



THE DEMOCRACY PROJECT

II. ABORTION

5. THE MORAL AMBIGUITY OF ABORTION (RELATIONSHIP ID)

The two excerpts below, followed by a set of discussion questions, prompt students to consider the moral ambiguity of abortion. To extend student engagement, we offer an optional writing activity ([Relationship ID](#)) at the bottom of this section.

Activity: Document Analysis & Relationship ID

Directions:

1. Have students read and annotate the two excerpts below.
2. Review the questions below the excerpts. Students may respond in writing or through small or large group discussion.
3. (EXTENSION) Writing Activity: For a more comprehensive assignment, have students write a Relationship ID.

EXCERPT #1: From [“Owning Up to Abortion” by Barbara Ehrenreich](#)

[T]he possibility of abortion is built right into the process of prenatal care. Testing for fetal defects can now detect over 450 conditions, many potentially fatal or debilitating. Doctors may advise the screening tests, insurance companies often pay for them, and many couples (no hard numbers exist) are deciding to abort their imperfect fetuses.

The trouble is, not all of the women who are exercising their right to choose in these cases are willing to admit that that's what they are doing. Kate Hoffman, for example, who aborted a fetus with Down syndrome, was quoted in The Times on

June 20 as saying: "I don't look at it as though I had an abortion, even though that is technically what it is. There's a difference. I wanted this baby."

The prejudice is widespread that a termination for medical reasons is somehow on a higher moral plane than a run-of-the-mill abortion. In a 1999 survey of Floridians, for example, 82 percent supported legal abortion in the case of birth defects, compared with about 40 percent in situations where the woman simply could not afford to raise another child.

It would be unfair, though, to pick on the women who are in denial about aborting "defective" fetuses. At least 30 million American women have had abortions since the procedure was legalized, mostly for the kind of reasons that anti-abortion people dismiss as "convenience" -- a number that amounts to about 40 percent of American women. Yet in a 2003 survey conducted by a pro-choice group, only 30 percent of women were unambivalently pro-choice, suggesting that there may be an appalling number of women who are willing to deny others the right that they once freely exercised themselves.

Excerpt #1 (Ehrenreich): Discussion Questions

1. What are some points of moral ambiguity that Ehrenreich explores in this excerpt?
2. Is there a moral difference in choosing abortion for a fetus with Down Syndrome versus choosing abortion for a non-medical reason? Explain.
3. Is it ethically or politically defensible to choose an abortion for one's self but vote against abortion rights? Explain
4. What did you find to be the most compelling sentence in Ehrenreich's article?
5. If you could pose one question to the author (Barbara Ehrenreich), what would it be?

EXCERPT #2: From ["The Dishonesty of the Abortion Debate: Why We Need to Face the Best Arguments From the Other Side"](#) by Caitlin Flanagan

A picture of a 12-week fetus is a Rorschach test. Some people say that such an image doesn't trouble them, that the fetus suggests the possibility of a developed baby but is far too removed from one to give them pause. I envy them. When I see that image, I have the opposite reaction. I think: Here is one of us; here is a baby. She has fingers and toes by now, eyelids and ears. She can hiccup—that tiny, chest-quaking motion that all parents know. Most fearfully, she is starting to get a distinct profile, her one and only face emerging. Each of these 12-week fetuses bears its own particular code: this one bound to be good at music; that one destined for a life of impatience, of tap, tap, tapping his pencil on the desk, waiting for recess.

The argument for abortion, if made honestly, requires many words: It must evoke the recent past, the dire consequences to women of making a very simple medical procedure illegal. The argument against it doesn't take even a single word. The argument against it is a picture.

This is not an argument anyone is going to win. The loudest advocates on both sides are terrible representatives for their cause. When women are urged to "shout your abortion," and when abortion becomes the subject of stand-up comedy routines, the attitude toward abortion seems ghoulish. Who could possibly be proud that they see no humanity at all in the images that science has made so painfully clear? When anti-abortion advocates speak in the most graphic terms about women "sucking babies out of the womb," they show themselves without mercy. They are not considering the extremely human, complex, and often heartbreaking reasons behind women's private decisions. The truth is that the best argument on each side is a damn good one, and until you acknowledge that fact, you aren't speaking or even thinking honestly about the issue. You certainly aren't going to convince anybody. Only the truth has the power to move.

Excerpt #2: Flanagan Discussion Questions

1. Do you think Flanagan is "Pro-Life" or "Pro-Choice"? Why? What does this excerpt reveal about the limits of these terms?
2. What does Flanagan mean when she says that an ultrasound at 12 weeks is a Rorschach test?
3. What did you find to be the most compelling sentence in Flanagan's article?
4. If you could ask Flanagan one question, what would it be?
5. Where do you see points of convergence in Ehrenreich's and Flanagan's articles? What are some points of divergence? How, if at all, has the reading of one or both expanded your thinking about abortion?

(EXTENSION) WRITING ACTIVITY: [Relationship ID](#): Barbara Ehrenreich and Caitlin Flanagan

A Relationship ID is a brief piece of writing that provides an opportunity for students to demonstrate their understanding of two terms by synthesizing and analyzing—rather than summarizing. The Relationship ID prompts students to identify each author's position and then explore points of divergence and convergence between the two positions. Students then form a sophisticated thesis, a body paragraph with evidence and analysis, and a short conclusion explaining the broader significance of their argument to fully demonstrate their understanding.

