

ARTICLE PRESENTATION EXAMPLE
PHI 212: CONTEMPORARY MORAL ISSUES
Mary Warren's Article On Abortion
Dr. Dave Yount

1. **BEARINGS/BIO:** (1-3 minutes) Give the title, author, and page number of the article you are presenting. Mention where this person teaches currently (if applicable), and try to find a picture and very brief bio of them, print it out, read the brief bio, and then pass the picture around. Please make sure you give the date of their article (it's on the first page of the article where the title is); it's helpful to state this information, especially including the date, so we can put what each author says into perspective.

MARY ANNE WARREN. "On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion." (pp. 126-130) 1973 [More biographical information will be given in class.]

2. **OVERVIEW:** (8-10 minutes) Briefly describe what the author's main thesis or point is, in the assigned material. Try to answer these questions briefly: What is the argument? [NOTE: I don't mind if you paraphrase the overview in the book, but the rest of your "Overview" needs to be *mostly* in your own words, with some important quotations you can mention, such as definitions, and you *must* mention at least something briefly from each section of the article, if it has sections.] What is the issue? How does the author support his or her position? Does the author make any assumptions in order to make his or her argument (if so, mention them)? Is the author making any objections against his or her opponents' position(s) (if so, mention them)? Mention the author's examples if possible, and bring in your own, contemporary or personal, examples whenever possible -- it helps students understand the material better. NOTE: Your Overview here should be much longer than your half page article summaries - you should read your presentation out loud just to time it and make sure it's about 8-10 minutes.
 - A. **Overview of Warren's view:** She takes the liberal position and thinks a "fetus is a human being which is not yet a person, and which therefore cannot coherently be said to have full moral rights." (128c1) A person has full moral rights in the moral community.
 - B. **Abortion, if it is murder, is wrong, regardless of its "tragic side effects":** E.g. women having restricted access to good physicians and equipment, illegal abortions, poor women not being able to afford abortions, etc. So, we need to show that abortion is not murder. Also, the appeal to the right to control one's body, which is generally construed as a property right, is feeble: Mere ownership does not give me the right to kill innocent people whom I find on my property; or a right to expel people from my property if I know that doing so will result in his/her death. Do I damage my *property* when I break my leg, or do I damage *myself*?
 - C. **ON THE DEFINITION OF HUMAN: The traditional moral argument of the conservative position has not been addressed:** that abortion is murder, and that it is wrong to kill innocent human beings. Who or what beings have full and equal moral rights in the moral community? What is the "moral" as opposed to the "genetic" definition of a human being? And this question is equivalent to the question: What is a person?
 - D. **DEFINING THE MORAL COMMUNITY: What is a person?** A person, according to Warren, has the following traits (127):
 1. **Consciousness**, and in particular the capacity to feel pain;
 2. **Reasoning** (developed capacity to solve new and relatively complex problems);
 3. **Self-motivated activity** (i.e., not related to genetic or direct external control);
 4. **Capacity to communicate**, by whatever means;

5. **Self-awareness** or having a concept of self.

Suppose we wanted to figure out if an alien were a being with full rights in our moral community. We need not suppose that the alien should have all 5 of these characteristics. Consciousness and reasoning may be sufficient, and consciousness, reasoning and self-motivated activity are probably quite *sufficient*. Not every one of these should be considered *necessary* for personhood (though consciousness, reasoning and self-motivated activity look pretty good for that). However, be this as it may, if we demonstrate that the fetus does not satisfy any of these 5 conditions, the fetus is definitely not a person. Note: In Warren's view, some humans are not persons (e.g., someone whose consciousness has been obliterated, severely mentally disabled, fetuses are humans who *will* be persons, but who aren't yet), and some persons are not humans (e.g., highly advanced, self-aware robots, intelligent aliens).

E. **FETAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE RIGHT TO LIFE: Two questions** (one at a time):

(1) *How far advanced since conception does a human being need to be before it begins to have a right to life by virtue of its being like a person?*

Answer: Even a 7 or 8 month old fetus is not significantly more personlike than a very small embryo, though it is somewhat more personlike: It can apparently feel pain, has a rudimentary form of consciousness (has an active brain); however, it's not fully conscious, cannot reason or communicate messages, is not self-motivated, and has no self-awareness. If a fetus is to have rights based on its resemblance to personhood, Warren argues, then it should have the same rights that, say, a guppy does. These rights would never override the mother's right to obtain an abortion at any stage of pregnancy, according to Warren. However *indecent* it may be for a woman to have an abortion in the later stages of her pregnancy, it is not immoral, and so ought to be permitted.

(2) *To what extent, if any, does the fact that a fetus has the potential for becoming a person endow it with some of the same rights?*

Answer: From the premise that the fact that an entity is a potential person is a strong *prima facie* reason for not destroying it, we do not need to conclude that a potential person has a right to life, by virtue of that potential. The rights of an actual (not potential) woman outweigh whatever *prima facie* rights a fetus may have, being a potential person, whenever the two conflict.

F. **POTENTIAL PERSONHOOD AND THE RIGHT TO LIFE: Thought experiment:** Suppose that you were captured by aliens who would split you up into every cell that makes you up, and that these cells would then be cloned that many times. Would it be morally permissible for you to escape and to prevent the many "you's" from coming into existence? Warren argues, "Yes." You would not be obligated to stay there no matter how you arrived there, merely for the sake of the potential persons. Analogously, a woman's right to protect her **health, happiness, freedom**, and even her life by terminating an unwanted pregnancy will always override whatever right to life it may be appropriate to ascribe to a fetus, even a fully developed one.

G. **[NOT IN OUR TEXTBOOK:] DR. Y'S NOTES ON WARREN'S "POSTSCRIPT ON INFANTICIDE" (February 26, 1982): A troubling OBJ: Warren's argument may appear to justify not only abortion, but infanticide as well.** For a newborn infant is not significantly more personlike than an advanced fetus, and consequently it would seem that if the destruction of the latter is permissible so too must be that of the former. Most people consider infanticide to be a form of murder, and thus never justified. **Warren's reply:** Warren grants that her argument implies that infanticide does not constitute the killing of a person. However, there are several reasons why infanticide is impermissible:

1. **Even if its parents do not want it and would not suffer from its destruction, there are other people who would like to have it, and would, in all probability, be deprived of a great deal of pleasure by its destruction.** So it is wrong, at least in this country and in this

period of history, other things being equal, to kill a newborn infant. Infanticide is wrong for reasons analogous to those that make it wrong to wantonly destroy natural resources or great works of art.

2. **Most of us value the lives of infants and would much prefer that they be preserved, by paying taxes to support orphanages rather than to allow unwanted infants to be destroyed.** "So long as there are people who want an infant preserved, and who are willing and able to provide a means of caring for it, under reasonably humane conditions, it is, other things being equal, wrong to destroy it. OBJ: If this argument shows that infanticide is wrong, at least at this time and in this country, doesn't it also show that abortion is wrong?" Warren's answer:
3. **Many people value fetuses, and are disturbed by their destruction, and would much prefer that they be preserved, even at some cost to themselves.** "As a potential source of pleasure to some family, a viable fetus is just as valuable as a viable infant." The crucial difference between a viable fetus and a viable infant? So long as the fetus is unborn, its preservation, contrary to the wishes of the pregnant woman, violates her rights to freedom, happiness, and self-determination. Her rights override the rights of those who would like the fetus preserved, just as if someone's life or limb is threatened by a wild animal, his right to protect himself by destroying the animal overrides the rights of those who would prefer that the animal not be harmed. Once the infant is born, however, its preservation no longer violates any of its mother's rights, even if she wants it destroyed, because she is free to put it up for adoption. Consequently, while the moment of birth does not mark a sharp discontinuity in the degree to which an infant possesses the right to life, it does mark the end of its mother's right to determine its fate. If abortion could be performed without killing the fetus, she would never possess the right to have the fetus destroyed, for the same reasons that she has no right to have an infant destroyed. On the other hand, it follows from my argument that when an unwanted or defective infant is born into a society that cannot afford and/or is not willing to care for it, then its destruction is permissible. This conclusion will, no doubt, strike many people as heartless and immoral; but the very existence of people who feel this way, and who are willing and able to provide care for unwanted infants, is reason enough to conclude that they should be preserved.

3. **CLARIFICATION:** (5-15 minutes, depending on your and the other students' questions) Is there anything about this material that you did not understand (after looking up unclear or unknown words, etc.)? What are you confused about? What did not make sense in the reading? What questions would you ask if you could talk to this philosopher right here and now? [NOTE: This is where I want everyone to be really honest and tell me if they were confused about ANYTHING! You will not have points taken off from your presentation for asking questions -- answering questions will only increase everyone's understanding of the material. This is also where I will answer your questions from everyone else's article summaries.]

I didn't have anything that I didn't really understand in this article, but I will answer your questions now.

4. **DEFENSE/CRITICISM/ANALYSIS:** (2-5 minutes -- not a one sentence summary of what you thought) What do you think about the author's argument or point? Do you agree and why or why not? Do you have any objection(s) to the author's argument? If so, how do you suppose the author would respond to it (or them)? Do you have a better idea, and if so, what is it? How does this author's position or argument compare with other authors' positions or arguments already presented?

[My advice/instruction: You can do a sort of pros and cons list here, and take a stand on what you really think. Try to come up with **something** good to say about the article even if you **really** disagree with it, or

with an objection if you think it's really great. Here, however, at the Praise/Criticism/Analysis stage, is where you can really let us know what you think – note that until this stage, we should have no real idea what you think of this article. To be fair to your opponent is to really give him or her the benefit of the doubt and lay out his or her position accurately, not throwing in snide or sarcastic comments, or saying that it's wrong while you're describing it. At this point, you really should not have a good idea of what I (or any presenter) think(s) about the arguments and points being made – this is being objective, and “doing good philosophy.” Pretend the person is in the room right now listening to you and is going to stand up and accuse you of being unfair if you get his or her view wrong! This pretending is for Steps 1-3 – for the Praise/Criticism/Analysis phase, you should still try to be fair, but let us know what you think.]

DY NOTE: Two consequences of Warren's view that “abortion and infanticide are not forms of murder”:

- (1) Infanticide may not necessarily be wrong to perform in countries (unlike ours) where people do not have the resources or desire to take care of infants.
- (2) Warren's way of putting the argument (in terms of personhood) has implications not only for abortion, but also for infanticide, euthanasia, and the moral rights of women and nonhuman animals. EX: Infanticide as a form of euthanasia may afford a terminally ill infant a painless death.

You should keep Warren's points and arguments about what makes a person a person separate from your feelings about abortion and infanticide. Here's what I mean: If she is correct about the five traits, and the first three being sufficient for personhood, the conclusion that follows from that claim is that a fetus is not a person. Her opponents cannot merely state that her five criteria are not right because that uncomfortable conclusion follows; her opponents must state what makes a person a person in a consistent way that does not include other implications, such as not having the definition imply that cancer cells, sperm, eggs, and the like, are persons.

Praise: Warren's view is interesting, considering its implications for other moral issues, whether or not she is right. Personhood is a central issue within the abortion issue.

Criticisms:

DY OBJ1: Warren argued that the fetus' potential is not a good reason to save the fetus, so how could it be in the case of an adult? If Warren's argument is sound, it seems to imply not only that infants may be killed, but that anyone who is comatose or senile or has advanced Alzheimer's disease can be killed any time anyone wishes, even if there is the potential for the person to come out of it (e.g., in the case of one's being comatose). It would seem that if a right to life exists, it is not only for “normal” adults or 1 year olds or older, but that these other people have a right to life as well.

POSTSCRIPT ON INFANTICIDE OBJs:

DY OBJ2: Since Warren favors actual rights v. potential rights, and given her argument that if people value infants or unwanted or “defective” infants, then isn't she saying that parents' actual rights to determine the fate of their children are overridden by society's rights to insist on adoption v. infanticide?

DY OBJ3: Warren argued that if people value unwanted or defective infants, then they should be preserved, but she also argued that even after viability, the mother's rights to freedom, happiness, and self-determination. This is inconsistent.

DY OBJ4: Isn't Warren effectively basing her anti-infanticide argument on a poll of whether or not people value infants and/or would like to take care of them? What if there are thousands of infants who await being adopted? Isn't it empty if many people say/feel that infants are valuable, but they're not being adopted?

And, what about troubled or parentless kids and teens whom no one has adopted yet? Would this show, given Warren's argument, that our society does not value them?

[NOTE: You don't have to have discussion questions. This is just to remind me to ask you about this issue: Does everyone see how difficult it is to define what a person is, but how crucial this is to the abortion question/issue?]