

# Candidate 5 evidence

## To what extent can abortion be viewed as morally acceptable?

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## **Introduction**

It is believed that forms of abortion can be seen throughout history as far back as 1550 BCE<sup>1</sup>, referenced in scriptures such as Egyptian Ebers Papyrus, an ancient Egyptian text focused on medicine and herbal remedies, and acknowledged in early Roman and Greek poetry and artworks. In the modern age, abortion is a completely different procedure from what it was and is much more widely discussed, researched and practiced, although we still consider the age long debate on the moral acceptability of the process, due to the risk placed upon the mother's life and some seeing the act as equivalent to murder.

In the early days of the induced removals of pregnancy, a foetus was not seen as a person with a soul, until the time of "quickening". "Quickening" was when the foetus could be felt moving inside the mother at around the 20-week mark of gestation, and when many believed ensoulment happened, therefore turning the foetus into a person. Before quickening the foetus was seen as part of the mother herself rather than its own being, meaning that any actions taken to remove the pregnancy before quickening would be seen as more a form of surgery for the mother, imposing no ethical query.

Throughout this dissertation I will focus on topics such as what abortion is, the history of abortion, current abortion laws, abortion around the world and disagreements between groups such as "Pro life" and "Pro choice". I will also bring to focus moral issues such as bodily autonomy, the question of personhood, the sanctity of life, and abortion and gender equality, analysed through the religious viewpoints of Islam, Christianity, Catholicism and Buddhism. I will conclude that abortion is completely morally acceptable due to the great amount of suffering that it prevents for many people.

## **Overview of Abortion and UK Laws**

This chapter aims to explore what an abortion is and the process, why one might consider abortion as an option, the history of abortion and current UK laws, with a focus on the moral issue of the question of personhood and when does life begin, as this specific moment in a person's life is a highly debated topic with differing viewpoints.

An abortion is a procedure that ends or terminates a pregnancy. The pregnancy is ended either by taking medicines or having a surgical procedure. During a medical abortion you take two pills, mifepristone and misoprostol, <sup>2</sup>usually 24-48 hours apart, to induce the termination. During a surgical abortion you have a procedure to remove the pregnancy and normally go home soon afterwards.

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<sup>1</sup> [BBC - Ethics - Abortion: Historical attitudes to abortion](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Abortion - What happens - NHS](#)

There are many reasons someone may choose to have an abortion, including financial concerns, the timing of an unplanned pregnancy, relationship status, family pressure and lack of support, rape or incest, toxic relationship (abuse concerns), fetal health (genetic concerns), mother's health (medical risk), mental health concerns, other children, and the fear of negative future impact.

There are a few risks when it comes to having an abortion, and they are safer the earlier they are carried out. Risks include infection of the womb (uterus), some of the pregnancy remaining in the womb, excessive bleeding, damage to the womb or entrance to the womb (cervix) and sepsis. In the UK, abortion laws state that the procedure can only be carried out legally up to 24 weeks into the pregnancy, and that it must be approved independently by two different doctors and performed in an NHS hospital or a place approved by the Secretary of State. On rare occasions an abortion may be performed after 24 weeks gestation, for reasons such as if the mother's life is at risk or if the child would be born severely disabled.

An implication of this is that some people strongly disagree with abortions being able to be performed for a longer period of time if the foetus has a disability, as some people see this as offensive to disabled people, as it implies their lives are worth less than those born without a disability.

On the other hand, some people see this as an act of kindness as disabilities can't always be recognised at an early stage of fetal development, and allowing abortion up until a later date could be seen as preventing someone from living a life of pain or suffering.

The Abortion Act was sponsored by MP David Steel and was legalised in 1967 throughout England, <sup>3</sup>Scotland and Wales, it came into effect on the 27th April 1968.<sup>4</sup>

A moral issue arising from the use of abortions is the question of when does life begin and personhood starts; whether at the point of conception, during pregnancy or at the moment of birth. Some people believe that the question of personhood is crucial in determining the moral value of the foetus.<sup>5</sup> A major ethical debate revolves around whether the embryo has moral status and at what point it should be considered a person with rights. Opinions vary, with some saying life begins at the moment of conception and others arguing for later stages such as viability (the capability of a foetus to survive outside the uterus), or even birth.

An implication of the question of personhood is that for many people it is based solely on opinion, meaning attitudes towards the rights of the foetus and morality of abortion vary greatly from person to person.

Due to the fact that many people have vastly different viewpoints on the question of personhood, I believe that only your opinion should affect any choice you make when it involves your body, nobody else should be able to make a decision for you especially if it is not affecting them directly.

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<sup>3</sup>[Statistics and History of Abortion](#)

<sup>4</sup>[History of Abortion Law in the UK](#)

<sup>5</sup>[https://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/abortion/legal/when\\_1.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/abortion/legal/when_1.shtml)

One religious perspective on the subject of abortion is the Islamic viewpoint. Islamic viewpoints on abortion vary, with many scholars allowing abortion within 120 days of conception, as this is before "ensoulment", under certain circumstances such as if there is serious risk to the mother's health or if there are foetal abnormalities. After ensoulment is believed to have taken place (after 120 days) abortion is prohibited unless the mother's life is in danger, although beliefs differ. In Islam life is considered to be a sacred gift from Allah<sup>6</sup>. The sanctity of life is a key concept, and the deliberate taking of life is generally forbidden as it is believed that we are created in God's image. *"And do not kill the soul which Allah has forbidden, except by right."* (Quran 6:151). An implication of this is that Muslims believe life should be preserved whenever possible, but this does also mean protecting and prioritising the mother's health and wellbeing if and when necessary, if the mother's life was in imminent danger then this would be the only acceptable reason for performing an abortion after 120 days of gestation<sup>7</sup>, however by seeing this as acceptable, some may argue that the foetus' status as a person is still up for debate, however the mother's status as a person is superior as it is already proven.

One non-religious viewpoint on the topic of abortion is that of Act Utilitarians, who believe that the morality of an action depends on the consequences it produces<sup>8</sup>. Jeremy Bentham states *"It is the greatest good for the greatest number which is the measure of right and wrong."* Act utilitarianism's main goal is to minimise suffering and maximise overall happiness, with each action evaluated in each situation<sup>9</sup>. An implication of this is that if an abortion leads to an overall greater amount of happiness, by preventing future suffering of mother, child or anyone else involved, then it would be viewed as morally justified. In the eyes of act utilitarians, any choice that maximises overall wellbeing and happiness would be considered the right one. However, this can sometimes be a difficult viewpoint as it is not always easy to assess how the consequences of an action will affect a situation in the long term, and it can be hard to know what suffering will be caused as a result as no one can truly determine or definitively prove at which point exactly life begins and personhood starts.

Throughout this chapter I have concluded I believe that at the point of conception I would not view the embryo as a human being or a person with rights, compared to how I would with a fully formed and viable infant at the moment of birth, yet I cannot say for certain at which moment in between these two a foetus truly becomes a human being.

<sup>6</sup> [Understanding Abortion Through the Lens of Islam | The Review of Religions](#)

<sup>7</sup> [BBC - Religions - Islam: Abortion](#)

<sup>8</sup> [ethics - What does utilitarianism say on the topic of abortion and timescales? - Philosophy Stack Exchange](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Abortion](#)

### **Abortion Worldwide and Throughout History**

Throughout this chapter I will explore the differing and diverse viewpoints and attitudes from around the world on the topic of abortion, and how this brings into question moral issues such as the rights of the parents (more specifically to what extent the father should have rights, and if so what can his say determine), the moral responsibility of each person involved, as well as abortion and the topic of gender equality, seen as necessary healthcare for the mother in some situations, yet possibly seen as a weaponized procedure in the viewpoint of those opposed to female foeticide.

Across the world there are vastly varying opinions on the topic of abortion with some countries such as America legalising the procedure in 1973, yet the Supreme Court overturning Roe V Wade in some states as of 2022, to countries such as India's female foeticide problem. Over 100 years ago in 1920, Russia became the first country in the world to legalise abortion.<sup>10</sup> In almost all European countries abortion is legal until around the 3 month mark, with exceptions of countries such as Poland and Malta that maintain highly restrictive laws. In Asia you can find access to abortion in countries including China, India, Thailand, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and Vietnam, with various different rules and regulations.

A basic definition of female foeticide is a gender selective abortion where a female foetus is illegally terminated solely based on the reasoning that the foetus is an unwanted girl. Female infanticide is a similar problem across the globe but is more commonly seen in places such as India and China, with the killing taking place after the birth of the child, usually as a newborn.<sup>11</sup> The reasoning behind this is usually cultural, rather than religious. It was found that female foeticide cases skyrocketed after the one child per family policy was introduced in China. In these cultures women may be seen as subservient to men, as it is believed women's role in society is solely domestic. Men may be seen as more employable, with a larger income prospective than their female counterparts, meaning that in some cases female foeticide may be put down to financial reasoning. This became an issue within countries such as India as well as China, leading to precautions being taken to prevent this practice. According to an Indian national census in 2011 there were only 914 females for every 1000 males in the 0-6 year age group. Although the Indian government implemented the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act 1994, prohibiting sex selection, evidence shows that sex selection remains a common practise among the affluent and educated in India.

However, only the pregnant woman's consent is necessary to perform the abortion procedure. Granted she is over the age of 18 years, the mother's parents do not need to consent and neither does the father of the unborn foetus. An implication of

<sup>10</sup> [A brief history of abortion – from ancient Egyptian herbs to fighting stigma today](#)

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[https://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/abortion/medical/infanticide\\_1.shtml#:~:text=Societies%20that%20practise%20female%20infanticide,family's%20social%20and%20economic%20stability.](https://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/abortion/medical/infanticide_1.shtml#:~:text=Societies%20that%20practise%20female%20infanticide,family's%20social%20and%20economic%20stability.)

this is that even if the pregnant woman was coerced into terminating the pregnancy by her partner or family members due to the fact it was a female foetus, the blame would most likely fall on her alone. An implication of the father not having the right to demand an abortion does also mean that the mother has the capability to refuse the termination if it goes against her best wishes, however this also means the mother can choose to terminate a pregnancy against the father's wishes, which could be emotionally distressing for both parties. A moral issue arising from this is abortion and gender equality.

A religious viewpoint on this topic is that of Buddhists. Buddhists believe that suffering exists everywhere, and that we should therefore reduce it wherever possible. Buddhists also believe in taking personal responsibility for any consequences their actions may have, and the kamma this may generate for them.<sup>12</sup> To quote the Dalai Lama on this subject, *"Of course, abortion, from a Buddhist viewpoint, is an act of killing and is negative, generally speaking. But it depends on the circumstances... I think abortion should be approved or disapproved according to each circumstance"*-(28/11/1993).<sup>13</sup> An implication of this is that there is no set viewpoint on abortion for Buddhists, as it was never directly acknowledged in any of the Buddha's teachings. However, there is no difference in Buddhist teachings between men and women<sup>14</sup>, and both are seen as equals in the sense that they both have the capacity to reach enlightenment, meaning that women would be viewed as in control of their own decisions and the consequences of their own actions.

A non-religious perspective on this moral issue is that of Immanuel Kant's philosophy. Kant's beliefs follow the Categorical Imperative, meaning that people should act in a way that can be universally applied, a simple explanation of this would be before you choose to make a decision or act in a certain way, you should ask yourself if you would like to live in a world where everyone acted this way. *"Act that your principle of action might safely be made a law for the whole world"*, - Immanuel Kant. This way of thinking encourages people to consider their actions and the morality of them. Kant also emphasised the importance of never mistreating someone by using them as a means to an end, what he meant by this was to never exploit someone just to get what you want. Another important factor in Kantian ethics is respect for autonomy, in this case considering not only the pregnant individual's autonomy but also that of the foetus. An implication of this is that if you were to consider the foetus as a rational being, those following Kantian ethics may view having an abortion as violating the "ends to a means" principle as you would be choosing to have the procedure for your own benefit. However, I disagree with this idea as I believe if a mother is not ready to provide and care for a child then the abortion would also be beneficial to the foetus and potential child as it prevents

<sup>12</sup> [Buddhist Perspectives on the Abortion Debate](#)

<sup>13</sup> [As a Buddhist, should I support the pro-choice view on abortion?](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Gender Equality In Buddhism | European Proceedings](#)

future negative consequences. On the other hand, Kantian ethics may view the procedure as morally acceptable under the circumstances if it were to negatively compromise the autonomy of the mother, such as if the pregnancy resulted from a situation that the mother was forced into. Then again I believe that abortion could be seen as justifiable under Kant's philosophy, by applying the universal law, meaning that everyone would have access to make the choice whether or not they wanted to have the abortion, not that everyone equally had to have the abortion.

To conclude this chapter, I believe it is morally right that only the mother's consent is needed to perform the abortion, and the father should not have control over what is done as it does not affect his autonomy. I also believe that if the abortion is done to prevent future suffering it is done for an honourable reason, making it completely morally acceptable in my opinion.

### **Pro-Life VS Pro-Choice**

Throughout this chapter subjects such as the Pro-Life vs Pro-choice movement will be explored, introducing moral issues such as the right to life vs the right to choose, the sanctity of life, and bodily autonomy, defined as the rights of an individual to decide and control what happens to their own body.

Currently 20 American states have a full ban on abortions, including Alabama, Idaho, Texas, South Dakota, Missouri, Kentucky, Indiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, Oklahoma, Arkansas, West Virginia and Louisiana, the majority of which have no exceptions even in the case of rape or incest. There are very few alternatives to abortion, leaving the mother to either have the baby and make the difficult decision to put the child up for foster care or adoption, or to just have and provide care for the baby, which isn't always an option in everyone's best interest.<sup>15</sup>

The history of Roe v Wade goes back to a case in Texas, 1969, when 25 year old Norma McCorvey (under the pseudonym of "Jane Roe") began to challenge criminal abortion laws, stating she was pregnant with her 3rd child that came to be as a result of rape, requesting that women gained access to safe and legal abortions. In position of defence of the anti-abortion laws at the time was Henry Wade, thus the case became known as "Roe v Wade". McCorvey argued that abortion laws in states such as Texas and Georgia contradicted the US Constitution as they violated a woman's right to privacy. In 1973 the case had fought its way to the US Supreme Court, where the court justices ruled 7-2 that the government did not possess the ability to prohibit abortions. This case resulted in women gaining absolute access to an abortion in the first 3 months of a pregnancy, access to abortion with some government regulation in the second trimester, and restrictions or bans on abortions within the third

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<sup>15</sup><https://www.mentalhealthy.co.uk/other/features/unplanned-pregnancy-the-alternatives-to-abortion.html>

trimester. On the 24th June 2022, Roe v Wade was overturned and history began to reverse. On this day millions of women lost access to safe and legal abortions. This brings into question the topic of bodily autonomy- defined as the right to make decisions about your own body, life and future. This includes the right for competent adults to make informed decisions about their own medical care.

Across the world, but most controversially and recently within the USA, there have been ongoing debates about the right to life vs the right to choose. This is argued by Pro-Choice advocates and Pro-Life groups<sup>16</sup>. Pro-Choicers are supporters of the notion that women should have the ability to control their own lives and choices, and decide if and when they will bear children. Pro-choice groups oppose any restrictions in women's current rights and access to abortions, and aim to better the experience of abortion, ensuring that all women have access to safe, legal and free abortion. An example of an established Pro-Choice group is the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL).

On the other end of the spectrum, Pro-Lifers believe that all humans, born and unborn, have a right to life, and they wish for full legal protection for embryos and fetuses. A lot of Pro-Life supporters put their beliefs down to their religion, believing that it goes against God's will and the natural law. One example of a well known Pro-Life group is the National Right to Life Committee.

In February 2025, Police Scotland arrested a 74 year old woman who was part of a Pro-Life protest group, in the Hardgate Road area of Glasgow, for "breach of the exclusion zone". This arrest was the first in Scotland for this type of protest.

A moral issue arising throughout all these examples is the debate between the right to life and the right to choose which raises the argument of the right, mentioned previously, of bodily autonomy, a person's right to control what is to be done, or not to be done to their body.

An implication of pro-lifers voting to put policies in place in favour of their beliefs, not only controlling a huge aspect of other people's lives, whilst they themselves remain unaffected, it interferes with other people's bodily autonomy and even goes as far as to restrict access to vital medical attention for many women. One example of medical negligence is the case of Josseli Barnica, a woman who died on the 3rd September 2021 in Texas, after being denied essential healthcare after she miscarried, leaving her to die from an infection.<sup>17</sup> An implication of this is that without the right to choose, women may be forced to carry pregnancies that could potentially cause them great harm not only mentally or financially, but also physically, which could lead to illness and potentially even death. I believe this is a flawed system and that in no case should a woman be denied medical attention solely due to the circumstances of her pregnancy, as I think a foetus is not yet a being and therefore their "life", or

<sup>16</sup><https://prochoice.org/statement-on-heartbreaking-death-of-josseli-barnica/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://pressley.house.gov/2024/10/31/pressleys-statement-on-texas-woman-who-died-after-being-denied-miscarriage-care/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CJosseli%20died%20at%20a%20hospital,to%20end%20was%20in%20miscarriage.>

potential to become a person, should not be put above the right to life of the mother, who herself is already a person.

I personally believe this reversing of history is a massive step back in the progression of society and rights for women, and taking away a person's right to their own bodily autonomy is never done in favour of the person, I believe it is a tactic used in an attempt to assert control over women.

A moral issue arising from this is the argument of The Sanctity of Life. This stance is built on the belief that all life is sacred and should be protected, especially human life as it is believed we were built in God's image. *"Let us make man in our image."*

**Genesis 1:26**

One religious viewpoint that agrees with this moral issue is that of Christians, specifically Catholics. An implication of this is that Catholics believe that abortion cannot be justified under any circumstances as it goes against the natural law and the belief that only God should possess the power in choosing when a life begins and ends. This belief is built on the fact that Catholics are taught life begins at conception, a consequence of this is that abortion could be seen as equivalent to murder in their eyes. *"I declare that direct abortion, that is, abortion willed as an end or as a means, always constitutes a grave moral disorder, since it is the deliberate killing of an innocent human being."* -**Pope John Paul II, Evangelium Vitae, 1995.** An implication of this is that under no circumstances would a person following the Catholic faith choose to have an abortion or agree with a person's choice to have one, they believe this is sinful and would have a negative impact on their relationship with God. However, this then could be argued that by taking away a person's right to choose to have an abortion, it takes away their gift from God of freewill, which then itself would go against God's wishes, and bring a negative impact within their relationship with God as they have chosen to restrict another one of his creations' abilities to make their own decision. I disagree with this viewpoint as I fail to agree with the idea that a foetus is a formed human being, with intelligent thoughts or feelings. Because of this I would not view the process of abortion as even similar to killing or murder, and I completely disagree with the idea that there should be consequences for someone who chooses to have one. I agree with the idea that life is precious, however, the argument of the Sanctity of Life is only convincing for those who wholeheartedly agree and believe in the existence of God, and that humans were created in His image, which is an idea that I disagree with as I believe there is no definitive proof of this.

A non-religious viewpoint on this is that of Humanists. Humanists disagree with the belief of the Sanctity of Life. They believe in the value of human life, but not with the idea that humans were created in God's image. Spokesperson from **Humanist Society Scotland, Ronit Quayle** said *"Abortion is a private decision, between a pregnant person and their doctor. Forcing somebody to be pregnant against their*

*wishes and violating their bodily autonomy is barbaric.*" Humanists value empathy<sup>18</sup>, happiness and personal choice. An implication of this is that they are likely to take a pro-choice stance on the issue of abortion and agree with the solution that causes the least amount of suffering, although they would choose to evaluate each situation individually to come to a confirmed conclusion on what the best course of action would be to take.

To conclude, I agree with the viewpoint of following through with the choice that causes the least amount of suffering. I also agree with the idea that this is a personal decision and one only to be made by who it affects directly, and that nobody's differing opinion should be able to prevent anyone's access to the procedure if it is seen as necessary for their situation, or if it is what they wish.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, although the moral issues surrounding it should be considered, I do believe that the process of abortion is completely justifiable due to the great range of situations that can and do occur, where having the abortion prevents a great amount of suffering or pain for many parties involved, most importantly being the mother or carrier of the child, and future child itself. I maintain the belief that it has been seen many times throughout the world, that by banning, restricting or criminalising abortions it only reduces the number of safe abortions, not the number of procedures overall, and encourages women to seek out unsafe abortion care therefore putting their lives at risk. Whether medically, surgically or through herbal remedies women throughout history have always found a way of performing abortions on themselves or to help in aiding others. Because of this I believe it is a necessary part of women's healthcare, threatened only by the spread of misinformation and lack of education on the subject. I believe it is a woman's right to have access to adequate healthcare and a support system without facing retribution, therefore preventing unsafe abortions, and many of the other negative implications that the problem of abortion bans cause to arise, including the increase of poverty, pregnancy-related deaths, impact on family and child development as well as the fact that it violates human rights<sup>19</sup> and ignores the reality of many women's situations.<sup>20</sup> To conclude, I believe that policies should be put in place to help support and protect women, and that sexual reproductive and health services should be made more easily accessible worldwide, as well as increasing the quantity and quality of education on the subject.

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<sup>18</sup> [Abortion humanist perspective](#)

<sup>19</sup> [5 Reasons to Oppose Abortion Bans](#)

<sup>20</sup> [The negative health implications of restricting abortion access | Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health](#)

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