

Humanist Perspective

Abortion

What is abortion?

An abortion is the ending of a pregnancy so that it does not result in a birth. Induced abortion, or the deliberate ending of the pregnancy, is normally just referred to as abortion or termination. Spontaneous abortion, where a pregnancy ends naturally, is normally known as miscarriage.

What does the law say?

The law in England, Scotland, and Wales permits an abortion up to 24 weeks of pregnancy, and up to 12 weeks of pregnancy in Northern Ireland. Two doctors must agree that an abortion presents less risk to a person's physical or mental health than continuing with the pregnancy. Pregnancy and childbirth carry more risks than abortion, so most people who seek an abortion can have one on these grounds.

The law in England, Scotland, and Wales chooses the 24-week mark as that is the point after which a foetus is viable: that means it can normally survive with medical assistance outside the womb. An abortion may be carried out in England, Scotland, and Wales after 24 weeks of pregnancy if there is a substantial risk that the child would be born with serious physical or mental disabilities, or if there is a serious risk of death or permanent injury to the physical or mental health of the person who is pregnant.

The dilemma

Abortion is an issue that has generated a lot of tense debate over the years. Some people argue that abortion involves taking a human life, and so it should never be allowed. Others argue that a pregnant person has the right to choose whether they want to go through with a pregnancy or not.

A humanist approach

Humanists have no agreed fixed response to many ethical dilemmas. They will typically try to use evidence, empathy, respect for individual autonomy and human rights, and a desire to support people's happiness and wellbeing to inform their position. Many humanists believe that abortion can be a morally acceptable choice to make and they generally approve of the law in the UK as it stands. Many humanists and humanist organisations around the world actively campaign for abortion to be legally available.

'The sanctity of life'?

Some people speak of the 'sanctity of life' – all life, they say, is sacred and should not be taken away. However, many humanists feel this oversimplifies a complicated question. Humanists will often say other factors should be taken into consideration such as the impact on the pregnant person. What about, for example, the situation in which the pregnancy is putting the pregnant person's life at risk?

When does life begin?

The American philosopher James Rachels distinguishes between 'life' in the biological sense and 'life' in the biographical sense. When we talk about the value of life, he says, what we're talking about is not the mere biological fact of 'being alive' – something which we share with mosses and bacteria and all other living things. We're talking about 'having a life' – life in the biographical sense – a life that contains joys and memories and aspirations – and what's normally wrong with killing is that it is depriving someone of this life. The relevant question would then be not 'when does life begin?' but 'when does *a* life begin?'. An abortion, then, is not the ending of a person's life. It is the ending of a potential life. That is why there is a serious moral question to consider, but it is not the same as killing a person.

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'Playing god'

Some people say that it is only for their god to decide matters of life and death. It is not the place of human beings to make such decisions. Humanists don't believe in a god or gods so such an argument is unconvincing to them. However, there are also flaws in this argument that not only humanists can see. If any human intervention in matters of life and death is 'playing god' then this would apply to many other medical interventions, such as antibiotics and vaccinations, which we readily accept.

Looking at the evidence

Many humanists believe that society should make abortion available in a manner that is safe, legal, and accessible. Evidence from history and other parts of the world shows that anything less would increase the number of illegal and unsafe abortions. Where abortion is legal, it is extremely safe. In fact, it is less risky than continuing pregnancy to term and giving birth. Most people do not suffer psychological harm from abortion, and where good quality support is offered, the risk of regret or depression is further minimised. There are also potentially harmful effects on a person's psychological wellbeing of being coerced into carrying and birthing a child they cannot support either emotionally or materially. There is also good evidence that improved Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) can help to reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies. This is why humanists have long campaigned for its place in the school curriculum.



'Whilst prevention (contraception and education) is always best for people who do not want to conceive, I believe that history will look back in amazement at us on our overpopulated planet and wonder how it came about that women could be forced to have children they did not want.'

Diane Munday, humanist campaigner

A woman's right to choose

Typically, wherever humanists lie on the question of when an abortion would be morally acceptable, they will defend a woman's right to choose. Primarily because, for the woman, it is a choice over whether or not another potential human being should have the use of her body. Of course, the right to choose does not always settle all moral questions, particularly as our choices affect other people. However, in the case of abortion, many humanists believe that the woman's right to make decisions over the use of her own body are strong enough to allow her allow the right to an abortion if that is what she wishes.

Suppose you wake up one morning to find that you've been kidnapped. You are in a hospital bed with another person attached to you who is suffering from kidney failure and needs the use of your kidneys for the next nine months. The doctor tells you that you're the only person with the right blood type and if you unplug yourself, the other person will die.

Though it might be very kind of you to agree to have the person plugged into you for the next nine months, you have the right to unplug yourself. Granted, the other person has a right to life, but that doesn't mean that he has a right to the use of your body to keep him alive. What does a 'right to life' amount to? It is not the same thing as a right to the use of someone else's body to maintain your life. So, even if we agree that a foetus has a right to life, a woman may still have a right to have an abortion. It is the woman's right to make such a choice, because it is her body.



'Women have said again and again 'This body is my body!' and they have reason to feel angry, reason to feel that it has been like shouting into the wind.'

Judith Jarvis Thomson,
A Defence of Abortion (1971)

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Humanist **Diane Munday** was a key member of the Abortion Law Reform Association when abortion was legalised in 1968. She spent much of her life campaigning for the right to safe abortions, and providing support for women who seek or have had them.



I believe that the decision to have an abortion should be made by the pregnant woman herself. Clearly it is desirable that the man with whom she conceived should be involved in the decision but, sadly, in a number of cases, he is no longer around or sometimes opposes her wishes. In these circumstances, because it is the woman who is pregnant and who must give birth and usually looks after the child, I am firmly of the view that the woman's wishes should prevail.

Like most humanists, I try to make decisions using **facts** – whether these are provided from experience, by science, or by history. The facts about induced abortion are that it can be performed safely by medical or surgical methods, and that most women who deliberately terminate a pregnancy are grateful that this has been possible and have fewer regrets than women who give birth to an unwanted child, and that, whatever the law says, women who find themselves unwillingly pregnant will resort to dangerous, self-inflicted, or other illegal means to end the pregnancy.

I think that human life is far too important to be brought into existence by an accident, carelessness or thoughtlessness – such as too

much alcohol on a Saturday night or a contraceptive failing. People are not rabbits or puppies to be brought into the world willy-nilly; they need to be wanted, loved, and nurtured. Humanists say that only when the **circumstances** are right for mother and child, should a new life be brought into being.

Most people who are anti-abortion like to call themselves 'pro-life'. This can lead to the impression that those who take a different point of view are anti-life. Nothing could be further from the truth. Pro-choice is not the same as 'pro-abortion'. Whether or not to seek to terminate an intolerable pregnancy is a complex matter and most women take it seriously and with great heart-searching. Those who shout about foetal rights ignore the **rights** of the prospective mother and the impact on her life of having a child at that time. They ignore **responsibilities** she may have to already born children she is raising in difficult circumstances and the adverse impact another person to love, clothe, and feed will have on them. Many humanists, recognising we live on an already overcrowded planet with diminishing resources, will also question the 'right' to add to these problems without considering the **consequences**.

Whilst prevention (contraception and education) is always best for people who do not want to conceive, I believe that history will look back in amazement on our overpopulated planet and wonder how it came about that women could be forced to have children they did not want.



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A humanist perspective

Richard Norman, philosopher



Abortion is the termination of a pregnancy before normal childbirth. The rights and wrongs of abortion is a hotly contested ethical issue, and the debate is sometimes presented as a stand-off between two opposed camps which are labelled 'Pro-Life' and 'Pro-Choice'. Humanists would reject the false antithesis implied by those labels. Respect for life and respect for people's considered choices are seen by humanists as fundamental values and they are closely linked. Respecting people's right to life involves respecting their autonomy, their right to make decisions about the course of their own lives.

A woman's discovery that she is pregnant will often be a cause for celebration of the prospect of bringing a new life into the world, but sometimes it is not. Sometimes the discovery may be shattering for her. The reasons why she might wish to terminate the pregnancy rather than bear a child are many and varied.

For example:

- Continuing with the pregnancy might be a danger to her own life.
- She might discover that the child would be born with a severe physical or mental disability.
- Having to bear and raise a child might destroy her plans and prospects for her own life.
- She may feel that she is in no position to give a child the nurture and support it needs.
- If she already has children she may feel that she will be less able to care for them properly if she has another child.
- The pregnancy may be a consequence of rape or sexual abuse, and having the child might then be a permanent reminder of a traumatic experience.

The woman who is pregnant may decide that she can cope with problems of these and other kinds, but she may not. They are a mix of concerns for her own life and concerns for the life of the child who would be born, but they are all weighty reasons for terminating a pregnancy, grounded in serious values and a serious assessment of the consequences.

Some people, however, take the view that however weighty the reasons, having an abortion would always be morally wrong, and they are liable to defend this view by invoking the idea of 'the sanctity of life'. It is sometimes suggested that a key question for the abortion debate is 'When does life begin?', and that differing views on abortion derive from different answers to that question. For humanists, this is the wrong question. The appropriate question is: 'When does *a* life begin?'. The natural and obvious answer is that a person's life begins when they are born. That is what we mean by 'birth'. Only then does a living human being start interacting with the world, experiencing and responding to the world and to other people. An abortion is not an act of ending a person's life, or depriving them of their life, because there is not yet a person who is living a life. The word 'potential' is often used to describe the status of a foetus, and humanists would say that that word gets it right. A foetus is a potential person with the potentiality for having a life. That is why a decision whether or not to have an abortion is a serious decision. But it is not a decision whether to kill someone.

That is not the end of the ethical debate, and it is important to understand why. We have said that the common sense view is that a person's life begins when they are born. Therefore an abortion – the termination of a pregnancy before the birth of the baby – is not the act of ending someone's life. Nevertheless, if it is a late abortion of a viable foetus, then removing the foetus from the woman's womb would effectively be the birth of a baby, and the

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decision would then become whether to end the life of a new-born baby. That is why a very late abortion would be very difficult to justify.

The abortion debate then tends to become the search for a cut-off point. At what point in the development of the foetus, people ask, does abortion become unacceptable, because it is too much like ending the life of a new-born baby? And that is a question to which it is difficult to give a convincing answer. One very precise answer is given by some religious people and religious organisations, including the Roman Catholic Church: a human life begins, they say, at the moment of conception, and any termination of a pregnancy is therefore completely impermissible. Most humanists would see that as highly implausible. For the first week the embryo is simply a tiny cluster of undifferentiated cells, and only gradually does it develop identifiable organs. A woman who takes an abortion pill in the first few weeks of pregnancy would be expelling from her body something which does not yet have a distinctive human form or any distinctive human characteristics. Doing so, almost all humanists would say, is completely different from ending the life of a living human being.

The question is then whether there is a stage in the development of the foetus, between conception and birth, of which it would be plausible to say: now it's different, now the foetus has undergone a morally significant change which would make it wrong to terminate the pregnancy. And again the problem is that there is no clear answer, because the growth of the foetus is a gradual process, with no abrupt changes. In UK law, abortion is permissible if there is a risk to the woman's physical or mental health, up to the 24th week of pregnancy, because it is around then that a foetus might come to be viable outside the womb. In other countries where abortion is legally allowed, the time limit varies mostly between 12 weeks and 24 weeks, and the legally acceptable reasons for having an abortion also vary. The variations

partly reflect the fact that abortion is a difficult ethical issue to resolve, and humanists would recognise this.

It is also a reason why, humanists would say, a woman's right to choose is crucial. Whether and when an abortion is morally acceptable is something about which people can reasonably disagree, there is no simple moral rule, and in the end the woman concerned has to make her own decision. There are also other reasons for focusing on the woman's right to choose. The kinds of considerations we listed earlier, which could lead a woman to think about having an abortion, are very much matters for judgement, and in the end it is the woman who has to make that judgement about what weight to give to them. Again, women may experience pregnancy in very different ways. A woman whose pregnancy is unplanned and who is still undecided about whether to continue with it may, when she first feels the foetus move, start to feel protective towards it and want to nurture the potential life of which she is now directly aware. On the other hand, a young girl, a victim of rape, scared and alone, may then feel even more terrified, and desperate to end her traumatic situation. Quite generally, humanists would say, it is the woman who should make the decision, because she is by far the person most directly affected. It is her body and, if the pregnancy is not ended, it is she who will give birth to the child. As the American philosopher Judith Jarvis Thomson put it, 'Women have said again and again "This body is my body!" and they have reason to feel angry, reason to feel that it has been like shouting into the wind.'

Humanists do not presume to lay down strict moral rules about when it is right for a woman to have an abortion, and they may well disagree in their answers to that question. What they defend, and what humanists and humanist organisations defend, is a woman's right to choose.

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A history of humanist campaigning

From the earliest days of campaigns for the legalisation of abortion, humanists have been among the most prominent activists for change, championing human rights, and challenging religious influence.



Abortion Law Reform Association (ALRA)

The Abortion Law Reform Association was formed in 1936 by humanists Stella Browne, Janet Chance, and Alice Jenkins, to campaign for the legalisation of abortion in the UK. Their work helped secure the passing of the Abortion Act in 1967, which legalised abortions carried out by registered doctors on certain grounds in England, Scotland, and Wales, but not Northern Ireland.

'Most of them... were active in the field of birth-control, and had been involved in the suffrage movement. [They] were free-thinkers, who saw organized religion as the main obstacle to the full emancipation of women.'

Madeleine Simms and Keith Hindell,
Abortion Law Reformed (1971)

The first attempt to change the law on abortion was a Private Member's Bill introduced by humanist MP Joseph Reeves (1888–1969) in 1952, seeking to allow abortion when in 'the interest of the mother's health and for the prevention of injury to her body.'



Humanist Dorothy Thurtle (1890–1973) campaigned tirelessly for reproductive rights, especially those of working class women. She was part of the Birkett committee on abortion 1937–9. When the committee recommended no major change to the existing abortion laws, Thurtle issued her own report, suggesting the legalisation of abortion under various circumstances. Although unsuccessful in the 1930s, she continued her activism for decades more, and lived to see the introduction of the 1967 Abortion Act.

British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS)

The British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS) began as the Birmingham Pregnancy Advisory Service, and was created to provide access to safe, legal, and affordable abortions after the enactment of the 1967 Abortion Act.

A driving force in the creation of BPAS was humanist Martin Cole (1931–2015). Humanists UK patron Diane Munday (1931–2026) was also instrumental, and became BPAS' parliamentary, press, and public relations officer. Its members wanted to make sure women were given access to the services they needed.

In Northern Ireland, humanist member of the Northern Ireland Assembly Anna Lo (1950–2024) worked to extend abortion access in the region. As well as arguing on the grounds of compassion and the right to bodily autonomy, she argued against the injustice that some women could afford to travel abroad to obtain abortions, while others could not.



'I stress that women's healthcare should not be a matter regulated by criminal law. Women who seek to have legal abortions in private healthcare are patients, not criminals.'

Anna Lo

Activity and questions

Acceptable or unacceptable?

Take a look at these cases of unwanted pregnancies.

Would an abortion be **morally acceptable** in each case? Why?

Would a **humanist** agree or disagree with you? Why?

- 1) A woman's life would be at serious risk if she were to complete the pregnancy and try to give birth.
- 2) A woman has discovered that there is a high chance that her child will be severely disabled. She does not feel she will be able to care for the baby.
- 3) A young woman was not aware she was pregnant. When she finds out she has passed the 24 week mark.
- 4) A woman was raped and does not want to have the baby.
- 5) A woman has discovered that the foetus is female. She and her partner wanted a son so they want to have an abortion.
- 6) A teenage girl has become pregnant by mistake. She says that having the baby will mean she is unable to fulfill all the plans she had for her life.

Questions for discussion:

- 1) Is abortion ever acceptable?
- 2) At what point does a foetus become a person? When does it have a life? Does this affect your view of abortion?
- 3) Is a potential human being the same as a human being? Why or why not?
- 4) Which is more important: sanctity of life or quality of life?
- 5) How much choice should we have over how our bodies are used?
- 6) Would making abortion illegal stop abortions taking place? Would it make the situation better or worse?
- 7) Is it possible to be pro-choice and anti-abortion?
- 8) Even if someone would not have an abortion themselves, does that give them the right to deny the option to others?