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## A Defense of Abortion

David Boonin has written the most thorough and detailed case for the moral permissibility of abortion yet published. Critically examining a wide range of arguments that attempt to prove that every human fetus has a right to life, he shows that each of these arguments fails on its own terms. He then explains how even if the fetus does have a right to life, abortion can still be shown to be morally permissible on the critic of abortion's own terms. Finally, he considers several arguments against abortion that do not depend on the claim that the fetus has a right to life – arguments based on the golden rule, on principles of uncertainty, or on various feminist theories – and concludes that these, too, are ultimately unsuccessful.

This major book will be especially helpful to those teaching applied ethics and bioethics whether in philosophy departments or professional schools of law and medicine. It will also interest students of women's studies as well as all general readers for whom abortion remains a high-profile and complex issue.

David Boonin is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

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DAVID BOONIN

*University of Colorado, Boulder*



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*For my students*

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## Preface

This was a difficult book to write for two reasons. One is that the subject with which it is concerned raises a number of philosophical questions that have no simple answers. In this sense, writing the book was intellectually difficult. It is, of course, a commonplace to observe that the moral problem of abortion is a difficult one. But it is a platitude that nonetheless merits repeating: Even though people say it all the time, relatively few people seem actually to believe it. Opponents of abortion typically seem to believe that the matter is fairly clear-cut: The fetus is a human being, killing human beings is morally wrong, abortion causes the death of the fetus, therefore abortion is morally wrong. And supporters of abortion often seem to treat the matter as equally simple: It's the woman's body, so it's her choice. This book grew out of a course on the ethics of abortion that I first offered at Tulane University in the fall of 1995, and if there is one thing that I learned from teaching that course, it is that the moral problem of abortion is every bit as complicated as the platitude would suggest.

The other reason that this book was difficult to write is more personal. On the desk in my office where most of this book was written and revised, there are several pictures of my son, Eli. In one, he is gleefully dancing on the sand along the Gulf of Mexico, the cool ocean breeze wreaking havoc with his wispy hair. In a second, he is tentatively seated in the grass in his grandparents' backyard, still working to master the feat of sitting up on his own. In a third, he is only a few weeks old, clinging firmly to the arms that are holding him and still wearing the tiny hat for preserving body heat that he wore home from the hospital. Through all of the remarkable changes that these pictures preserve, he remains unmistakably the same little boy.

## *Preface*

In the top drawer of my desk, I keep another picture of Eli. This picture was taken on September 7, 1993, 24 weeks before he was born. The sonogram image is murky, but it reveals clearly enough a small head tilted back slightly, and an arm raised up and bent, with the hand pointing back toward the face and the thumb extended out toward the mouth. There is no doubt in my mind that this picture, too, shows the same little boy at a very early stage in his physical development. And there is no question that the position I defend in this book entails that it would have been morally permissible to end his life at this point.

Perhaps it will be thought distasteful of me to mention this fact. I find, on the contrary, that what is distasteful is to think of abortion as a purely theoretical issue, an intriguing philosophical problem that should be grappled with only in abstract and impersonal terms. It is true that abortion poses an intriguing philosophical problem, and it is true that it is necessary to apply abstract and general categories of thought to it in order to make progress in its resolution. That is what I have attempted to do in this book. But the moral problem of abortion is not like other intellectual puzzles where little is at stake beyond the mere display of philosophical acumen, and it is objectionable to think of it as if it were. It gives me no pleasure to confess that there were times when I was working on this book when I was tempted to lose sight of this important fact, even though it is precisely the practical gravity of the problem that drew me to this research project in the first place. On those occasions, when to my dismay I found myself becoming more concerned with being clever than with being right, when I was tempted to complacently embrace an unconvincing response to a cogent objection to my position rather than to seriously confront the possibility that my position stood in need of revision, I often pulled that picture out of my drawer. That picture prevented me from giving in to such inclinations. It forced me to ask myself directly and honestly not whether I believed that the words that I had thus far written were impressive, or whether they might convince others, or whether they might be good enough to be published, but simply whether I believed that they were true. In doing so, the picture in my desk drawer made my task far more challenging and, at times, emotionally burdensome. My hope is that, in the end, it also helped me to do justice to a difficult and important subject.

## Acknowledgments

This book began as a series of lecture notes for a course on the ethics of abortion, a course that I first taught at Tulane University in the fall of 1995. My first and most important debt is therefore to my students, both at Tulane and later at the University of Colorado. Virtually every decision that I made about how to organize, present, clarify, analyze, and revise the material in this book was shaped by the questions and comments that arose through my teaching of the issues that the book covers in a variety of courses over a period of several years. It is possible that I could have written a book about abortion without the countless contributions that my students made to my thinking and my writing on this subject, but I could not have written *this* book. I am therefore pleased to acknowledge how much this book owes to the many students who studied the problem of abortion with me over the last several years and to dedicate the final result to them.

As my sketchy lecture notes gradually began to be transformed into readable paragraphs, arguments, and chapters, I benefited enormously from a further pool of talented critics. Some of these were colleagues, first at Tulane and then, as I came closer to a final draft, at the University of Colorado. Of these, I would especially like to thank Bruce Brower, Graeme Forbes, and Eric Mack at Tulane and Luc Bovens, Claudia Mills, Jim Nickel, Graham Oddie, and Michael Tooley at Colorado. Claudia and Michael, in particular, deserve special thanks for meticulously poring over the entire penultimate draft of the book and providing extremely clear and detailed suggestions for further revisions. Although I cannot say that I was happy to see how much more work they found for me to do at a time when I thought I was very close to being finished, I can now honestly say that I am grateful that they prodded me into doing it.

### *Acknowledgments*

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In addition to the intellectual support that I depended on during the writing of this book, I would also like briefly to acknowledge three further sources of assistance. One is financial: I am grateful to the Senate Committee on Research at Tulane University for a grant that supported research during the summer of 1995 and to the University of Colorado for a grant that supported further work in the summer of 1999. The second is editorial: I would like to thank Terry Moore, my editor at Cambridge University Press, for all of his work on behalf of this project, and to apologize belatedly for neglecting to thank him in the acknowledgments to my previous book for the equally valuable assistance he provided me with then. My final debt is personal: I am profoundly grateful to my friends and family for their love and support. Without their support, finishing this book would not have been possible. Without their love, finishing it would not have been worthwhile.