

TRANSCRIPT

An Undeceptions podcast.

John Dickson:

We are talking about abortion in this episode, and occasionally I'll mention sexual abuse and violence. Nothing graphic, I promise. But some listeners may find what follows distressing. Be safe.

John Dickson:

Consider this thought experiment ...

Speaker 2:

I woke up one morning to find myself in bed next to an unconscious violinist; a famous unconscious violinist. He'd been found to have a fatal kidney ailment, and the Society of Music Lovers canvassed all available medical records and found that I alone had the right blood type to help him. So they kidnapped me. And last night, the violinist's circulatory system was plugged into mine so that now my kidneys are being used to extract poisons from his blood as well as my own.

Speaker 2:

The director of the hospital comes in and explains ...

Mark:

Look, we're sorry the Society of Music Lovers did this to you. We would never have permitted it if we had known. But still, they did it. And now the violinist is plugged into you. To unplug you would be to kill him. But never mind, it's only for nine months; by then he'll have recovered and we can safely unplug him from you.

John Dickson:

What should our surprised hospital patient do? Does she lie in bed with the violinist connected to her for nine months? Surely it's unreasonable to expect her to support another life without her consent? Every life matters of course, but it's her body that the other life is drawing on. She has the right to unplug the violinist, whatever the consequences.

John Dickson:

That's the thought experiment offered in a groundbreaking article about abortion by the American philosopher, Judith Jarvis Thomson. The article is from the journal *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, in 1971, and it's titled *A Defense Of Abortion*. Thomson revolutionized the debate around abortion, launching arguments particularly about bodily autonomy, that continue and prevail to this day.

John Dickson:

Before Thomson, the philosophical debate about abortion focused more on the question of whether a fetus is a person. If a fetus is just a clump of cells there's no problem, but if it's a person it's more tricky. We all know you're not meant to kill persons. But Thomson argued that even if we do think of a fetus as a person abortion can still be viewed as morally acceptable, just as it would be morally acceptable to unplug yourself from the hypothetical violinist who was drawing on your body against your wishes. The right of a fetus, even if it is a person, can't trump a woman's right to be in control of her own body.

John Dickson:

Thomson's bodily autonomy argument is powerful, probably the most powerful pro-choice argument there is. And we'll return to it again. For now though, let me admit that I am nervous about this episode; probably more nervous about this one than I was for last season's closer on racism. We're going to give the pro-choice arguments, the arguments in favor of abortion, a really good run.

John Dickson:

Abortion is overwhelmingly accepted in the countries where this podcast is listened to, so it's fair to say these arguments are dominant or at least they'll sound familiar. But we're also going to road test the best pro-life arguments and see if they stack up. These arguments are less familiar and, as a result, less compelling in the public square. But if we're successful in this episode we'll at least convince you that the case against abortion, the pro-life case, isn't as dumb or mean as it's often portrayed to be, and nor does it depend on religious dogma. But we'll see how we go. I'm sure you'll let me know. I'm John Dickson, and this is Undeceptions.

John Dickson:

Undeceptions is brought to you by Zondervan Academic's new book, *The Global Church: The First Eight Centuries*, by Donald Fairbairn. Every episode, at Undeceptions, we try and explore some aspect of life, faith, history, culture or ethics, that's either much misunderstood or mostly forgotten. With the help of people who know what they're talking about, we'll be trying to deceive ourselves and let the truth out.

John Dickson:

Okay. I'm talking with Margaret Somerville, known as Margo, or Professor Somerville to us lower beings. Margo, hasn't the issue of abortion been resolved in favor of abortion rights, and so any form of the pro-life argument is on the wrong side of history?

Margaret Somerville:

I think that a lot of people think it has been resolved, people who are pro-choice and feel that they have accomplished what they wanted to do; which was to decriminalize it. But I don't think that that's the end of the matter at all.

John Dickson:

That's Margaret Somerville, currently Professor of Bioethics at the University of Notre Dame here in Sydney, after many years as a professor in both the law and medicine faculties at Canada's prestigious

McGill University. Margaret ... or Margot, as she kept on telling me to call her ... is the author of zillions of articles and a number of really important books, including the 2000 book that first introduced her to me, *The Ethical Canary: Science, Society, and the Human Spirit*.

John Dickson:

I spoke to her, in-between Sydney lockdowns, in her gorgeous home, surrounded by some of the best First Nations art I've ever seen.

Margaret Somerville:

And my own personal approach to abortion is that abortion is always, and I believe will remain always, a very, very serious ethical issue.

John Dickson:

A very serious ethical issue. Look, before we head too far down this difficult road I want to acknowledge that I know there's a lot of political and legislative stuff going on around this issue right now, especially in the US. And we're going to put some links to a bunch of relevant articles in the show notes. But this episode is not timed to coincide with all that legal and political stuff. And, perhaps disappointingly for some, this is not an episode about the law, it's about ethics.

John Dickson:

As Professor Somerville says, abortion is a serious ethical issue, whatever our political and legal views. The fact that something is ethically wrong doesn't necessarily mean it should be illegal, just as the fact that something is already legal doesn't make it ethically right. So when I talk about pro-life arguments in this episode, I mean the ethical, philosophical arguments for preserving the life of the fetus. And when I talk about pro-choice arguments, I mean the ethical, philosophical arguments for a woman's right to decide whether or not to continue the pregnancy.

John Dickson:

And yes, you'll notice I'm using the word fetus instead of baby, because it seems to me that's the standard way of talking in the ethical and medical literature, even though I totally accept the natural instinct to call it a baby. Margaret, however, is very comfortable speaking, as an ethicist, of the baby in the womb.

Margaret Somerville:

I think the main focus in abortion is not the baby. The main focus is the woman and her body and her right to control both her body and her life, and how having a baby interferes not just with her body but also with her life.

Margaret Somerville:

And what we do then, in the pro-choice, is we put the spotlight on the woman and we barely mention the baby, because the baby kind of disappears. And we look at the woman, we look at her needs and

desires and that. And we sympathize with her, she's in a situation where she's panicking about things and worried about her future, and in some cases she might be subject to domestic violence. And we know that women who are pregnant are more likely to be subject to domestic violence.

Margaret Somerville:

But then, if we're pro-life, what we do, we put the main spotlight on the baby and we say, "Hey, wait a minute. What do we owe to this little guy?"

John Dickson:

My other guest today is Dr. Emma Wood. She's an adjunct lecturer at Campion College and a research fellow with the think tank, Women's Forum Australia. Her doctoral research was in philosophy, specifically meta-ethics; that's the high-level analysis of how we justify what is and isn't ethical.

John Dickson:

I asked her to give me the rundown on the bodily autonomy argument for abortion.

Dr. Emma Wood:

Here's the really interesting thing about this argument ... as its most thoughtful proponents make the argument ... they're not actually trying to argue that a woman's right to the use of her own body trumps the fetus's right to life in any way, rather the argument they make is that it circumscribes it. It specifies the scope of a person's right to life.

Dr. Emma Wood:

The basic idea behind the bodily autonomy argument is that having the right to life does not entail that you have the right to the means of sustaining your life in all possible circumstances. Consider, for instance, the possibility that you may be drowning in the ocean. I may have the capacity to rescue you if I'm observing you drowning in the water.

Dr. Emma Wood:

Let's assume, for argument's sake, that you're not a particularly good swimmer. Let's say that you have a 90% chance of drowning if I don't jump in and try and haul you out of the water. Let's say that, if I do jump in and try to haul you out, I offer you life-saving assistance. Let's say your chances of survival go up to 50%. So they've gone from 10 to 50%. Now, let's say they even go to 60%. Most people would still regard it as a supererogatory act on my part, to jump in and save you. Obviously-

John Dickson:

A supererogatory just means doing more than mere duty requires. Philosophers love the term, but so do some theologians actually.

Dr. Emma Wood:

... Obviously, there's going to be some small risk to me in jumping in and trying to save you. Most people would still consider that, by jumping in and saving you and offering you life saving assistance, I'm going above and beyond the call of duty. Even if the total cost and benefits in question would favor me jumping in, we'd still regard it as not obligatory. We'd still regard me as having a right to refuse to offer you life-saving assistance.

Dr. Emma Wood:

Now, this kind of reasoning applies to the abortion debate as well, in the bodily autonomy argument. Because the bodily autonomy argument is that offering your body to a fetus, to sustain that fetus, is an act of supererogatory life-saving assistance on a woman's part.

Dr. Emma Wood:

Now, if it's supererogatory, if it goes above and beyond the call of duty, that means a woman has the right not to do it. In other words, she has the right to abort, should she want to decline to offer this life-saving assistance. So-

John Dickson:

You may have picked, that's Emma's version of the famous violinist thought experiment. You have a right not to put your body on the line for another person.

Dr. Emma Wood:

... So I just want to get clear about what the argument is before saying what I think is wrong with it. What I think is wrong with this argument ... I think there are a few things wrong with it ... firstly, in most situations where you may or may not decline to give assistance to someone, in most cases in which a person's having a right to life doesn't entail the right to the means of sustaining it, in most of those cases the potential rescuer, so to speak, has not done anything to put the person in harm's way.

Dr. Emma Wood:

But in consensual sex, we know that's not the case. Unlike life-saving organ donation ... which is what pregnancy is often likened to ... in consensual sex, the baby is dependent on your body because you have engaged in the very activity that is biologically ordered to bring that life into existence. And even if contraception is used, a contraception doesn't change the fact that, biologically, the function of sex is to bring a new life into existence. So to then deny that life the dependence on your body, I think is to live in denial of one's own retrospective responsibility for this life. That's the first reason I think the argument fails.

John Dickson:

So on the analogy, this person in the water was first in your boat, with you?

finmateDr. Emma Wood:

Yeah. Maybe I threw you in, off the pier, to start with. So maybe I do have a duty to rescue you, yes.

Dr. Emma Wood:

Now, obviously, rape is going to complicate that conversation quite a bit. And it is interesting to note that even the most ardent pro-choice philosophers, such as Michael Tooley, think that the bodily autonomy argument fails to secure the permissibility of abortion for consensual sex. They say it might work in the case of rape, but it's not going to work in the case of consensual sex due to this responsibility objection, as it's known. There's a second reason-

John Dickson:

Michael Tooley was Professor of Philosophy at the University of Chicago. He wrote a book on abortion and infanticide in the 1980s. It's been really influential in the ethical case for abortion. Tooley argues that an entity can't possess a right to life unless it has the capacity to desire its continued existence. Since a fetus obviously lacks the capacity to desire its own existence, it lacks a right to life.

John Dickson:

Now, you might be wondering what that says about the newborn baby or the coma patient, both of which also lack the capacity to desire their continued existence. But we'll return to that later.

Dr. Emma Wood:

... There's a second reason why I think the analogy fails though, and maybe this is an even more fundamental reason. I think a second reason why the analogy fails is because most cases in which you have the right to deny a person life-saving existence, most situations where that is the case is because there is already something that is threatening the existence of their life, there is already something that is compromising their biological flourishing or threatening their biological flourishing. Which is exactly why it makes sense to talk about assistance as life-saving assistance, it implies that there's already a threat in place.

Dr. Emma Wood:

To describe this support that your body offers in pregnancy as life-saving assistance is a very misleading way to describe it because being a fetus is not like having a disease, being a fetus is not like being under the threat, it's not having your ordinary biological flourishing placed under threat. It's a part of standard human flourishing. Every one of us who has come into existence has had to depend on the body of a pregnant woman. The life that we live, the human moral community that we enjoy, is built upon the bodily dependence involved in pregnancy.

Dr. Emma Wood:

So it's very unlike rescuing someone from organ failure, it's very unlike trying to cure someone of a disease, to great sacrifice to yourself, because you're not offering someone life-saving assistance you are simply participating in the ordinary unfolding of human life and its processes. Abortion is more kin to a

disease in fact, because abortion is an assault on a natural process that is part of standard human flourishing.

Speaker 6:

God, takes in the hands that she [inaudible].

Speaker 7:

Just shut up. That's such so traumatic. That's so traumatic.

Speaker 6:

We're here to help you.

Speaker 7:

I don't want your help.

Speaker 6:

We're here to help you.

Speaker 8:

Leave the poor girl alone.

Speaker 6:

That baby's got a heartbeat, love. Please turn away. We can help you.

John Dickson:

That's the audio of some footage producer Kaley made me watch, of a woman protesting outside an abortion clinic in Queensland in 2018. In most parts of Australia now, protestors aren't allowed anywhere near an abortion clinic.

John Dickson:

I'm not sure protests like that, which often involve publicly shaming vulnerable women, are likely to achieve much. They're more likely to galvanize opposition to the pro-life position. I might be wrong about that. But it's important, says Margaret Somerville, to realize the depth of feelings on both sides. Both sides feel they're doing something necessary and righteous.

Margaret Somerville:

And it is a very difficult issue, because you've got the conflict between a woman feeling she's lost control of her life ... I think that's what she feels. And I think we can all emphasize with that ... and you've got the fact that you've got a unique new human life that you're going to intentionally destroy. So how to work that out?

Margaret Somerville:

But I think that the first step is to recognize that the people on both sides think they are doing good, that they have chosen the way to go. That's true for both the pro-choice and the pro-life, they just disagree about when there's conflict. We call it, in ethics sometimes, a world of competing sorrows. And so you've-

John Dickson:

A world of competing sorrows, it's a poignant expression used in ethics to speak of situations where whatever decision you make you are going to cause some kind of harm. It's probably important for all of us, for tons of topics, to contemplate the sorrow on both sides. Unless we can appreciate the passionate feelings on the other side of a debate, we probably haven't understood that side. That's true for pro-choice advocates, just as much as pro-life advocates. There's a sorrow on both sides.

John Dickson:

Anyway, back to Margo.

Margaret Somerville:

... And so you've got those two sorrows, you've got the woman who feels this is going to be enormously damaging to her and her life and you've got the fact that you've got this new human life. And as a society particularly, what do we owe to that? What does it mean if we don't require respect for that? So that's why we're in such a difficult area.

John Dickson:

Yes. Do we know anything? I mean, is there good research about the main reasons women seek terminations?

Margaret Somerville:

Oh, I'm not an expert on that, John. From what I do know ... and I've read a lot about this over the years ... I think they're as varied as the women themselves. I think it can range from just not wanting to have children ever, to, at the other end of the scale, perhaps a woman who's got a serious health issue and thinks that abortion is the only way in which to deal with that. That's very rare, but it does happen.

John Dickson:

A study in the journal *Contraception*, in 2017, looked at the common reasons women seek abortions across 14 countries. The most common reason, in poorer countries, was of course socioeconomic factors; not being able to afford another child. In richer Western countries, like the US and Belgium, the top reasons were, according to the paper: not ready for another child, timing was wrong. That's the US. And in Belgium, no desire for a child at the moment and partner related reasons, which includes things like the partner didn't want the child or the mother felt there were problems in the relationship. Economic reasons also featured. And the researchers made the point that there are usually multiple reasons

women decide they can't go through with a pregnancy. We'll link to this paper in the show notes, of course.

John Dickson:

The Guttmacher Institute, a leading pro-choice organization, estimates there are more than 120 million unintended pregnancies every year around the world. And 61% of those end in abortion. That's over 73 million abortions in the world each year. Now, either that's 73 million babies killed annually, the entire population of the UK every year, or it's 73 million women ... that's assuming one abortion per woman ... who have managed to express their right to make decisions about their own bodies. The stakes are very high. And I suppose it's because of this that both sides tend to argue from the extremes.

John Dickson:

I asked Professor Somerville about this tendency in our public debate. Is it helpful for pro-life advocates to focus on late-term abortions when only a very small proportion of abortions are late-term? And is it helpful for pro-choice advocates to focus on, say, young rape victims when the vast majority of abortions are for timing, relationship, or financial reasons?

John Dickson:

Pro-life advocates often refer to very late-term abortions and how shocking they are, but is it ethically fair to argue from the extreme?

Margaret Somerville:

I think everyone does that.

John Dickson:

Well, my next question is about how the other side do it, but just going with this ...

Margaret Somerville:

And it's particularly in the US situation, where there's been some horrific examples of late-term abortions. I mean, just appalling beyond belief. Even the pro-choice people would not support that. Two cases of a very late abortion on which I was consulted.

Margaret Somerville:

And in one of them, it was a married heterosexual couple where the woman was 34 weeks pregnant. So well past viability. And they had an ultrasound and discovered that the baby had a cleft palate, that is the two sides of the palate hadn't joined together properly. And it's not an uncommon thing, they do surgery after the baby's born and correct it. And these people said no, they didn't want a defective baby. So they wanted an abortion. And the hospital was very upset about what to do about this and came to talk to me about it. And my understanding is that they did do that abortion.

Margaret Somerville:

And in the other case, it was a doctoral student at my university. She was from the Middle East and from an Orthodox family, and she had fallen in love with another student. She was pregnant. She'd hidden the pregnancy. She was 32 weeks pregnant. And she presented at the hospital as saying that she was going to commit suicide unless she could have an abortion. And, again, I found out afterwards that that abortion was done.

Margaret Somerville:

So there's difficult cases for sure, really difficult cases. I mean, I think the first situation was completely appalling.

Margaret Somerville:

And in another case, we had a woman visitor from the West Indies who was visiting her sister. And she collapsed on the floor of the sister's apartment and got rushed into the hospital and put on resuscitation, and was kept on it and given antibiotics because she had some massive infection. And anyway, they kept her on the respirator for, I think, about three months. And at the time she was admitted, she was four months pregnant. So the issue was, by this time, after three months, they knew she was not going to recover consciousness. And so the issue was: could they turn off the respirator? Did they deliver the baby before they turned it off? Or what did they do?

John Dickson:

So the other side ... also offer the extreme, to support the pro-choice ... they raise the example of a woman who will die as a result of the pregnancy or of a young rape victim.

Margaret Somerville:

Yeah.

John Dickson:

How ethically clarifying, for the general discussion about abortion, are those extreme cases?

Margaret Somerville:

They're important things to think about. I mean, rape is horrible, and incest, especially if it's incest, and very young girl who's pregnant. I'm inclined to allow exemptions for those, within any law that would otherwise restrict abortion. I think the reason is that, in those rare and extreme circumstances, it should be a decision that is left either to the person or to their guardians, I mean depending on how old the young girl is.

Margaret Somerville:

I guess I would regard it somewhat in the analogy of: we don't believe in killing human beings, but we do justify some wars and some protections. And where that is not absolutely essential, then we shouldn't do it. But it is not a total absolute. So it becomes a question of: how awful does it have to be before you would say, "Well, this is a case where it should be left open"?

Margaret Somerville:

If you look at the spectrum on abortion ... from: absolutely no abortion at all, never, ever, ever, even if the mother's life is in danger, to one end. And you look to the other end: absolutely no restrictions on abortion at all. It is just a small thing and the woman's got the absolute right, even if she's nine months pregnant ... very few people on either side are at those poles. And what you've got in between is a gradation of how restrictive your law should be. I don't think you have got a gradation of ethics. I think abortion is always a very serious ethical issue. But you can have a gradation of law to govern that.

John Dickson:

And that brings us to a significant question: what exactly is that fetus?

John Dickson:

The word, fetus. A fetus obviously doesn't have the capacities of a fully grown human being, and not even the capacities of a child, so why should a fetus be granted rights that in any way compete with the rights of the woman?

Margaret Somerville:

There's essentially two theories about what pregnancy involves, in terms of the development of the fetus or unborn child. One of them is called the construction theory. And what it is, is that until a certain point of development, the fetus is not sufficiently developed to be regarded as a member of the human race. And I mean, this is Peter Singer's approach too. And-

John Dickson:

Peter Singer, by the way, is a super famous Australian philosopher at the renowned Princeton University in the US. He accepts that a fetus is a member of the human species. But he argues that that doesn't necessarily give this small human a right to life. It is not a fully conscious person yet, it's only part of the way along to gaining the full rights of personhood. This is the constructionist view of personhood, as Margaret explains.

Margaret Somerville:

... And so under that theory, you wouldn't have an unborn child that deserve protection until they reached a stage at which you could say, "That is a child." Now, almost everybody ... not everybody, but almost everybody ... agrees that viability, that is the ability to live outside the body of the woman, is such a point. Even under a construction theory, they think that child should be recognized.

Margaret Somerville:

The other theory is called the developmental theory. And that says that, from the moment of conception, you've got a unique, new human being. Some people put that at 14 days because that's the point at which you can no longer get identical twins or identical triplets. But right from that very early stage you've got a new human being. And then everything that that child will become, genetically, and in their essence and being and their physiology and whatever, that is all already present. So the rest of life is

simply a development of the early person ... well, you can't use the word person because that's contentious; the early human being.

Margaret Somerville:

And the image that's often used is that of a pear tree. That you've got a tiny baby little plant, and it is a pear tree plant, and you put it in the ground and it grows up and it becomes a big pear tree and it has lots of pears on it. That's still the same tree as that little tiny one you put in the ground. And that's the one that's used to describe the developmental theory.

John Dickson:

I'm guessing you fall into that second camp, of a developmental view of human life? What do you believe is superior in that understanding, to the constructionist view?

Margaret Somerville:

Because I think that it is truer to the natural scientific reality of who we are and where we come from, because there is no point that you can identify at which you suddenly go from being a non-human to a human in the construction theory.

Margaret Somerville:

You see, the house is a man-made construction. And you can say, "I won't call it a house till it's got walls and a roof." But in the case of a human being, that's a natural development. It's not something that we are making. And so there's a false image that gives you the wrong information, as far as I can see.

John Dickson:

What do you think is the correct principle in thinking about the status of a fetus? I mean, is it personhood? ... yes, that's very contentious ... Consciousness? Human? Life? What is the correct way to start drawing out ethical principles?

Margaret Somerville:

Very basic: living human being. Not living human doing. You don't have to do anything, you just have to be. And then you should attract the protections that go to living human beings. And you see, once you start saying, "You've got to have consciousness, you've got to be able to do this. If you can't do that, you're not going to get protected," that's not protecting human beings, that's demanding that before you get protection you must be a human doing; you have to do things in order to win your human protection. That's wrong.

John Dickson:

Yeah, so-

Margaret Somerville:

And you can see what that means for people with disabilities?

John Dickson:

Indeed. Or even infants, frankly.

Margaret Somerville:

Yeah. Yeah.

John Dickson:

Infants don't have-

Margaret Somerville:

Well, that's how you ...

John Dickson:

... the capacities.

John Dickson:

That's a point I find myself getting stuck on. I don't know how you feel about it? It's not just fetuses that don't have full consciousness or self-awareness or a desire for continued existence, newborn babies don't have that either nor do coma patients. What does that mean for their rights, their ethical status? Pondering that point changed my mind on this topic. But, back to Margaret.

John Dickson:

It seems that it really comes down to whether that thing inside the womb is a human.

Margaret Somerville:

Well, of course it is.

John Dickson:

So-

Margaret Somerville:

If it's not a human, what is it? You are an ex fetus, John. Keep it in mind. Somebody could have got rid of you.

John Dickson:

But it is as simple as that. Or is it? I mean, nothing's simple in ethics. But if I don't believe that thing in the womb really is a human being yet, for whatever reason, then it is, for me, ethical, allowable, to get rid of it.

Margaret Somerville:

Yeah. You can say, for you, you think it's ethical. But then you come to the question: is ethics only what the individual thinks it is? Or are there some norms that we need to take into account to decide, whether as an individual or as a collective, what we think is ethical and that those ethical principles will guide us?

John Dickson:

This is obviously a life and death issue. There's no way around that. Whatever you reckon the fetus is, it either continues living or it doesn't. But there is another argument against abortion that doesn't depend on settling this question of whether a fetus is a person with rights. It's no quack argument either, and it's got nothing to do with religion. So stay with us beyond the break.

John Dickson:

This episode of Undeceptions is brought to you by Zondervan's new book, *The Global Church: The First Eight Centuries*, by Donald Fairbairn. It's just my sort of book. This is a good book for the Undeceptions listeners actually, because Fairbairn takes us through the early years of church history and helps us to understand both the unity of Christians, on fundamental beliefs, but also the variety of practices that developed through that period. He also tries to recenter our attention on Africa, Turkey and Syria, where he says most of the churches intellectual energy was nurtured. I'll say.

John Dickson:

It's a fresh approach in a historical discipline that often centers more on the Western roots of Christianity, in the Roman world. But there were Christian communities in far-flung places, like Persia and even India. And Fairbairn highlights these communities, brings them to our attention, and shows how Christianity was able to penetrate very different cultures.

John Dickson:

I reckon there's a whole episode of Undeceptions, where we could explore the non-Western versions of Christianity. But until we do that, this is a great place to start. The Church's history goes well beyond the West, it is truly global; and was from the beginning. So get Donald Fairbairn's *The Global Church: The First Eight Centuries*. It's out now at Amazon, of course, or head to zondervan.com to find out more.

John Dickson:

Right now, 2.2 billion people can't access water that is safe to drink. It's an extraordinary figure. And Anglican Aid, the overseas relief agency of the Anglican Church, is working hard to change that. These are people I deeply trust. And their Waterworks campaign is funding local organizations in 17 countries, to provide wells, bore holes, rainwater tanks, microflush toilets, and hygiene education. All of which decreases waterborne diseases and raises living standards exponentially.

John Dickson:

And you can help make this happen in more places. Head to waterworks.org.au to learn more about the Waterworks campaign, and please donate today. You can also find a link in the show notes.

John Dickson:

I want you to talk us through this famous article by Don Marquis, Professor of Philosophy. It was in a reputable journal, right? We're not talking about some dinky theology journal. Tell us what the journal was and how well rated that journal is?

Dr. Emma Wood:

Ah, it was Journal of Philosophy, I believe. It's one of the most well-established academic philosophy journals. It was 1989 ... that was the year of publication of the piece ... and by then, the abortion debate had been raging for quite some time. Probably-

John Dickson:

For the nerds who want to pin this down, the author is Don Marquis, M-A-R-Q-U-I-S. Though, Emma later corrects me that it's actually pronounced Marquis. Anyway, the title is Why Abortion Is Wrong in the Journal of Philosophy, volume 86, number four, April 1989, pages 183 to 202. Knock yourself out.

John Dickson:

The article is called Why Abortion Is immoral. It sounds like it's about to be this sort of blustering right-wing crazy thing. But it sure isn't.

Dr. Emma Wood:

By using the title, Why Abortion Is Immoral, he's not insinuating necessarily that all women who have abortions are equally blameworthy. I think there's a possible distinction you can make between blameworthiness of an action and the wrongness of it. You might look at something like prostitution in the Third World. You might say that prostitution is always a wrong act, in the sense that sex is just not something that should be sold. But you wouldn't necessarily thereby be saying that all third world women who engage in prostitution are blameworthy for their act.

John Dickson:

Here's one of the subtleties often lost in this debate: an action can be wrong, always wrong, but the blameworthiness, the moral guilt attached to it, might be lesser or greater depending on the circumstances. And we accept this all the time. In fact, just yesterday, I heard of a case where a prison inmate beat his cellmate to death. It was a murder. It was wrong. But it turns out the murdered inmate was the perpetrator of the rape of the other inmate's little sister.

John Dickson:

Now, that inmate asked to be put in a different cell because the rapist had begun to taunt him about what he did to his sister. Prison officials apparently refused. And one day, when the taunting continued, this guy snapped and he killed his sister's rapist. The action was wrong, but I bet most of us listening in would agree that the blameworthiness of the action was less, much less, than if this were an unprovoked attack.

John Dickson:

I'm sorry if that's all a bit too confronting. But the point is, it's possible to see abortion as wrong, always wrong, and agree that the blameworthiness of the action is different depending on the circumstances of the case. Pro-life advocates aren't being inconsistent when they accept that an abortion following a rape is a very different thing from an abortion where there's no desire for a child at the moment; to use the language of the article I quoted earlier.

John Dickson:

And let me add, as plainly as I can ... and perhaps I should have said this earlier ... while I'm not offering a specifically Christian case against abortion in this episode, no Christian should speak against abortion without making clear that God's mercy, the mercy Christ died for, extends to anyone who wants it, regardless of the blameworthiness of an action.

John Dickson:

Back to Emma and her explanation of the famous ... well, famous in philosophical circles ... argument of Don Marquis.

Dr. Emma Wood:

The crucial starting point is the question: why is it wrong to kill you or me? All things being equal, assuming that you or I have not been involved in some heinous crime, we're not being punished, someone is not attacking us in self-defense, all usual exceptions being equal, why is it wrong to kill you or me?

Dr. Emma Wood:

And there are certain possibilities that you can eliminate. You can eliminate the possibility that it's just because killing you or me would cause pain. If it's about the pain to you, then that entails that painlessly anesthetizing you would not be wrong. But we're never going to accept that conclusion. It can't be because it causes pain to your loved ones, because then you get the implication that killing a friendless hermit would be just fine. But we're not going to accept that either. It can't be-

John Dickson:

Sorry to interrupt again. You might be feeling sorry for our poor friendless murdered hermit. Emma, following Marquis, is pointing out that if the wrongness of murder lies in the hurt it causes the loved ones of the murder victim, then killing someone who doesn't have any loved ones isn't wrong. So the wrongness of murder must lie in something else.

Dr. Emma Wood:

... It can't be either because of the possibility that it ends someone's consciousness or because death appears at the time, to a person, as a loss to them. If that were the case, shooting someone in the back of their head while they're not looking would not be wrong, nor would killing someone who's in a deep sleep and possibly about to wake up in a few months. So you can eliminate all those possibilities for the

key wrong-making feature of killing you or me. So the conclusion that he arrives at is that the key wrong-making feature of killing you or me is that it would deprive you or me of a future of value, a future of experience as typical of human life.

Dr. Emma Wood:

Now, if that's true, if that is the key wrong-making feature of killing, then you have to conclude that that same feature applies for the killing of an embryo, a fetus; any human individual, from conception onward. Because they possess a future in the same sense that you and I possess a future. Given time and nutrition, they will go on to move into this future of valuable experiences.

Dr. Emma Wood:

So there you have it, that is the future of value account of the wrongness of abortion.

John Dickson:

Here are Marquis' own words from that important article. Thanks Director Mark.

Mark:

"The claim that the primary wrong-making feature of a killing is the loss to the victim of the value of its future has obvious consequences for the ethics of abortion. The future of a standard fetus includes a set of experiences, projects, activities, and such, which are identical with the futures of adult human beings and are identical with the futures of young children. Since the reason that is sufficient to explain why it is wrong to kill human beings after the time of birth is a reason that also applies to fetuses, it follows that abortion is prima facie seriously, morally wrong."

John Dickson:

There's nothing religious here, no doctrine, no scripture, no gods. There's just logic. If what makes murder wrong is the taking of a victim's human future that applies equally to babies and to fetuses, both of which, in the normal course of events, will have future experiences just like ours.

John Dickson:

Now, Marquis is quick to point out that this argument doesn't apply to euthanasia, where the subject chooses to give up their unwanted future. And nor does it apply to contraception, he says, because, by definition, contraception prevents the very creation of a particular subject that could enjoy a human future. I mean, a sperm or an egg on its own can't be said to have a future. Only a fertilized embryo is an identifiable subject destined to have a human future. Marquis' argument applies only to the thing that is in process after conception.

John Dickson:

And you find this compelling? I mean, I think it was a throwaway comment you once made on my Facebook page that alerted me to this article years ago. How compelling is it?

Dr. Emma Wood:

Yes. I think one of the really interesting things about this argument is that a lot of the debate in the pro-life and pro-choice philosophical ... a lot of the philosophical debate revolves around the question of personhood; so whether the embryo or fetus is a person yet.

Dr. Emma Wood:

Now, that debate is really interesting. I think there are good reasons to consider an embryo or fetus a being that is already a person. But supposing you want to sidestep that whole debate about personhood, about unborn personhood, if you want to sidestep that whole debate but you still feel that there's something not quite right with the standard pro-choice line, Marquis' argument is going to appeal to you, because it gives you a basis for locating the wrongness of abortion in what it does to the victim rather than because of any consequentialist considerations to society at large about how costly a life is going to be, for instance. It gives you a basis for locating the wrongness of abortion in what it does to the victim, without making the claim that the victim is yet a person.

Dr. Emma Wood:

The argument is interesting because, essentially, it argues the harm involved in killing, in abortion, is what makes it wrong, regardless of whether or not this embryo or fetus is yet a person.

John Dickson:

So, just to recap: Don Marquis first shows that what makes murder wrong is the taking of the victim's future. And then he points out, inescapably, I think, that this applies equally to newborn babies whose future it is wrong to take away, and to fetuses.

John Dickson:

And so what pushback might there be to this argument? If what is wrong with murder is robbing a human future, this seems to have really solved the moral argument. You're robbing a human future every time an embryo is aborted.

Dr. Emma Wood:

Well, the argument about Marquis' argument, that has happened since, has revolved around technicalities of what sort of future you're talking about. I think some critics have tried to trip the argument up by looking at the fact that there are a lot of fetuses that spontaneously abort. "Okay, if a human future is so valuable, then isn't the pro-life position monstrous because we're not doing anything to save the large proportion of embryos who spontaneously abort?" So they've tried to find ways into refuting the future of value account through thought exercises like that.

John Dickson:

It doesn't seem that compelling a response to the Don's argument.

John Dickson:

There are plenty of people who'd argue that pro-lifers are monstrous for all sorts of reasons. One accusation that sticks out is that those who advocate against abortion are really only interested in protecting life before birth. They are not pro-life, they're just pro-birth. They couldn't care less what happens to the kid that's actually born.

John Dickson:

Take this little exchange between two New York Times columnists, pro-choice advocate, Michelle Goldberg, and pro-lifer, Ross Douthat.

Michelle Goldberg:

There are things you can do to make it easier for somebody with an unplanned pregnancy to bring it to term. But aside from Ross and a few other quirky figures, that's not a priority. And I think that there's a fundamental question to me ... well, it's not even a question because I know what I think about it ... of: is the anti-abortion movement interested in stopping abortions or banning abortions? Or is it interested in reducing the number of abortions or making abortions illegal? Because those two things are different questions.

Ross Douthat:

Now, I completely agree with Michelle. And as she kindly acknowledged, I am part of the small faction of Conservatives that thinks that government spending and government policy around families is a really important area of public policy where Conservatives have, with some exceptions, failed in their goals.

Ross Douthat:

At the same time, the actual pro-life movement ... which is not the same thing as the Republican party, it's a sort of group within the Republican party that doesn't have actual control over the Republican party in all kinds of ways ... the actual pro-life movement has spent large amounts of time and energy, through all kinds of charitable organizations and Catholic religious orders and crisis pregnancy centers, and so on, trying to actually help mothers who want to have babies.

Ross Douthat:

I think this is insufficient as public policy, that private charity is not enough. But the idea that the pro-life movement mostly consists of people sitting around saying, "We really need to restore status hierarchies and keep women in their place-

Michelle Goldberg:

I don't think they're saying that, I think it's implicit.

Ross Douthat:

It just doesn't map onto actual pro-life activism. The people who are activists, the people who actually work on this issue, are doing the things that, under Michelle's theory of what's going on, they shouldn't be doing.

Michelle Goldberg:

They're not doing it that much.

John Dickson:

That's from an episode of The New York Times podcast, The Argument. We'll add a link in the show notes.

John Dickson:

Now, Ross Douthat is too conservative for some, and he's dismissed as a squishy Conservative by others. But I reckon he makes two good points, one is a kind of concession and the other is a pretty strong defense. On the one hand, Christians haven't been that active in trying to reduce the number of abortions, through good public policy measures, access to birth control, better sex ed and healthcare, paid parental leave, support for single moms, and so on. I reckon that's a blind spot, for myself included.

John Dickson:

On the other hand, with due respect for Michelle Goldberg, whom I love reading and listening to ... she drives me nuts, but she's so thoughtful and articulate ... she is just wrong that the churchy pro-life types are simply pro-birth not pro the whole human life. Religious Conservatives are more likely than any other demographic to be involved in public volunteering, orphanages, food programs, affordable housing projects, women's shelters, and on and on. It gets very little press, which I suppose is why Goldberg can say, "They're not doing it that much," but they're doing it more than any other demographic.

Paxton Smith:

As we leave high school, we need to make our voices heard. Today, I was going to talk about TV and media and content, because it's something that's very important to me. However, under light of recent events, it feels wrong to talk about anything but what is currently affecting me and millions of other women in the state.

John Dickson:

That's Paxton Smith, an 18 year old American woman, speaking as valedictorian of her Texan high school just a few months ago. Her speech went viral after she switched her approved text to something completely different. She chose to talk about this so-called heartbeat bill in Texas, which is about to come into effect in the state on the 1st of September.

John Dickson:

In a nutshell, the bill bans abortion at the point where there's a fetal heartbeat; usually around six weeks. Politicians did a fair bit of creative legislating to get around the United States Supreme Court ruling in Roe v. Wade, which made abortion legal nationally in the 1970s. Anyway, we'll put a link in the show notes so you can find out more about that specific bill, as well as a really important legal case from Mississippi that's set to be heard by the US Supreme Court in the next 12 months.

John Dickson:

Anyway, that's not why we are listening to Paxton Smith.

Paxton Smith:

Starting in September, there will be a ban on abortions after six weeks of pregnancy, regardless of whether the pregnancy was a result of rape or incest. Six weeks. That's all women get. And so before they realize ... most of them don't realize that they're pregnant by six weeks ... so before they have a chance to decide if they are emotionally, physically, and financially stable enough to carry out a full-term pregnancy, before they have the chance to decide if they can take on the responsibility of bringing another human being into the world, that decision is made for them by a stranger. A decision that will affect the rest of their lives is made by a stranger.

Paxton Smith:

I have dreams and hopes and ambitions. Every girl graduating today does. And we have spent our entire lives working towards our future. And without our input and without our consent, our control over that future has been stripped away from us. I am terrified that if my contraceptives fail, I am terrified that if I am raped, then my hopes and aspirations and dreams and efforts for my future will no longer matter.

Paxton Smith:

I hope that you can feel how gut-wrenching that is. I hope you can feel how dehumanizing it is to have the autonomy over your own body taken away from you. And I cannot give up this platform to promote complacency and peace when there is a war on my body and a war on my rights, a war on the rights of your mothers, a war on the rights of your sisters, a war on the rights of your daughters. We cannot stay silent. Thank you.

John Dickson:

It's powerful stuff. And I wonder if Paxton would see what I'm doing in this episode as a war on mothers, sisters, and daughters; a breach of a woman's fundamental rights. I feel the force of that.

John Dickson:

So let me hand back to Dr. Emma Wood.

Dr. Emma Wood:

Well, I guess the reason why the debate rages on is because that despite the moral reservations that a lot of thoughtful pro-choice people have about killing a human being, ending a human life, despite those moral reservations, the perception that abortion is a positive social good that women somehow need ... a good that women, for some reason, need in order to gain equality with men, in order to exercise proper freedom ... that perception that abortion is a woman's basic need has persisted.

Dr. Emma Wood:

Now, ultimately, I think that argument is not convincing. I think whatever need you can point to that a woman may have, that falls short of the preservation of her own life, I think obviously you have to stack up against the deprivation of someone's entire future. But that is the reason why I think the abortion debate still rages on, it's because people cannot conceive of what living the good life would mean for women, absent abortion.

John Dickson:

You once said to me in our tos and fros, our Messenger to and fros, that you think there's something inherently anti-woman to the logic of abortion. Wow, that goes against the grain. Because I would've thought that one of the best arguments is that ... and as the reason why I shouldn't do much talk on this issue, because I'm not a woman ... this is really a woman's issue, it's really about women flourishing.

Dr. Emma Wood:

Yeah. The idea that abortion is a pro-woman solution to a challenge that human beings have, the challenge of living out your sexuality and the challenge of nurturing the life that comes from that, the idea that abortion is or could be a pro-woman solution has, for a long time, struck me as implausible.

Dr. Emma Wood:

There are a number of reasons for this. For a start ... and a lot of social comment commentators have recognized this since the sexual revolution, since the liberalization of abortion laws ... easily available abortion has given sexually selfish men a get out of jail free card. "Her body, her choice, her problem," as the saying now goes.

Dr. Emma Wood:

Now, it used to be the case that if an unwanted pregnancy occurred, if it occurred outside of marriage, the custom was that the man would be expected to marry the woman. The child was not to be sacrificed for what would then have been deemed a mistake that the couple made; conceiving outside of marriage. And so the shotgun marriage used to be pretty common. George Akerlof and Janet Yellen, the famous economists, noticed that when abortion laws were initially liberalized in the early '70s, right at that time you started to see a decline in shotgun marriage.

Dr. Emma Wood:

So while the original solution to reproductive asymmetry, which is just the fact that sex costs women more than it costs men, the original solution to that reality used to be marriage. Now, the solution to that problem is abortion. Because with easily available abortion, it has become harder for women to hold men to account when they become pregnant, it is harder for women to get a commitment from men when they find themselves pregnant. So of course it's women who end up on the abortionist's table, with all the associated negative impacts of post-abortion regret, while too many carefree men can walk away from that situation with an unequal consequence. So there's-

John Dickson:

Just popping in to say that the two economists Emma is talking about here, Yellen and Akerlof, wrote in 1996 that, "By making the birth of the child the physical choice of the mother, the sexual revolution has made marriage and child support a social choice of the father."

Dr. Emma Wood:

... So there's that. We could talk for a long time about the flow-on effects of this degradation of sex and this loosening of sex from commitment. I don't think it's a state of affairs that women particularly want. So there are really important questions to ask there, about the sexual norms that easily available abortion has ingrained that women probably don't particularly enjoy.

Dr. Emma Wood:

But, look, I think there's something intrinsically anti-woman about the pro-abortion stance. Because what the pro-abortion stance says to a woman is that in order to be able to advance professionally, to advance in her education, to be a useful citizen, what the pro-abortion message says to a woman is that she has to be at war with her own body, she has to be at war with the natural processes of her own body. She can't achieve equality with men unless she is like a man; namely, not pregnant. Only if pregnancy ... which is a defining feature of womanhood ... only if a woman can eliminate pregnancy, this distinctively womanly experience, from her existence, is she able to compete with a man. In other words, a woman needs a surgical operation in order to fully flourish as a human, while a man needs no such thing. I think that logic to the pro-abortion movement is inherently anti-woman because it does set women against their own bodies, in much the same way that our culture of objectification sets us against our own bodies.

John Dickson:

If I may speak personally and directly for a moment. I mean, I know it's my show and I can do what I like, but I'm also conscious that I'm a bloke and this issue doesn't affect me like it does women. Anyway, if you don't mind me speaking directly about my view, I used to be quite uninterested in the topic of abortion. I thought it was just the Catholics who were all up in arms about it. And in pastoral settings, early in my ministry, I was quite hands-off when people came to me asking for advice about their abortion.

John Dickson:

I see it differently now, partly because of the realization that my pastoral approach was a bit shallow; it was all care and support and very little ethical insight. And it was also partly because I did more history and philosophy, if you can believe that.

John Dickson:

I still don't talk much about this issue. I mean, here we are, 50 episodes into Undeceptions, and this is the first time I've mentioned it. I don't think I've ever preached on it, but I have slowly come to think that pro-choice arguments are so popular mainly because they're emotionally compelling. It's not because they're successful moral or logical arguments.

John Dickson:

Honestly, I can't see how all of the arguments for killing a fetus in the womb don't apply equally to killing a newborn baby outside the womb. And it's pondering that nexus, between unborn and born, that really has landed this for me, intellectually anyway. A newborn would have no awareness or fear of being killed by its mother. A newborn isn't consciously desiring existence. A newborn isn't a fully rational person. A newborn is just as dependent on some adult assistance as a fetus is on its mother. And a newborn, of course, can be a huge strain on parents' mental health and financial security.

John Dickson:

And here's where the history thing really struck me: these are all the reasons ancient societies gave for both abortion and infanticide. They accepted abortion on the same grounds they accepted discarding unwanted newborns. Only ancient Jews and Christians opposed both abortion and infanticide. Studying abortion and infanticide in the pre-Christian era helped me see that I couldn't be intellectually consistently pro-choice about the unborn without being pro-choice about the newly born. The logic just doesn't work. If there's a strong reason not to kill a newborn, despite the fact that the parents really want to, that reason will also apply to killing the unborn.

John Dickson:

There may be less blameworthy instances of killing a newborn, but it is always wrong to do so because it always takes away the newborn's human future. There are less blameworthy instances of abortion too, the example of the young rape victim. But abortion always amounts to taking away a human future like ours. It is always wrong.

John Dickson:

For me, this is simply moral logic, not religion. The only specifically religious or Christian thing I want to say in this episode is that Christ died for our forgiveness, no matter how blameworthy we think we are. Let me reassure listeners, His mercy is greater than our wrongdoing. But that doesn't mean the wrong isn't real. As professor Somerville said to me, this is life and death.

Margaret Somerville:

And you can hardly think of anything more important, in terms of having some form of both personal or individual and collective ethics, than the decision between life and death. And that's what you're talking about. I mean, that's a zero-sum game. There's no niceties involved, that you can put some ribbons on it or flowers around it or something.

John Dickson:

Hey, that's the last episode for this season. Maybe some of you are thinking, "Good riddance." I hope you'll come back. We've already started work on season five, and I can't wait. Between now and then we'll be releasing some Undeceptions singles, a few from me and a few from my mates, including one from Sam Allberry in a couple of weeks. Watch out for that one. It's fantastic.



John Dickson:

And you're going to start to see some developments here at Undeceptions; over at the website and in the frequency and quality of the show and, God willing, in the launch of some very new things. So if you're in a position to help us out, please consider donating. The Undeceptions project got off the ground in the first place only because of three really generous benefactors. You know who you are. Thank you. But we need your help, listeners, to sustain and expand this project. Please head to undeceptions.com and click the oversized donate button. Whatever you can give is deeply appreciated. Every dollar goes toward undeceiving the public and letting the truth out. Thanks so much.

John Dickson:

And if you're interested in other good podcasts, check out SALT: Conversations with Jenny Salt, part of the Eternity Podcast Network. Next episode ... actually, we haven't decided yet. It could be aliens, if director Mark gets his way, the underground church of Asia, the good life with Miroslav Volf ... woo-hoo ... transgenderism, and a bunch more. See you.

John Dickson:

Undeceptions is hosted by me, John Dickson, produced by Kaley Payne, and directed by this season's best and fairest, Mark Hadley. Editing by Richard Hamwi. Special thanks to our series sponsor, Zondervan, for making this undeception possible. Seriously, Zondervan, love you guys.

John Dickson:

Undeceptions is part of the Eternity Podcast Network, an audio collection showcasing the seriously good news of faith today. Why not head to eternitypodcasts.com?

Speaker 2:

Brought to you by the Eternity Podcast Network.