Synthesis Chapter

This final chapter applies the various views in the book to a specific moral issue – the hotly disputed topic of abortion.

We'll here be concerned with the *morality* of abortion, not whether it should be *legal*.

A nonconsequentialist argument

Killing innocent human life is seri-
ously wrong.
A fetus is innocent human life.
∴ Killing a fetus is seriously wrong.

- But "human" can mean various things, for example: (1) a born or unborn member of *Homo sapiens*, (2) a born member of *Homo sapiens*, (3) an animal who reasons. This argument must use "human" in sense 1.

- And then premise 1 means "Killing innocent *born or unborn members of Homo sapiens* is seriously wrong." But why accept this? Why not accept that a right to life begins later (perhaps with individuation, brain waves, viability, birth, or rationality)? Moral intuitions here vary greatly.

A consequentialist argument

Whatever maximizes good consequences is right.
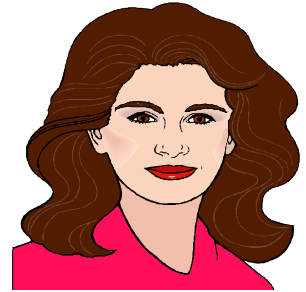Many abortions maximize good consequences.
∴ Many abortions are right.

- But do abortions have bad consequences too (by harming women psychologically and promoting callous attitudes about killing)? And isn't the consequentialist premise deeply flawed?

- Rule utilitarianism instead asks: "What rule about killing has the best consequences for society to follow?" This may go against abortion.
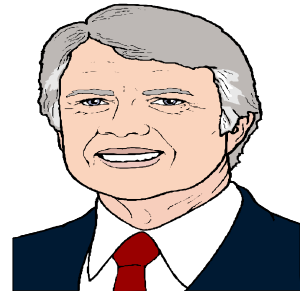
Metaethics asks:

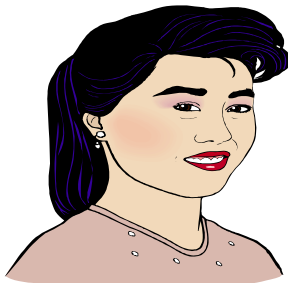"How should we pick our moral principles?"

Supernaturalism

Cultural relativism

Intuitionism

Subjectivism & emotivism

Ideal Observer & Prescriptivism

The golden-rule consistency argument

> To consistently approve of an abortion, you must now approve of the idea of your mother having had an abortion when pregnant with you in an imagined identical situation.

- In most cases, someone approving of an abortion won't be consistent.
- People may be consistent in a few extreme cases. The clearest cases involve the principle of **double effect** (e.g., a pregnant woman with cancer needs chemotherapy to save her life, which would kill the unborn as an unintended side effect).

Double effect

Natural-law thinkers, while generally seeing abortion as seriously wrong, tend to allow some indirect abortions when the mother's life is at risk, appealing to the *principle of double effect*. This says that under certain conditions it may be permissible to do something with a morally good intended effect and a morally bad unintended side effect.

Suppose that Judy is pregnant but needs chemotherapy to save her life from cancer. This can be permissible, according to double effect, even if the unborn child will likely die as an unintended result. But killing the unborn directly (e.g., by crushing its head) would be wrong.

Abortion and virtue

Janet Smith examined recorded interviews of many women who chose abortion. She's disturbed by their moral character. The women are typically confused, irresponsible, and poor at making decisions; one in three are repeat abortions. She takes this to give some indication (but not a proof) that abortion is morally bad.

Abortion and violinists

Judith Thomson compares aborting an unintended child to removing an unconscious violinist from your circulatory system (his friends, without your knowledge or consent, attached him to save his life). She argues that you have no duty to preserve the life of the violinist (or the unborn child) at great personal cost.

Abortion and feminism

Sidney Callahan argues that women should oppose abortion. She criticizes four pro-abortion arguments. And she appeals to a Rawlsian argument; if we picked the moral rules for our society but didn't know our place in it (including whether we were an unborn child), we'd choose a rule that protects our life against being aborted.

She thinks abortion-permissiveness hurts women politically (since it legitimizes irresponsibility about child support) and psychologically (since women by nature shun violence and favor peaceful solutions). And she argues that a committed model of sexuality is better for women at every stage (adolescence, motherhood, and old age).

Summary of the book

- Moral philosophy: reasoning about the ultimate questions of morality.

- Metaethics: "What is the nature and methodology of ethics?" → CR, SB, IO, SN, IN, EM, PR, and GR consistency.

- Normative ethics: "What basic norms ought we to live by?" → Consequentialism and nonconsequentialism.

- GR gives the best summary of morality: "Treat others as you want to be treated."