Is your Opinion on Abortion Wrong? Critical Thinking & Abortion

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People with "thought bubbles" over their heads, suggestive of their opinions.

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For the past few years in the United States, almost daily there's a headline about new proposed abortions restrictions. Conservatives cheer, liberals despair.

But who is right here? Should abortion be generally legal or should it be banned? Is it usually immoral or is it usually not wrong at all? These same questions, of course, are asked in other countries.

To many people, answers to these questions seem *obvious*, and people with different or contrary answers are, well, just wrong.

But how can we know? In particular, could anyone *know* that abortion is not wrong and should be legal? If so, *how*? And how would anyone effectively, persuasively, communicate that knowledge?

One important set of answers depends on this idea: *critical thinking*. Critical thinking can help people know, not merely believe or feel, that their perspectives on issues are true or correct, and it can help them persuade others to understand and accept that knowledge.

We are philosophy professors who teach courses in critical thinking and its applications to ethical, political, scientific, and legal issues. In our 2019 open-access book, *Thinking Critically About Abortion: Why Most Abortions Aren't Wrong & Why All Abortions Should be Legal*, we apply well-confirmed methods of critical thinking to the most discussed arguments about abortion.
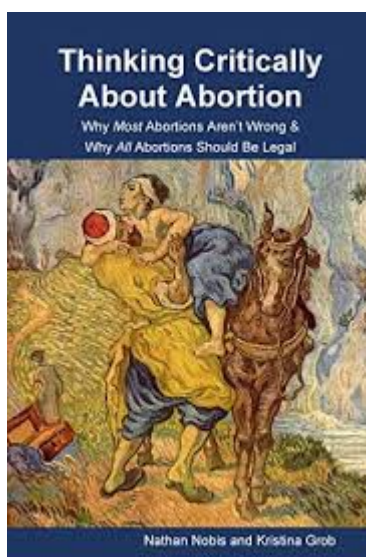
"Thinking Critically About Abortion" book cover

Critical thinking can be operationalized as *skills*. Three key critical thinking skills involve *defining words*, *identifying the structures of arguments*, and *evaluating explanations*.

Understanding these and other critical thinking skills can only help improve conversations and advocacy about abortion. Let's see them in action.

Definitions

Philosophers going back as far as Plato in Ancient Greece have taught that people can think critically about a topic only if they define their terms well.

Good definitions are, first, informative.

Many pro-choice people define abortion as the "termination of a pregnancy." But what is a "termination" and how is it achieved? This definition doesn't explain that. Defining abortion as "killing a fetus to end a pregnancy by medical means" is better because it explains more. While some people react to this definition with the thought that it implies that abortion is wrong, critical thinking shows that it doesn't, as we'll see below.

Good definitions also are not biased.

Many pro-life advocates define abortion as the "murder of a fetus." This definition is bad because "murder" often means "illegal killing," and so where abortion is legal, it *cannot* be murder: that fact at least complicates many pro-life claims.

"Murder" also often means "wrongful killing," which assumes that abortion is wrong and that you can just look up the word to know this. But nobody can responsibly just *assume* their position on this debated issue. And nobody can "prove" they are right with just the dictionary: arguments are needed.

Definitions can be better and worse in many ways. Critical thinking helps us understand this, which improves communication, discussion, and debate.

Arguments

Everyone has reasons for their opinions, even if they are only their feelings. But critical thinkers want good arguments, so how can anyone tell whether an argument is good or bad? We care about this in science and medicine, and we should care about this here also. How can anyone tell if their beliefs are supported by good reasons?

Logic — the study of arguments — helps. Logic shows the steps in anyone's reasoning. It reveals any assumed premises that are essential to an argument but aren't stated outright. This is important since assumptions, like overtly stated premises, are sometimes not true.

For example, many argue that abortion is wrong simply because fetuses are "human." The assumed premise is that "it is wrong to kill anything human." But how is "human" defined? If "human" means biologically human then it would be wrong to kill human cells like skin or hair cells. But nobody thinks this is wrong.

So "human" must mean "human beings" or "humans," not merely "biologically human," and the premise is that "it's wrong to kill humans or human beings," not just anything merely human. But what are the differences among these very similar terms, and what difference does this make to the argument? (Answers: many! A lot!).

Critical thinking involves asking questions like these about the subtle meanings of terms — even those that initially seem painfully obvious — to ensure that everyone in the conversation is on the exact same issue. These questions are necessary to determine whether the premises of arguments are true or false, a core task when evaluating arguments.

Another valid pattern of reasoning involves seeing if a premise leads to a false claim: if it does, the premise is itself false.

Some pro-choice advocates sometimes are not careful and claim that "women have the right to do *whatever* they want with their bodies." But if this exact premise were true, women would have the right to use their bodies to murder born people. Since women clearly lack that right, *that* premise can't justify abortion. An improved, more-carefully stated premise could though, and critical thinking helps find that exact premise.

Pro-life advocates often argue that fetuses have "the right to life" and so abortion is wrong. But how is that right defined? Is it the right to everything needed for life? Does it include the right to someone else's body, even if they don't consent to that use?

These are questions that advocates of this argument usually don't ask. If they are asked and answered, these answers are usually not supported with much in the way of developed reasons. But if the premise that "fetuses have the right to life" *does not* lead to

believing that "fetuses have a right to the pregnant woman's body," that common argument against abortion is weak, and it's important that this is common knowledge.

Many common arguments about abortion are mere soundbites and slogans: false and dubious claims are found on all sides of the debate. It's nobody's mere "opinion" that these are often bad arguments: critical thinking skills demonstrate that.

Explanations

One strategy for engaging the ethics of abortion is to start with an uncontroversial moral fact — that it's wrong to kill children and adults. Critical thinkers then try to find the best explanation why this is so and see whether that explanation applies to fetuses, making abortion wrong also.

One common explanation of why it's wrong to kill children and adults, or why human beings have human rights, is simply that they are *human beings*.

A critical thinker, however, will observe that saying it's wrong to kill human beings *because* we're human beings, or we have human rights *because* we are human, doesn't explain anything: these are circular, uninformative explanations. Humans know they are human; the question is why that would give humans rights.

A better explanation is that killing children and adults is wrong because it prevents them from experiencing their futures.

Does this explanation apply to fetuses? To answer, fetuses must be compared with adults and children. One difference is that adults and children are aware of their futures — at least, they have been aware of something — whereas early fetuses have never been aware of anything.

Does this mean that fetuses don't have futures like children's and adults' futures? Some argue they do not and so the best explanation why it's wrong to kill born people doesn't apply to fetuses. However, fetuses could be wrong to kill because of *different* explanations than what apply to born humans: what could these be?

Engaging these discussions requires thinking critically about many challenging, complex issues. Critical thinking often isn't quick or easy! Beyond applying skills, people have to

admit that their reasons might be bad and their opinions wrong, which is often difficult.

Applications

Many responses to abortion are not based on critical thinking: they involve bad definitions, false assumptions, inadequate explanations and sometimes worse. Recognizing this is a step toward holding better-informed opinions, which in turn promotes better arguments that *should* persuade and make a positive impact, in many ways.

The COVID crisis has, again, made clear the need for good evidence, careful analysis, and informed communication about important issues. These standards apply to our thinking, reasoning, and arguing about *everything*, including vitally important ethical and legal issues like abortion, and any advocacy concerning it.

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