was made for humans by a great designer because the 'accidents of physics and astronomy' have worked to our benefit as if the universe had prepared for us.<sup>36</sup>

One of the most notable arguments from design is the fifth way of Aquinas inductive<sup>37</sup> argument designed to persuade people that it is not a coincidence all natural bodies work towards a goal. Most natural bodies lack knowledge, yet act with purpose, such as bees who pollinate yet have limited intelligence. Aquinas would use the analogy of how an arrow lacking intelligence reaches its target because it is directed by an archer with intelligence.<sup>38</sup> This argument is reliable because of the implication that an intelligent being exists, whom we know as God, that directs all natural bodies with a clear purpose. However, 20<sup>th</sup>-century French biochemist

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<sup>33</sup> Insert reference to swinburne's credulity

<sup>34</sup> Cole op. cit p42

<sup>35</sup> Ibid p42

<sup>36</sup> Ibid p46-47

<sup>37</sup> Ibid p42

<sup>38</sup> Ibid p43

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Jacques Monod argues that 'Pure chance, absolutely free but blind' is at the root of evolution.<sup>39</sup> This makes the teleological less powerful than religious experience because it seems more likely the order of life comes from organised chaos instead of a complex design from the divine designer.

William Paley, an English vicar, and philosopher of the Enlightenment, who wrote '*Natural Theology*' (1802), develops the fifth way of Aquinas with his watchmaker analogy. In the watchmaker analogy Paley says that if you were to find a watch on the ground without ever seeing a watch before, you would observe the complexity of its design and assume that there was a watchmaker. He then developed this by adding that we observe the universe to be complex because we see complexities in human biology, for example, the human eye is very complexly designed.<sup>40</sup> This is supported by religious texts, for example, the Christian argument from design is evident in Psalm 19 which says:

*"The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard."*

<sup>41</sup>This supports Paley's conclusion that like effects have like causes and so a complex design implies a complex designer whom we call God. However, before Paley had made this argument, Hume had already contradicted it, arguing the watch analogy is unreasonable as we haven't observed the origin of the universe and have only seen the creations of humans, a manufactured watch and the universe are too dissimilar to compare in an analogy. He thought it was better to compare the universe to something in nature like a vegetable because neither are man-made.<sup>42</sup> There is evidence for the existence of God in the teleological argument, while it is limited by subpar analogies, we observe the world to have an extraordinarily complex design that transcends our understanding which can only be explained by a complex designer, however, this is limited because it is

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<sup>39</sup> Messerly, John., "Summary of Jacques Monod's 'Chance and Necessity,'" Reason and Meaning, February 24, 2014, <https://reasonandmeaning.com/2014/02/24/jacques-monod-a-cosmos-without-meaning/>

<sup>40</sup> Cole op. cit p44-45

<sup>41</sup> American Bible Society op. cit p555

<sup>42</sup> Cole op. cit p48

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possible the designer has abandoned us. While the teleological argument is strong, the argument from religious experience is still stronger in terms of the existence of God because religious experiences such as Lourdes prove that God is still present and acting in the world. For example, Bernadette Soubirous's experience at Lourdes had a permanent and lasting effect on her community, ever since then there has been reported repeated verified healing miracles, at least one per decade in recent history. Such as the 69<sup>th</sup> Lourdes miracle: an Italian woman suffering from severe hypertension was cured after visiting Lourdes in 1989.<sup>43</sup> This means that religious experiences are the best evidence for God because the experience of one working-class girl has had continuing consequences for long after her death, proving God is not only existing but inclusive of all classes and gender meaning God is universally available.

Another criticism of the design argument comes from Charles Darwin, an evolutionary biologist who wrote *'On the Origins of Species'* (1859). Darwin proposed the theory of natural selection: a selected characteristic of an animal mutates, if beneficial the species evolves to increase survivability. For example, the ichneumon flies are a parasitic wasp that places their eggs inside a caterpillar with a virus that reprograms the caterpillar's brain to feed and protect the eggs. Darwin believed the fly could not be the result of a beneficent and omnipotent God with the intention of feeding on living caterpillars, setting them up for pain.<sup>44</sup> There is no great design for the universe: the apparent design is ordered chaos caused by random genetic mutations. However, this is refuted by the omega point theory proposed by 20<sup>th</sup>-century French Priest, Teilhard de Chardin. Chardin disputes Darwin's theory by proposing that as we evolve, we are becoming increasingly conscious, bringing us closer to the omega point (the biblical image of cosmic Christ), the ultimate point of Christianity.<sup>45</sup> This implies evolution is all part of God's great ineffable plan which strengthens the teleological argument as evidence of God because cannot be disproven by scientific evolution.

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<sup>43</sup> Ferguson, Sharon,. "Dr Michael Moran Evaluates Lourdes Miracles Reports," *BBC News*, February 25, 2014, sec. Northern Ireland, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-26334964>.

<sup>44</sup> Dewar op. cit p30

<sup>45</sup> Ellerton-Harris, Delyth., *WJEC A2 Religious Studies: Studies in Philosophy of Religion; Study and Revision Guide* (Cheltenham: Illuminate Pub, 2013). p88-89

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Overall, the teleological argument implies a benevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent God. However, it is more of a persuasive argument than an empirical one aimed to make solid conclusions and it relies on individual judgement, making it inconclusive on its own, and so religious experience is the best evidence for God's existence.

The teleological argument is strengthened by 21<sup>st</sup>-century biochemistry professor, Michael Behe, who introduces the idea of irreducible complexity through the mousetrap analogy: if just one of the things that made up a mousetrap were to change it would no longer work and so would not be a 'mousetrap'. Thus, God exists because he designed the universe perfectly to fit with us and work perfectly. The teleological argument is dependable because it proves God has designed things with a function that does not change if it evolves, *'the function of a chicken will always be to lay eggs.'*<sup>46</sup> This means the teleological argument is good evidence for the existence of God because it shows there is a greater purpose to the world and so there is a God.

The argument from religious experience still offers the best evidence for the existence of God because religious experiences cannot be explained away with logic or reason, for example, the recent miracle at Lourdes in 2008 where a nun, with one foot permanently twisted, requiring her to wear a brace and use a wheelchair, taking significant amounts of morphine for the pain, and had been declared disabled in 1980 was recently healed to complete health at Lourdes despite how she had only gone on a pilgrimage there to relieve her pain, not heal herself completely.<sup>47</sup> Whereas the teleological argument is limited by the theory of evolution disproving the theory universe is organised, instead suggesting it is random chaotic order caused by unprovoked genetic mutations.

Overall, all arguments for God's existence are excellent quality evidence. The argument for religious experience is superior to the cosmological argument as evidence for God's existence because paradoxes prove that nothing can be the cause of itself and so there is not an infinite regress, the religious experience argument is stronger because it lies out with human comprehension and must be from a divine transcendent being. While

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<sup>46</sup>ibid. P70

<sup>47</sup> Ganley, Elaine., "Bishop Declares Nun's Recovery as 70th Lourdes Miracle," The Seattle Times, February 11, 2018, <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/bishop-declares-french-catholic-nuns-cure-a-lourdes-miracle/>

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the design argument is reliable because Tennant observed if one thing were different in the universe, the world would not exist in the same way and we would not be here to debate whether there is a God, therefore the world is designed and so there is a designer whom we call God. However, the argument from religious experience is stronger because you do not need to study philosophy to understand your experience, making it more accessible and the best evidence for everyone.

Therefore, it can be argued that the religious experience is the best evidence for the existence of God to the greatest extent.

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# Dissertation 2

***At the end of the day, abortion is still murder.*** Evaluate religious and non-religious responses to this statement.

Throughout this dissertation I aim to:

- describe and explain what is meant by abortion
- research and apply religious and non-religious viewpoints on abortion
- analyse moral issues arising from abortion
- evaluate religious and non-religious responses towards the debate
- draw conclusions on the question

## What is meant by abortion?

Abortion is the name given to the ending of a pregnancy through a procedure which induces a miscarriage. This has caused many debates and disagreements for many years all over the world. In England, Scotland and Wales, abortions are carried out up to the 24 week period of pregnancy. However, in extreme circumstances e.g. if the mother or foetus' life is at risk, they can legally be conducted after 24 weeks<sup>4</sup>. The Abortion Act, which provides legal defence for those carrying out abortions, was not put in place until 1967<sup>5</sup>. This act amended and clarified laws surrounding abortion, stating that a person cannot be guilty of an offence relating to abortion as long as the pregnancy is terminated by a registered medical practitioner and two registered medical practitioners are in agreement the abortion is in 'good faith'<sup>6</sup>. Prior to this abortion laws such as the 'Ellenborough Act' (1803) made abortion in Britain after the 16 to 20 week period in which life is first felt, an offence that carried the death penalty, though it later became life imprisonment<sup>8</sup>. This meant women could be punished as severely as death if it was deemed the baby was 'alive'. Abortion is first referenced in British law in the 13<sup>th</sup> century<sup>9</sup> these first laws followed the teachings of the church and stated that abortion would be acceptable until 'quickening'. This was believed to be when the soul entered the foetus. However, there are many disagreements over when this occurs and when it should be considered acceptable to abort a foetus.

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<sup>4</sup> NHS Abortion Overview, last accessed on 22/03/19, <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/abortion/>

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Maria Miller the minister for women and equalities, 'Abortion 24 Week Limit', The Telegraph, last accessed on 22/03/19, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/health/news/9582428/Abortion-24-week-limit-QandA.html>

<sup>6</sup> 'Abortion Act 1967', last accessed on 22/03/19, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1967/87>

<sup>8</sup> 'Abortion: The Facts', The Independent, last accessed on 23/03/19, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/abortion-the-facts-5349981.html>

<sup>9</sup> 'History of Abortion in the UK', last accessed on 22/03/19, <http://www.abortionrights.org.uk/history-of-abortion-law-in-the-uk/>

24 weeks is when an embryo is considered 'viable' in the UK but this is a very controversial subject and was only recently changed from 28 weeks in 1990.

#### Religious viewpoints on Abortion

Many moral issues surrounding abortion arise from the religious belief that all life is sacred and that terminating a life is the equivalent to murder, which is considered morally wrong. By law murder is considered an extremely immoral offence in most societies and religions. Although in some cases some would argue that murder can be morally justifiable for example in instances of self-defence, however, the deliberate killing of an innocent person is considered wrong and evil in all religions and societies. This is why there are many disputes over the moral ground surrounding abortion due to its irrefutable link to the murder of innocents.

There are many other reasons that people are against abortion and many link it to other immoral behaviour. Many Christians would argue that it could encourage immoral sexual behaviour, e.g. unmarried/ unprotected sex and encourages people to shy away from taking responsibility for their actions by choosing the 'easy way out.'<sup>10</sup> It could be argued that if abortion becomes normalised, people will begin to value protection and certain sexual responsibilities less and start to be more reckless in their behaviour. There is concern that this could also normalise murder as people could become less aware of the consequences of abortion and the control over an unborn child's life. However, although in theory it is widely believed abortion is an 'easy way out' for reckless sexual behaviour, for many women abortion can have a major impact on their physical and mental health especially with stereotypes which surround it. According to the recent studies on the NHS website, women who have an abortion are 30% more likely to develop a mental illness and are three times more likely to develop alcohol or drug addiction compared with other women<sup>11</sup>. This implies that abortion is most definitely not an easy way out and is something which great thought has to be given to.

For many Christians the link between murder and abortion stems from beliefs about God and the sanctity of life. This is the belief that all life should be preserved and protected as it is a gift from God and is why many Christians would be against abortion in any circumstance. However, today it is recognised that there is a need

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<sup>10</sup> 'World's leading Abortion Provider Encourages Youth Sex', last accessed on 22/03/19, <https://www.christianconcern.com/our-concerns/abortion/world's-leading-abortion-provider-encourages-youth-sex>

<sup>11</sup> 'Abortion and Mental Health', last accessed on 22/03/19, <https://www.nhs.uk/news/pregnancy-and-child/abortion-and-mental-health/>



for abortion in some circumstances. This has been acknowledged by organisations such as the Church of Scotland which was previously against abortion. The Church of Scotland now agree abortion can be accepted in certain cases e.g. if the mother's life or health is at risk.

*"...in Biblical and historic Christian conviction... its inviolability can be threatened only in the case of risk to maternal life, and that after the exhaustion of all alternatives."*

The Church of Scotland has taken the position since the 1960s that abortion is necessary if the mother of foetus' health is endangered. The church has also tried to provide support for families and individuals affected by abortion and encourages more educational opportunities for young people and offers support to health care staff and ministers<sup>12</sup>. They do however still maintain that abortion should be a last resort due and should not be trivialised due to the undeniable moral issues linking to the murder of an unborn foetus.

Beliefs surrounding the sanctity of life drive many religious arguments surrounding controversial issues such as abortion and embryonic use. This belief comes from the idea that all life is sacred and holy as it is a gift from God. Many monotheistic religions, such as Christianity, would argue that because of this all life is immensely valuable and that of an embryo, which is not fully developed, should be valued no less than any other human being regardless of age or level of development.

*"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you prophet to the nation."*<sup>38</sup>

This extract from the Old Testament identifies a key message which is highlighted throughout the Bible. It is believed that God has a plan for every being as they are all uniquely and individually created in his image. Scripture teaches that life is precious and murder is always morally wrong.<sup>39</sup> There are many who believe that abortion contradicts this as it destroys a sacred life before God wills it. For this reason, many Christians struggle

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<sup>12</sup> Church and Society Council, 'Summary of selected issues from reports to General Assembly', last accessed on 22/03/19, [http://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=4&ved=2ahUKEwjgo5jlzJDhAhUsQhUIHal-CIUQFjADegQIBBAC&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.churchofscotland.org.uk%2F\\_\\_data%2Fassets%2Fpdf\\_file%2F0014%2F5306%2Fchurchofsociety\\_issues\\_2010.pdf&usg=AOvVaw2wIHN\\_cFrGKJ9-D9bZgQ4F](http://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=4&ved=2ahUKEwjgo5jlzJDhAhUsQhUIHal-CIUQFjADegQIBBAC&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.churchofscotland.org.uk%2F__data%2Fassets%2Fpdf_file%2F0014%2F5306%2Fchurchofsociety_issues_2010.pdf&usg=AOvVaw2wIHN_cFrGKJ9-D9bZgQ4F)

<sup>38</sup> Jeremiah 1:4-5, Old testament, King James Version

<sup>39</sup> 'The Sanctity of Life', last accessed on 22/03/219, <https://www.christian.org.uk/theology/apologetics/the-sanctity-of-life/>

to condone abortion due to its moral link to murder which goes against many of the key values and morals that they have been taught. However, it could be argued that abortion is part of God's overall plan as it aims to alleviate possible pain and suffering for either the embryo or the mother. Jesus taught to help others and to use our knowledge to prevent suffering so perhaps abortion is an advancement which is needed in some cases to prevent further death or suffering.

This idea that God individually formed each human being and intertwined them into the overall plan for humanity can be seen in many religions throughout the world. Islam, for example, believes that human beings are shaped by Allah from clay and created by his breathing a soul into them<sup>40</sup>. This emphasises the special bond between God and life that is apparent in most religions throughout the world. Monotheistic religions view God as being all powerful, all knowing and all loving beings. This causes further issues for many who feel that only God should have the power to decide when to give life and when to take life away. Many worry that we could be making the decision to end a life which could have done great things for society and in doing so we interfere with Gods plan. This issue inevitably goes back to the debate over whether the deliberate ending and murder of a life can ever be justified which many monotheistic religions believe it cannot.

Many Roman Catholics will view the fifth commandment literally, 'You shall not murder'<sup>41</sup>. The scripture specifies "Do not slay the innocent and the righteous" and specifies that the murder of an innocent human being gravely contradicts the dignity of the human being and the holiness of God. Murder is universally forbidden and obliges 'everyone, always and everywhere'<sup>42</sup>. For this reason, the direct and intentional killing of a human being is gravely sinful and is forbidden by the Catholic Church. This is where many issues arise concerning abortion. Many Catholics believe abortion is an act by which we are purposefully ending the life of perhaps the most innocent of human beings. This completely contradicts the fifth commandment and the teachings of God and the Church and would be considered equivalent to murder. According to the Vatican human life must be protected and cherished from the moment of conception. It is believed that from the first moment of existence i.e. as soon as the egg is fertilised an embryo must be given the full rights of any other

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<sup>40</sup> 'Creation of Humans from Clay', last accessed on 22/03/19, [https://wikiislam.net/wiki/Creation\\_of\\_Humans\\_from\\_Clay](https://wikiislam.net/wiki/Creation_of_Humans_from_Clay)

<sup>41</sup> Exodus 20:13, Deuteronomy 5:17

<sup>42</sup> 'Catechism of the Catholic Church', last accessed on 22/03/19, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a5.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a5.htm)

person, including the right to life<sup>43</sup>. For this reason, since the first century the Catholic Church has asseverated the moral 'evil' of every abortion. The Catholic's very strong and public view on abortion has caused many people to question the morals and values we hold in our society and if abortion can fit into that. The church's very strong opinions are actually what has caused many of these issues to be addressed as previously many ordinary people may not have considered how murder and abortion link and how this fits into their religion.

The Church of England and The Church of Scotland's official position is against abortion. They state that "The foetus is, from the beginning, an independent human being".<sup>45</sup> This highlights the belief, similar to the Catholic Church, that life begins at the very first moment of conception. Based on this, it could be deduced that the Church of Scotland's anti-abortion stance is due to their view that a foetus at any stage of development is classed as a human being and therefore their intentional destruction would be similar to that of murder. Overall, the church shares the Roman Catholic view that abortion is 'gravely contrary to the moral law'<sup>46</sup> as stated by the church's board of Social Responsibility in 1980. However, The General Assembly declared that a foetus can be aborted "only in the case of threat to maternal life, and that after the exhaustion of all alternatives"<sup>47</sup>. The Church of Scotland doesn't completely condemn abortion and recognise that it may be a necessary evil in some cases. The governing body for both Churches have repeatedly raised concerns over the number of abortions being carried out each year and believe it is unnecessarily high<sup>48</sup>. In England and Wales alone, 190,406 abortions had taken place in 2016. This could be considered an extremely high number and many would argue this cannot be attributed to only extreme cases where abortion is necessary. However, considering that women and girls make up 51% of the population of England and Wales<sup>49</sup> and there are approximately fifty-five million people living in England alone, the number of abortions seems miniscule in

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. CDF, *DŪnum vitae* I,1, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a5.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a5.htm)

<sup>45</sup> Church and Society Council, 'Summary of selected issues from reports to General Assembly', last accessed on 22/03/19, [http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0014/5306/churchsociety\\_issues\\_2010.pdf](http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0014/5306/churchsociety_issues_2010.pdf)

<sup>46</sup> 'Abortions', last accessed on 22/03/19, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/christianethics/abortion\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/christianethics/abortion_1.shtml)

<sup>47</sup> Church and Society Council, 'Summary of selected issues from reports to General Assembly', last accessed on 22/03/19, [http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0014/5306/churchsociety\\_issues\\_2010.pdf](http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0014/5306/churchsociety_issues_2010.pdf)

<sup>48</sup> 'Abortion: Church of England Statements', last accessed on 22/03/29, <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/Abortion%20Church%20of%20England%20Statements.pdf>

<sup>49</sup> Office for National Statistics, 'Male and Female Populations', 2011 Census, Last accessed on 22/03/19, <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/british-population/demographics/male-and-female-populations/latest>

comparison<sup>50</sup>. A series of letters written by Reverend Dr John Cameron, a member of the Church of Scotland has caused many disputes. His statements claim that the attempts to restrict abortion by many religious organisations is a 'clear example of religious extremists... interfering with a women's ability to make her own health decisions.' His resolution that such religious organisations should work to stop trying to prevent and restrict things for people who do not share their same beliefs. This is an example of a view from the church which was met with a lot of praise but an equal amount of disagreement. Many articles arose around the time of these letters with some stating that he claims to be a minister but is attacking the teachings of Jesus and the church<sup>51</sup>. This highlights that there is an apparent divide in the Church of England and the Church of Scotland as this is only one example of many. Overall, although their position is officially against abortion, they are far better at acknowledging the need for abortion and considering the differing opinions throughout the church. Although the Church of Scotland and England do not condemn abortion they do recognise that there is a certain equivalency to murder which generates many moral issues.

#### Non-Religious viewpoints on Abortion

Many philosophers have argued that a foetus should be considered a human being when it reaches consciousness. This occurs after the point of conception. Some individuals would argue this is when the foetus is actually born. Others believe this should be when the central nervous system has formed as this is when the baby can feel, many Utilitarian's believe the ability to think and feel is what characterises us a human beings. Furthermore, some people argue that we should not class a foetus as a person until it can survive outside the womb and is viable. This is what the UK 24 week law is based on. The law in England, Scotland and Wales only permits abortion before the 24th week of pregnancy and only if two doctors agree there is a risk to the life or the mental or physical health of the mother or foetus<sup>52</sup>.

Humanists use reason, experience and thought for others when considering moral and ethical issues. When considering abortion many Humanists consider evidence, the consequences and the rights and wishes of

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<sup>50</sup> Office for National Statistics, Population estimates for the UK, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, last accessed on 22/03/19, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/annualmidyearpopulationestimates/latest>

<sup>51</sup> Minister D. Robertson, 'Abortion, the Church of Scotland and the Media', The Wee Flea, last accessed on 22/03/19, <https://theweeflea.com/2017/08/26/abortion-the-church-of-scotland-and-the-media/>

<sup>52</sup> 'Britain's Abortion Law', Last accessed on 22/03/19, <https://www.bpas.org/get-involved/campaigns/briefings/abortion-law/>

everyone involved in order to find the best course of action that will do the least amount of harm<sup>53</sup>. Many Humanists believe in personal choice and autonomy and would therefore argue it is up to the mother to make an informed decision about her body. Although there is no correct humanist view many currently agree with the UK's laws on abortion. The UK's current law is permissive. This means abortion is not imposed on any one and the ultimate moral choice is up to the individual. Many Humanists have actively campaigned for abortion and a woman's rights since the 1960s. Humanists do have a great respect for life despite not holding the belief that it is 'sacred'. For this reason they believe the debate should be centred on when a foetus gains full human rights. Many Humanists agree this does not happen until well after conception. Although many Humanists would agree that the purposeful killing of a young child or any human being for that matter is morally wrong, many would argue that you cannot class the abortion of a foetus which lacks the ability to think, feel or even survive outside the womb as having the same weight as murder. Due to humanist beliefs on generating happiness and limiting suffering as far as possible, quality of life will generally trump beliefs about the preservation of life. Although, the opinion of the father, doctors and everyone the decision could impact is considered, most humans believe the woman's opinion should take prominence as she is ultimately the person who will have to carry and take care of the unborn baby. Humanists believe that all options should be explored and considered before making an informed decision regarding abortion. Despite this, many Humanists believe abortion should not be used as a common way of avoiding unwanted children and highlight that improved sexual education, easily accessible contraceptives and improved opportunities for young women<sup>54</sup> would help decrease the number of abortions.

Atheists and Humanists doubt the fundamental basis of many religious arguments. Some non-religious people would argue that religious viewpoints are generally based on some idea of 'sacredness' and that this is unhelpful in a situation where either the mother or foetus' life or quality of life is compromised as who can determine which life is more sacred or more valuable to save. Another religious argument follows the idea that we are giving doctors too much power and allowing them to 'play God' which is morally wrong. However, many Humanists and non-religious people would argue that by this logic all medical interventions could be considered 'playing God'. Even something as simple as childhood vaccinations could be thought of as going

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<sup>53</sup> 'A Humanist Discussion on Abortion', last accessed on 22/03/29, <https://humanism.org.uk/humanism/humanism-today/Humanists-talking/humanist-discussion-on-abortion/>

<sup>54</sup> 'A Humanist Discussion on Abortion', last accessed on 22/03/29, <https://humanism.org.uk/humanism/humanism-today/Humanists-talking/humanist-discussion-on-abortion/>

against God's plan. Many doctors have differing views on abortion but most tend to give the mother's health (including her mental health) the most weight when making decisions. Some individuals believe that carrying out abortions goes against a doctor's oath and job. They would argue that a doctor's job is to save lives not end them. However, opposition would argue the key part of their job is to end suffering and acts such as abortion work to help the greater good of society. Many Pro-choice groups raise the point that even if the foetus does have the right to life, the same as any other human being, this right does not mean they have the right to life at the expense of the mother<sup>55</sup>. No human has the right to use another person's body to survive so why should a foetus? We do not force healthy people to donate organs to people who would not survive otherwise. The right to life doesn't imply a right to live by threatening another human being's wellbeing. Bearing child could be considered a threat to this. These arguments highlight the opinion that abortion is in fact not equivalent to murder and question the religious belief that a foetus should be given full human rights from the point of conception.

It could be argued that legalising abortion is not the same as murder and is actually safer and reduces the number of injuries and deaths. The 'WHO' estimates that approximately one-third of maternal deaths are due to complications arising from illegally induced abortions<sup>57</sup>. Each year an estimated 20 million unsafe abortions are performed worldwide, 95% of these are performed in low-income countries<sup>58</sup>. The result of this is that many women and foetuses die or suffer severe injuries due to the illegalisation of abortion. This is also believed to have a much more severe impact on a woman's mental health due to the trauma, guilt and stigma associated with these illegal abortions. Only half of the abortions carried out each year worldwide are safe (legal).<sup>59</sup> Unsafe abortions are one of the leading causes of maternal mortality. According to the 'WHO', every 8 minutes a woman in a developing nation will die of complications arising from an unsafe abortion. This is a major issue that really stems from societies leaving desperate women without education or a solution which results in them feeling that there is no other option. It is important that the stigma surrounding abortion is tackled. It could be

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<sup>55</sup> Abortion rights, '*the National Pro-choice Campaign*', last accessed on 22/03/29, <http://www.abortionrights.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Winning-the-Arguments-Workshop.pdf>

<sup>57</sup> '*Abortion and the safety of women*', last accessed on 22/03/19, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/abortion/mother/safety.shtml>

<sup>58</sup> L. Haddad and N. Nour, '*Unsafe Abortion: Unnecessary Maternal Mortality*', *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, last accessed on 22/03/19, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2709326/>

<sup>59</sup> L. Haddad and N. Nour, '*Unsafe Abortion: Unnecessary Maternal Mortality*', *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, last accessed on 22/03/19, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2709326/>

argued that by condemning abortion and equating it to murder we are actually causing deaths as it is necessary in some situations to actually save the lives of women.

Overall, it is important to ensure that abortions are only conducted in necessary circumstances. Currently in the UK abortions are allowed under set circumstances, for example, if the mother's health or mental health is at risk. However, some would argue abortion could actually have a negative effect on a woman's mental health. Most studies regarding the subject remain inconclusive. In 1994 the royal college of psychiatrists found that a women's risk of developing mental health problems was lesser for those who had carried out an abortion compared to those who had continued the pregnancy. In 2009, however the college changed its position and warned that the guilt of abortion could cause significant mental health problems for women but so could continue pregnancy. This is why it is important women make an informed decision. Abortion is also allowed in instances where the pregnancy is the result of a crime e.g. rape, incest or child abuse. It is difficult to justify that a women or child who has been subjected to a traumatic incident of trauma and abuse should then be expected to take responsibility and care for a child that is a result of their trauma. Abortion is also allowed in cases where the child would have an unacceptable quality of life e.g. in a situation where they would have a life limiting condition. In this case it is extremely important to consider if the family or mother would be able to look after a child which they would likely have to dedicate their life to looking after and taking care of. It is also important to consider if it is morally just to bring a child into the world if it is likely to live a limited life in pain with no chance of living without medication or without constant care. Abortion is also allowed for a number of social issues e.g. poverty. These are mainly considered if the mother herself admits that she doesn't feel able to look after the child properly for example if they would be unable to cope with a child or are too young to properly look after a child. In these situations many people would argue that this is the mother's consequence for not using contraceptive but in reality contraceptive is not always effective and if women are not properly educated is it not a fault of society. It is important to consider that by not allowing abortion we are possibly limiting the lives of both the mother and the child. Adoption is something that is always brought up as a solution or alternative to abortion. However, there is the issue that not every child put up for adoption will be adopted and the child may be put into a care system of foster homes and there is the question of whether this is actually better for them. It is important to consider that even if you would consider abortion the same as murder if due to these beliefs it would be best to compromise the quality of the lives of a foetus and a mother.

### Conclusion

Overall, although issues with the sanctity of life are prominent it is important to remember that although a foetus is living this does not make it a human being. Any plant or organism is technically living but it does not have consciousness and it does not have the right to life. This however should be down to personal opinion over when the individual themselves would be comfortable aborting a foetus. Because the foetus is not viable or sentient before twenty four weeks I would argue its abortion is not equivalent to murder. I agree that the intent and circumstances surrounding the abortion are important to consider however the moral responsibility should be the individual's choice and pressures should not be forced upon young women surrounding their decision. Throughout history it has been shown that the criminalisation of abortion can cause an immense amount of emotional and physical harm to women. It is important that more attention is focused on sexual education worldwide and there is an increased awareness of contraceptive and that is made easily accessible. This would reduce the number of legal and illegal abortions and reduce the emotional effects abortion can have as well as making it less taboo. The idea of intent is extremely important when the issue arises of abortion being the equivalent to murder for both religious and non-religious people. If you imagined a scenario where two men go deer hunting but one man accidentally mistakes his friend for a deer and shoots him. This would not be considered murder, involuntary manslaughter at most, because the shooter believed he was killing a deer, not a real, sentient person. Now comparing this to abortion, if a woman and doctor believe they are killing a non-sentient organism, then they are not committing murder. Considering they were charged with manslaughter, this has to involve criminal negligence, and it is impossible to judge someone as being negligent for believing a fetus is not sentient when we do not know for certain this is true. From the point of view of someone who believes life begins at the point of conception abortion is a horrific killing but legally it cannot be the same as murder. In conclusion, abortion cannot be considered the same as murder legally but it is a decision which has to be made by the individual themselves.