

For: The Dictionary of American Philosophers

THOMSON, Judith Jarvis (1929–)

Judith Jarvis Thomson received her BA from Barnard College in 1950, her MA from Cambridge University in 1956, and a Ph.D. from Columbia University in 1959. Her first teaching position was at Barnard where she was a lecturer from 1955–9, an instructor from 1959–60, and then Assistant Professor from 1960–2. In 1963, she moved to Boston, first as an Assistant Professor at Boston University (1963–4), and then to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where she has remained ever since. She became full Professor in 1969, and between 1990 and 1996 held the Laurence S. Rockefeller Chair in Philosophy at MIT. She has received a large number of awards and honours, and contributed in many ways to professional philosophy in America. In 1992, she held the Presidency of the American Philosophical Association (Eastern Division), and in 1999, she gave the Tanner Lectures at Princeton University. She is Chair of the American Philosophical Association's Board of Officers for 2002-5, and gave the Association's Carus Lectures in 2003. She is also widely acknowledged as one of the best teachers of philosophy, and the excellence of the graduate program at MIT is due in no small measure to her influence.

Thomson's philosophical work ranges widely but her main areas of concentration are moral philosophy and metaphysics. In moral philosophy, Thomson has made seminal contributions to all three sub-fields of that discipline, applied ethics, moral theory and meta-ethics. (Indeed, the nature of her work makes these divisions seem somewhat artificial.) The papers gathered together in *Rights, Restitution and Risk*, and, since then, papers such as, 'Self-Defence', 'Physician Assisted Suicide: Two Moral Arguments' and 'Assisted Suicide: The Philosophers Brief' (written jointly with John RAWLS, Robert NOZICK, Ronald DWORKIN,

T.M.Scanlon and Thomas NAGEL) discuss the morality of a range of issues of practical concern. *Moral Realism and Moral Objectivity* (written with Gilbert Harman), 'The Right and the Good', and *Goodness and Advice* contain a general treatment of meta-ethics and moral theory. *The Realm of Rights* is an expansive work that includes all three themes.

In metaphysics she has concentrated on questions about actions and events, and about time and parts. *Acts and Other Events*, 'The Individuation of Action' and 'The Time of a Killing' present a metaphysics of action, while 'Parthood and Identity over Time' and 'The Statue and the Clay' take up a range of questions about identity and constitution. 'Parthood and Identity Over Time' is particularly noteworthy for resisting the view, so dominant in contemporary metaphysical thought, that the notion of a temporal part can be used to account for various puzzles about identity. In addition to her work on moral philosophy and metaphysics, Thomson has made contributions to philosophy of mind ("Molyneux's Problem"), philosophy of science ("Grue"), and, in the course of discussing topics in action and morals, the philosophy of language. Overall, her work is characterized by its exemplary clarity, its foundation on examples, its inventiveness, and depth.

In the 1970s, Thomson became extremely well known as the author of 'A Defense of Abortion', which appeared in the first issue of *Philosophy and Public Affairs* in 1971. In the words of one recent commentator, this paper "had an immediate impact on philosophers' discussions of abortion. And, after more than a quarter of century it continues to play a pivotal role in thinking and writing about abortion" (Davis, 2001, 81). The key of idea of the paper is to avoid for purposes of argument the question of whether the foetus is a person. Suppose the foetus *is* a person—how is it supposed to follow that it may not be killed? The usual response is to reason in the following apparently straightforward way: the foetus is a person; all persons have a

right to life; hence it is always immoral to kill the foetus, i.e. for doing so flouts its right to life. But Thomson shows that the idea of a right to life is vastly more controversial and difficult than it at first appears, and that to see this is to see the mistake in the argument.

To bring out the difficulty, she presents, in a passage that has since become one of the most famous of modern philosophy, the following imaginary case:

You wake up in the morning and find yourself back to back in bed with an unconscious violinist. A famous unconscious violinist. He has been found to have a fatal kidney ailment and the Society for Music Lovers has canvassed all the available medical records and found that you alone have the right blood type to help. They have therefore kidnapped you, and last night the violinist's circulatory system was plugged into yours... (1971, p. 3)

Thomson completes the story by imagining that the director of the hospital tells you that you can't unplug yourself without killing the violinist, and moreover that you must remain like that for a period of nine months (and, in another version of the story, for the rest of your life). Does morality require that you stay in bed so that the violinist may live? A parody of the straightforward argument would suggest so: All persons have a right to life, and violinists are persons, etc. But of course the intuitive response is just the opposite: it is clearly not required by any reasonable moral principle that you lie in bed for the rest of your life. But then there must indeed be something wrong with the argument from the premise that the foetus is a person and all persons have a right to life to the conclusion that abortion is impermissible. In the remainder of the article Thomson spells out precisely what is wrong with it, viz. that it rests on a mistaken conception of what having a right to life consists in. The right to life does not consist in, or include, the right not to be killed; nor does it consist in, or include, or the right to be given the bare minimum to sustain life. It consists rather in the right not to be killed unjustly. On the other

hand, if the right to life consists in the right not to be killed unjustly, the straightforward argument above is invalid. The position on abortion that emerges at the end of the article is not what every defender of abortion wants – it does not entail that abortion is morally permissible in every case, for example – but Thomson makes a persuasive case that it is nevertheless intuitively the correct response. (Some more recent views by Thomson on this issue are contained in ‘Abortion’; for a recent discussion and further references see David Boonin’s *A Defense of Abortion*.)

Responding to one critic of ‘A Defence...’ Thomson remarked that the issue about the right to life raised in the article was in fact perfectly general: “the situation about rights...is really this: all of them are problematic in the way I mentioned—none of them will serve anybody in the very simple and clear way in which the opponents of abortion have seemed to think that the right to life will serve them” (1973, p. 22). It is natural to view remarks such as this as prompting her own later work on rights, including in particular *Rights, Restitution and Risk*, *The Realm of Rights*, and a number of articles since then. This work contains a detailed investigation into the idea that for a person to have a right is for him or her to have a certain moral status, and in particular into the relation between this idea, on the one hand, and other moral ideas, on the other, including in particular the ideas associated with talk about ‘ought’ and ‘good’. The theory that emerges is not easily summarized in a pithy phrase, but, as Thomson says in *Goodness and Advice*, a theory that would replace consequentialism “would lack the simplicity of Consequentialism. But then we really shouldn’t have expected a theory of what we ought to do to be simple as Consequentialists take it to be” (2001, p.47).

The Realm of Rights opens with some meta-ethical remarks, and in particular includes a discussion of the Fact-Value Gap, roughly, the idea that no moral sentence is entailed by any

factual or non-moral sentence. The issue of how to react to the Fact-Value Gap forms the basis of much of Thomson's recent work, contained in *Moral Realism and Moral Objectivity*, 'The Right and the Good', *Goodness and Advice*, and other works. Her starting point is an observation due to Peter Geach (Geach 1956) about the logic of the word 'good'. Geach observed that 'good' is in a many ways like 'big': you aren't plain good or big, you are a good pianist or a big land mammal. Indeed – and this point is Thomson's rather than Geach's – the situation with 'good' is more extreme than the situation with 'big'. In the latter case, a statement of the form 'X is big' uniformly permits expansion into a statement of the form 'X is a big F'. Not so for 'good'. Sometimes a statement of the form 'X is good' permits this sort of expansion. But sometimes it doesn't, permitting instead expansion to 'X is good at doing F' or 'X is good for F-ing' or 'X is good to Fs' or 'X is good with Fs' and perhaps others. Thomson summarizes these points in the slogan: all goodness is goodness in a way, and goes on to develop them in two directions. First, she argues that the persuasiveness of the Fact-Value Gap depends largely on failing to see that all goodness is goodness in a way, and failing to see something which is entailed by this, viz., that there is no such property as the property of goodness (or of rightness etc.). Second, Thomson argues that, if there is no such property as goodness, we are in possession of a very good reason to reject utilitarianism. Utilitarianism here is a thesis which defines the right in terms of the good, or, rather, as the right action as the one that makes the world better than (i.e. contain more good than) it would otherwise. But if there is no property of goodness, there is also no relation of betterness; hence utilitarianism rests on a mistake.

In this work, we see Thomson responding to and rejecting themes that have dominated moral thinking since Moore's *Principia Ethica* (1903), including questions about the relation between fact and value, the notion of goodness and the definition of the right in terms of the

good. With one major exception, Moore raises the questions that are central to moral philosophy in the last hundred years. The major exception is the set of questions concerning applied ethics and political philosophy that became very prominent in the 1970s. Thomson's work provides a strategy, not simply for answering the Moorean questions, but in addition for connecting the Moorean questions with questions of a more practical nature.

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