SLIDE 1 INTRODUCTION

When people feel passionate about a topic it can be difficult to hear different points of view. While ethicists are often passionate about issues, they draw on their training as philosophers to avoid trading emotion for reason. Abortion is an emotional issue for many. To look at abortion from a philosophical view requires that emotions, however justified, be temporarily set aside in order that it can be examined with tools of philosophy. This is not to imply that the ethics of abortion can be determined by reason alone. Rather, it is an attempt to establish a set of basic principles drawn from reflection on human experience that can be accepted by every side of this contentious issue. Reason tries to establish a common language that all parties can use with the hope that better understanding might lead to better outcomes.

SLIDE 2 ABORTION – Indirect/direct

The distinction between direct and indirect abortion can be helpful. Indirect abortion is a natural part of reproduction. When a spontaneous abortion occurs early in the process it is unlikely that the mother is even aware. When it occurs later it is considered a miscarriage. When there is no intent to end a pregnancy an abortion is considered indirect, even if human activity is involved, such as a fall while skiing or taking medicine for an unrelated matter. Indirect abortions are generally considered non-controversial and are normally not considered to be ethically suspect.

Direct abortions or induced abortions are those that result from human actions intended to end the pregnancy. The principle of *Double Effect* can be helpful in determining if human action will be the direct or the indirect cause of an abortion.

The Principle of Double Effect addresses cases where an action has two types of effects. When one effect is both good and desirable while the other is bad and undesirable, the good action is permitted if:

1. The action itself is good or morally indifferent.
2. The agent intends only the good and not the bad effect.
3. The bad cannot be the means to the good effect.
4. The good effect must be greater than the bad effect (There must be proportionality between the good and the bad effect).
SLIDE 3 DIRECT ABORTION

There are three basic positions on the moral status of direct abortions. First, abortions should be generally permissible. Second, abortions should be permissible only in limited circumstances. Third, abortions should not be permissible.

These positions mainly rest on the application of two basic principles; the utilitarian goal of reducing pain and suffering while promoting happiness and the deontological principle of rights. To a lesser degree these positions are also dependent on the controversial idea of personhood, especially when it is applied to a fetus (The term fetus is used here, referring to any stage of development between fertilization to birth).

SLIDE 4 ABORTION IS PERMISSIBLE

The first position is that direct abortions are generally permissible. There are two principles that are commonly used to support this position. The first is the autonomy argument, which recognizes the special right of a person to make decisions concerning his or her own body. In the case of abortion, the pregnant women would be exercising her right of autonomy when choosing to have an abortion. Essentially this was the legal decision that the U.S. Supreme Court reached in the case of Roe v. Wade.

Autonomy is a highly respected principle in medicine, but it is not absolute. If a non-viable fetus is part of the woman’s body then the principle of autonomy would seem to hold. If however a non-viable fetus has dignity or rights, then the mother’s autonomy may not be absolute.

The other important argument supporting the general permissibility of abortion is utilitarian. The principle of utility states that actions that increase the overall good or reduce the overall suffering for those involved are morally good while those that produce more overall harm are morally wrong. An abortion is always permissible when there is a reasonable chance that it will prevent greater hardship and suffering for the parents, the child, or society than will allowing an unwanted, unplanned, or abnormal child to be born.

The argument is that having a baby and raising a child is difficult. Many unnecessary hardships can result from unwanted and unplanned pregnancies. Many parents are not equipped for the task of raising a child. Child and parents alike suffer from poverty, lack of education and job opportunity, drug addiction. There can also be strong emotional suffering from pregnancies that result from rape, incest and abuse. Ending a pregnancy that has a high likelihood of increasing suffering is the right thing to do under this perspective. Waiting for a time when the parents are better prepared for the responsibility of raising children reduces the burdens on parents, children and society as a whole.

One important objection to this utilitarian reasoning is that abortion becomes a type of birth control used indiscriminately. In effect, abortion on demand removes some of the consequences of poor planning and thoughtless, even reckless behavior by potential parents.

SLIDE 5 LIMITED ABORTION POSITION

The limited abortion position recognizes the problems with both the rights positions and the utilitarian positions and tries to find a middle ground. There are two rights positions. The first is that the
woman has the right of autonomy over her own body and health. The second is that the fetus, as a person, has rights including the right to life. The limited abortion position recognizes the validity of both points. Furthermore, since there is no general agreement on when a fetus becomes a person, it is impossible to definitively identify which right should prevail except in a case by case manner.

Two considerations are important. First, because an abortion is permanent, the right of the fetus should be given *prima facie* privilege. This means that on the face of things abortion should not be considered.

But, under certain circumstances where the certainty of potential suffering is great, the right parents have to make autonomous choices may prevail. This means that the utilitarian principle is only invoked is very particular cases such as rape, incest, the health of the mother or the likelihood of the birth of a child with serious abnormalities.

Utilitarian criteria such as the youth of the parents, potential poverty of the family and various social burdens that result from unplanned or unwanted pregnancies do not predict suffering to any great extent. Many children are born every day into lives of poverty and limited opportunities and yet they become joys to their parents and have productive lives. In the limited abortion position, the principle of utility is invoked only in those rare cases when the suffering of those involved is far greater than would normally be expected.

**SLIDE 6 Direct Abortion is Never Permissible**

The position that abortion is never permissible is a deontological approach, primarily focused on the rights of the fetus and the duty of society to protect the rights of the vulnerable. This approach rejects the utilitarian position that abortion can be used as a way of limiting suffering. These rights positions are dependent on establishing the personhood of the infant. When a fetus becomes a person is not a simple matter. Biological existence does not entail moral status. For example, groups of human tissue in a test tube does not establish rights. Arguments for conception, viability and birth as the moment of personhood all have their strengths and weaknesses.

Basing the impermissibility of abortion on the rights of the fetus makes an argument about humans in general and not specifically about fetuses or infants. If we do not grant the right to life for all biological human beings we open ourselves up to all sorts of practices that we would find repulsive, such as killing people for population control or exterminating people for political or economic reasons. Persons have rights by virtue of their relationship to humanity. There is an implication here that persons have a connection to others beyond their individual abilities, potentials and contributions to the whole.

Basing the impermissibility of abortion on the duty to protect the marginalized and the vulnerable goes a step beyond the assertion that a fetus has rights. Certainly there is a claim here that all humans have rights, even the most marginalized and vulnerable. These rights are not lost merely based on the argument that the fetus is not self-conscious, cannot reason, and has no capacity to communicate with others. The rights of the vulnerable and the marginalized are strengthened by the duty of society to affirm and protect these rights for the sake of those who are unable to do so themselves. In a sense, the rights of the marginalized flow from the dignity of the whole of humanity.
People often rely on their religion to provide moral guidance. Most religious traditions have a specific approach to the issue of abortion and many have very specific rules and guidelines. The Roman Catholic tradition has a long history when it comes to teaching about abortion and has been an important influence in America.

The Roman Catholic Church has consistently taken the position that direct abortion is never permissible. Their position is summed up in the 2008 Vatican document *The Dignity of the Person (Dignitas Personae)*. “The dignity of a person must be recognized in every human being from conception to natural death. This fundamental principle expresses a great “yes” to human life and must be at the center of ethical reflection on biomedical research.”

While the Roman Catholic teaching on Abortion has much in common with the argument that the standard abortion is never permissible, it builds on the basic premises that personhood begins at conception and that humans have duty to protect the marginalized and the vulnerable.

Three factors that are central to Roman Catholic teaching are the assertion that abortion is a human concern and not merely a religious concern, the claim that abortion is a direct attack on innocent life, and the conviction that abortion fails in the Christian command to “love the least among us.”

Because the church teaches that abortion is a human concern and not just a religious concern, it tends to make arguments against abortion using natural law reasoning, rather than making specifically religious argument. Relying on a philosophical approach to abortion rather than a religious approach is a means of building understanding between people whose ethical decisions come from their faith and those whose decisions have a different source. As Pope John Paul II wrote: “Philosophical thought is often the only ground for understanding and dialogue with those who do not share our faith”. (1998, *Fides et Ratio*).

Another contribution made by Roman Catholic teaching has been the development of the principle called “A Consistent Ethics of Life.” The desire here is to avoid some of the disagreement surrounding abortion by putting the issue into a larger context, a commitment to life in all of its manifestations.

A consistent ethic of life links a variety of moral issues together in order illuminate a common framework that people work from. These life issues include capital punishment, war, nuclear proliferation, care of the dying, genetic manipulation and poverty, as well as abortion. The hope is that such an approach forms a “seamless garment” which provides a clear context that removes abortion from the “single issue” category and places it at the center of human concerns.

Furthermore, by linking issues of poverty, healthcare, and other social problems as being related to abortion, the potential to reduce the negative consequences of having an unplanned or unwanted child can be more easily addressed, reducing the chance that the utilitarian position that abortion is permissible to avoid suffering will be used.