

Reframing Abortion Lessons¹
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Abstract: A perennial topic in introductory ethics classes, abortion has offered students a real-life issue to critically analyze. In this paper, I argue a popular approach to teaching abortion in such classes fails to attend to relevant political contexts of the issue and that this contributes to harms against pregnant people. I will argue for these conclusions by identifying three related problems with such an approach: these lessons frame a political issue as apolitical, value impartiality over lived experiences in moral assessment, and objectify the already-objectified group of pregnant people in the course of debating about them. I will then point to considerations that may help counter the harms caused by this approach and informed by these problems. These involve framing abortion lessons in terms of the relevant political and historical context of abortion and incorporating first-person accounts that engage with the embodied, lived experiences of abortion.

I. Introduction

The choices we make as educators are not value neutral. Nearly every choice that contributes to the structure of a course may reveal some value we hold whether we realize it or not. We do not just curate reading lists, pick assignments, and lead class discussions. We also choose what content is worth reading, which voices can be omitted, and which perspectives ought to be taken. In so doing, we reveal our own (and our profession's) values about what—and who—matters and tacitly convey this to our students. Far beyond due dates and word counts, our choices as educators are immediately important.

Covert values are especially apparent in ethics lessons, specifically with regard to communicating which factors are morally relevant to a given issue or case. Part of the challenge in teaching introductory ethics classes is in helping students identify morally relevant and irrelevant factors. Yet despite the impulse to silo 'pure' morality from irrelevant contextual factors, certain moral issues are seated in very relevant historical, political, and social

¹ This article was published as LaGuardia-LoBianco, A. 2022. "Reframing Abortion Lessons." *Teaching Ethics*, 22(2): 201-217. <https://doi.org/10.5840/tej202322123>

circumstances. In order to give a proper moral assessment of these issues, educators should recognize how such factors bear on the moral issue and contextualize the moral questions accordingly. Failing to situate certain ethical issues in this way would present a distorted, myopic lesson.

Such a mistake can be seen in its extreme with many abortion lessons in introductory ethics classes. A popular approach to this topic lays out abortion debates in terms of the moral status of the fetus and then proceeds to weigh rights to bodily autonomy against any purported rights the fetus may have. While these factors are certainly morally relevant to the issue, I will argue that they are far from the only—perhaps even primary—factors that bear on the question of abortion’s permissibility. Specifically, I will argue that the recognition of the historical, social, and political conditions from which abortion debates emerge should radically change how the topic of abortion is conventionally taught in introductory ethics classes. Indeed, I’ll argue that this change is long overdue.

My central contention is that a popular approach to teaching abortion in introductory ethics classes fails to attend to relevant political contexts and that this contributes to harms against women and other pregnant people. I will argue for these conclusions by identifying three related problems with such an approach: these lessons frame a political issue as apolitical, prioritized impartiality over lived experiences as relevant for moral assessment, and objectify an already objectified group of pregnant people in the course of debating about them. I will then point to potential solutions that may help counter the harms caused by this approach and informed by these problems. These involve framing abortion lessons in terms of the relevant political and historical context and incorporating first-person accounts that engage with the embodied, lived experiences of abortion.

Among our choices as educators are those that can either entrench or challenge power dynamics. Rectifying the harms introduced by one popular approach to teaching abortion in introductory ethics classes thus requires a political redesign of an ethical issue. My argument is not about whether we should teach abortion lessons, but rather about *how* we should do so in order to give a more comprehensive lesson of the moral factors involved.

Some caveats are in order. My criticism is only directed at certain discussions and lessons on abortion: those that set up abortion as *merely* an ethical debate of the moral status of the fetus and the rights granted therein (explained further below). I do not implicate the philosophers or arguments used in such lessons in my criticism, for I think their work is valuable. Rather, I am concerned with the choices educators make when deciding how to frame and execute these lessons. Additionally, I will use “pregnant people” to refer broadly to cis-women, non-binary people, and transgender men—that is, the set of any bodies that may be capable of pregnancy—and refer to the subset of cis-women as needed.

II. Problems with the Conventional Approach to Abortion Lessons

It is no surprise that abortion has become a perennial topic in ethics classes. The two sides of the debate are clear, the morally relevant features are easily identified (e.g. rights to life and to bodily autonomy) which provides good practice for critically assessing those factors as they pertain to an important real-world problem. What I will call the conventional approach to teaching abortion can be summed up by one of its progenitors: “Many of the most insightful and careful writers on the ethics of abortion...believe that whether or not abortion is morally permissible stands or falls on whether or not a fetus is the sort of being whose life it is seriously wrong to end” (Marquis 1989, 68). Accordingly, an abortion section in an ethics course may

involve a ‘pro-life’ paper (such as Marquis’) and a ‘pro-choice’ paper (like Mary Anne Warren’s [1973] or Judith Jarvis Thomson’s [1971]).ⁱ Doing so frames the debate in terms of the moral status of the fetus and whether any rights the fetus may have weigh against the rights of the pregnant person.

While I do not claim that this approach is representative of all philosophical papers or discussions of abortion, it does seem a common approach, and in any case, my criticism applies only to this sort of framing of the lesson.ⁱⁱ The conventional approach I describe can be roughly understood in terms of a “signature pedagogy” (Shulman 2005). According to Lee Shulman, a signature pedagogy in the professions indicates the “types of teaching that organize the fundamental ways in which future practitioners are educated for their new professions” that include characteristic ways of thinking and behaving with regard to that profession (2005, 52). For example, Shulman notes the signature pedagogy of the case method in law, in which the professor asks questions of students who rarely interact with one another (2005). Attention to signature pedagogies in a given profession are informative, for

[t]hey implicitly define what counts as knowledge in a field and how things become known. They define how knowledge is analyzed, criticized, accepted, or discarded. They define the functions of expertise in a field, the locus of authority, and the privileges of rank and standing. (Shulman 2005, 54)

Shulman notes that signature pedagogies are not exclusive to professional training (2005, 53). So, even though very few in an introduction ethics class will go on to become professional philosophers, we can still interpret the conventional approach as a signature pedagogy in the discipline that may influence those who do go on to become professionals, in addition to conveying information about professional philosophy to those students who do not. The

“signature” here includes a way of analyzing the issue of the permissibility of abortion (framing it as a debate among rights), the sort of information and evidence that is made salient to the debate, the set of classical texts that are often assigned, and so on. Taken together, this pedagogical approach to abortion (what I’m calling the conventional approach) indicates a disciplinary standard about how this debate should be approached and unpacked, which itself conveys knowledge beyond the arguments analyzed—and which thus influences future professionals who may go on to teach the topic.

While this conventional approach certainly has pedagogical benefits, I will argue that it can create harms which outweigh these benefits and which call for a change in our teaching practices. These problems are: these lessons frame a political issue as apolitical, deny lived experiences as relevant for moral assessment, and objectify pregnant people in the course of debating about them. I will consider each in turn before discussing potential solutions in the final section. These considerations overlap, and I make the distinctions between them for clarity only.

i. Depoliticizing a political issue

First, the conventional approach problematically depoliticizes abortion lessons. While it is important to identify the morally relevant features of abortion for moral assessment, framing the debate *primarily* in terms of the rights of the fetus versus the rights of the pregnant person myopically omits the political context of these debates: a patriarchal society in which pregnant people’s—including cisgender women’s—bodies are controlled and in which abortion, specifically, has been used as a tool of this control (see for instance MacKinnon 1982; Manne 2017). To be clear, I am not claiming that pregnant people’s lives and rights are not being considered in these debates—they are—nor that the moral status of the fetus is not important—it

is. But to start with the central question of the moral status of the fetus, and only *then* weigh up the pregnant person's rights against it, blatantly neutralizes the political aspects of the issue. Given that the practice and policies of abortion is historically intertwined with gender injustice, framing the permissibility of abortion as primarily a quasi-metaphysical debate of moral personhood fails to recognize this injustice. And that context seems deeply morally relevant.

Why should a moral question attend to the political context of that question? Some may argue that the ethical and the political ought to be kept separate: the question of the permissibility of abortion is solely an ethical question, and to consider any political context dilutes pure moral reasoning. Perhaps these are practical considerations that bear on policy choices, but these are irrelevant to ethical assessment. I think there are a few reasons to reject this view that the ethical and political can, and should, be separated.ⁱⁱⁱ First, in general, it is only in theory that the ethical and political can be hermetically sealed from one another, and even then, a theoretical boundary is not obvious. Moral issues are not always politically neutral, and political issues can have moral consequences. More importantly, dynamics of power, privilege, and systemic disadvantage *do* work their way into ideas and theories, even those hoped to be 'purely' moral. The history of feminist ethics is one testament to this reality.^{iv} So, the suggestion that we shouldn't consider power and systems of injustice when doing ethics may belie a privilege of neutrality.

Additionally, the history of the abortion debate in the U.S. is *literally* a political issue. In an effort to expand its dwindling voter base, the GOP (via the "new right") targeted social conservatives and religious pro-life voters starting in the 1970s (McKeegan 1993). This effort shifted the Republican platform to center "family values" and a pro-life stance in an explicit attempt to gain political allies (McKeegan 1993).^v The justification for this particular effort to

maintain women's 'rightful' childbearing place in a patriarchal society—and punishing those who try to step out of it—has been well argued (see Manne 2017). We clearly see the impact of these efforts in the Republican party today as abortion has continued to be a central moral-political, vote-garnering issue. This has most clearly affected this makeup of the Republican party, which has become a de facto pro-life party, but the Democratic party also has a small share of detractors for whom the pro-life position is important enough to defy party stance (see for instance Grisales 2022). In other words, we've seen how politicians' stance on abortion has become a central political metric of their platforms. Arguably, introductory ethics courses would not be discussing abortion at all if it were not thusly introduced into mainstream discourse for unambiguously partisan purposes. Indeed, prior to this shift, second wave feminists were able to help secure a federal right to abortion. Yet, the biggest threat to this right's existence ultimately came in 2022 when *Roe v. Wade* was overturned (Gerstein and Ward 2022), suggesting that the present conception of abortion as a moral controversy arose from the GOP's co-optation of a particular religious pro-life viewpoint.^{vi} Especially in light of this history, one cannot seriously take abortion to be an apolitical issue, at least in the United States. And if that is right, then we should not only teach this history in abortion lessons but should *frame* these debates in terms of this political context in order to yield a more accurate moral assessment (this point will be discussed further below).

A second consideration that supports the recognition of the political dynamics of abortion falls out of the goals of ethical analysis. Since it is meant to identify harms and avoid wrongs, ethical analysis should care about the actual people who have been victimized by anti-choice positions: pregnant and potentially pregnant people. It is undisputed that oppression is a harmful wrong, and hardly controversial to feminists that abortion restrictions have functioned to control

bodies that may be or become pregnant (see for instance Frye 1983 and MacKinnon 1982). But restrictions on women's bodily autonomy exist before one even considers the status of the fetus. For example, consider that access to birth control is made difficult for many women, or that some school-aged girls are subjected to deeply sexualized school dress codes that effectively control what they wear. Abortion restrictions are perhaps a more extreme form of institutionalized bodily control, but they are undeniably part of an existing pattern. In short, abortion lessons should recognize the existing social and political harms caused by abortion restrictions *because* they are relevant to the moral analysis—both in themselves and insofar as they represent an oppressive pattern. Failure to recognize this oppression in ethical debates just seems a convenient way to avoid talking about those who are harmed by anti-choice positions and policies.

A final problem with the apolitical framing of abortion lessons involves the discussions of rights. The conventional approach sidesteps the history of abortion restrictions as a political weapon of gender oppression. This is needed to isolate the extent of the fetus's (purported) right to life in ethical debates. But in a society in which pregnant people's bodily autonomy is constantly under threat (and not only by abortion restrictions), it is in bad faith to focus the moral question on whether a fetus's purported right to life outweighs a pregnant person's right to bodily autonomy precisely *because* the latter right is not fully respected to begin with. I'm not claiming that the right to bodily autonomy can never be outweighed, nor am I arguing that we cannot debate ethical matters concerning oppressed groups because they are oppressed. Quite the opposite—we need to figure out these ethical issues. But I am suggesting that we need to do so in a politically informed way. That is, it is an incomplete moral approach to weigh up types of rights if we don't also acknowledge that the rights of the groups in question have not been fully

respected. Situating the abortion rights debate within the relevant social-political context of women's rights is not only historically relevant, but it can also help ground the more abstract reasoning concerning rights. Again, this will bear on the moral analysis; looking at the broader politics of women's rights may not tell us the answer to abortion's permissibility in itself, but it could yield a richer, and more honest, philosophical discussion (this strategy will be discussed further in the final section).

So far, I've argued that treating abortion lessons as apolitical fails to recognize the morally relevant political context of abortion. Doing so yields an incomplete moral analysis since it disregards the morally relevant use of abortion restrictions as a tool of oppression. Thus, abortion lessons and debates cannot—and should not—be presented as politically neutral.

ii. Prioritizing Impartiality over Lived Experience

A second problem with the conventional approach concerns impartiality. In philosophy courses we teach our students to fairly assess the many sides of an argument with sound reasoning. This often involves adopting an impartial stance: one suspends their personal opinions so that they can focus on arguments. Doing so helps center the importance of *reasons*, since any side that can be supported with reasons is worth considering. So too with this debate: each side of the abortion debate has, *prima facie*, an equal claim to truth and thus each side starts out as equally legitimate pending further analysis. Such an approach may be as especially important for topics like the permissibility of abortion that can easily devolve into political pathos. Further, the emphasis on impartiality suggests that lived experience can—and should—be set aside when evaluating arguments. Indeed, arguing from lived experience may be viewed as a personal bias that distracts from an objective evaluation of the moral issue, or else an overly generalized piece of evidence

that cannot be usefully applied to ethical analysis *because* only part of the population can experience it.^{vii} Thus, anyone with a decent argument can take a stance on an issue since ethics is, here, divorced from lived realities—which is meant to account for assessing the strength of reasons for different positions on an experience that is not generalizable or equally shared.

Now, I do not take issue with this general method, and think it important to separate out reasons for a position from unwarranted bias towards it. Again, I suggest the problem concerns how abortion lessons—and the debate in particular—are framed and what is thereby communicated. The underlying problem here is that under conventional approaches to teaching abortion, lived experience is not as important as the strongest argument.^{viii} To treat this debate as a matter of requiring a ‘view from nowhere’—even if for the sake of entering into a discussion about an experience that only some can have—not only overlooks yet another set of morally salient features (i.e. considerations that are ascertained through living them or listening to those who have), but it also potentially delegitimizes the lived experience of those who have had or can have abortions. And when discussing abortion, particularly within the relevant political context, it seems especially pernicious to overlook embodied experience for the sake of impartiality. Yet, at the same time that impartiality is emphasized, a portion of any given class is tacitly targeted precisely because it is *not* an impartial issue.^{ix} It is worth noting that when lived experiences are considered in these discussions, they are often the traumatic circumstances of pregnancy by rape or incest or the risk of death from the pregnancy, and these are *still* considered against the moral status of the fetus.^x The message some students may receive is: so long as something bad enough happens to you, abortion is acceptable.

In addition to the worry that devaluing lived experiences for the sake of impartiality again misses a morally salient feature of abortion, I also worry there is a risk of harmfully alienating

students by doing so. Again, this is not to say we should ignore objective assessment or argumentative rigor; but *this* embodied experience seems especially important when discussing abortion *because* only a portion of the population can even possibly experience it. Resting the debate on impartial reasoning seems a convenient way to avoid listening to the people who have been or may become harmed by the results of these debates. It is a clever argumentative trick to disembody a fundamentally embodied experience, to detach from lived realities because they are ‘irrelevant’ or otherwise overgeneralize and thus distort the ethical considerations. And it makes sense given the political context of abortion: how else could people who cannot become pregnant carry out certain partisan interests over those who can except by pretending the personal is irrelevant and reason lets anyone grasp the facts to determine the ethical truth? I emphasize again that I am not speaking against objective, sound reasoning; I note only that it is awfully troubling that actual experiences of abortion have somehow been rendered inconsequential in many discussions of it. Doing so contributes to a continued silencing of pregnant people. And I do wonder the extent to which these philosophical discussions have reinforced the popular notion that we just need to assess the *facts*, rather than listening to people with experiences of abortion, and that these two are distinct. I venture that this move is part of a pattern of overly-analytic arguments that justify surgical neutrality for the sake of the pure, disembodied facts. Such a method tends to yield bloodless philosophy, drained of real importance or insight. With regard to abortion lessons, it misses a centrally relevant moral feature. All this suggests that attending to lived experiences, rather than hiding from them under the guise of partiality, ought to be part of abortion lessons, as will be discussed below.

iii. *Objectification*

A final problem with conventional approaches to abortion is two-fold and follows from the first and second problems: this approach positions pregnant people's lives and bodies as matters up for debate and in so doing, objectifies them in a problematic way.^{xi} This is a concern given that this group has already—historically and at present—undergone dehumanizing objectification in our society. So, the concern is not about objectification per se, which may be unavoidable in ethical discussion, but about the added weight of dehumanizing objectification *given* the social and political context of how this group is treated.^{xii}

The conventional approach grants the pregnant person's right to bodily autonomy and then asks whether the fetus has a right to life, and if so whether it has a claim against the pregnant person's rights. Now, it is true that there are limits to rights, and the right to bodily autonomy is no exception (my right to bodily autonomy does not supersede your right not to be recklessly threatened by me if, for instance, I am not vaccinated and you are immunocompromised); I'm not suggesting ethicists stop trying to delimit rights. But the way in which the conventional approach posits the debate over rights should be worrisome when we again consider it against the backdrop of a misogynistic, transphobic society that does not fully respect certain rights. In other words, I'm suggesting that the fact that this is a debate *at all* has already been partly shaped by political forces that remain hidden when abortion is cast as just another rational debate. In turn, the way in which this debate has unfolded is deeply objectifying of *already* objectified agents, thus potentially reinforcing some of the harms they face. In a pernicious double bind, bodies that can become pregnant are both disembodied for the sake of neutrality (the second problem) and objectified in a potentially dehumanizing way by these debates. Again, this falls out of the very specific context within which abortion debates arise.

When we proffer a debate, we are implicitly suggesting that this *should* be up for debate. As the second criticism against the conventional approach contends, we are positing each side as plausible and open for rational assessment on which anyone with a decent argument can opine. And when that debate concerns a central right of controlling one's body which, in the case of abortion, only applies to a group of already marginalized and objectified people, we are effectively communicating that this right requires adjudication *because* it is up for dispute. Now, I am not claiming this is a problem with debates in general, or that we can never debate issues involving marginalized groups, or even that we should stop debating abortion. But I am arguing that this should tell us something morally salient about abortion lessons: In presenting abortion as just another ethical debate, this approach tacitly gives legitimacy to and perpetuates the political control of pregnant people's bodies. It is a worry to legitimate a side of a debate that is implicitly aligned with continued oppression especially when this history is suppressed. Again, it is against the reality of already-objectified populations that I offer this worry. In order to have debates at all, we do sometimes need to reduce the people we discuss to objects; objectification as such doesn't always have to be a pernicious (Nussbaum 1995). But we should be extra careful about doing so when such people already suffer under an objectifying gaze, as in this case, and we thus stand to reinforce this particular harm. Below, I will discuss some ways to help rectify this problem.

A further worry is that arguments that concern marginalized populations are based on hidden prejudicial assumptions. In response to Peter Singer's argument that parents can permissibly choose infanticide of their disabled infants (1994) and his support of voluntary euthanasia for disabled people (Johnson 2003), some disability activists have decried not only Singer's conclusion but the fact that he, an able-bodied person, took up disabled lives as a

subject of debate and assumed these lives are worse ones. Harriet McBryde Johnson, a disability lawyer and activist and one of Singer's critics, says of her discussion with Singer about selective infanticide: "Even as I am horrified by what he says, and *by the fact that I have been sucked into a civil discussion of whether I ought to exist*, I can't help being dazzled by his verbal facility" (2003, emphasis added). Johnson expresses the alarming contrast between the content of the debate and the manner in which it is debated. This again implicates impartial, objective reasoning as a potential tool of discrimination.

Johnson argues that prejudice and ableism are baked into these debates not only through assumptions that these lives are not worth living, but also in the very existence of such a debate. It is a well-known (and spurious) rhetorical strategy to posit an outlandish claim, refuse to defend it, and then put the burden of objecting to the claim on the interlocutors. The result lends legitimacy to the claim by engaging rational debate around it. The disability activist group Not Dead Yet clearly identifies this strategy when they tell Johnson "we should not legitimate Singer's view by giving them a forum. We should not make disabled lives subject to debate" (Johnson 2003).^{xiii} What and who we debate in the first place says something about what we think *requires* adjudication.

Returning to conventional approaches to abortion, there are some salient differences when compared to disability debates. I do not want to suggest that the matters are equivalent, as selective infanticide and euthanasia of disabled people clearly have more serious implications. Rather, I suggest that a similar type of problem underlies each debate: just as debating the desirability of disabled lives masks disability prejudice as rational discourse, debating the morality of abortion masks the historical and social control of pregnant people's bodies as rational discourse, which can then sidestep this relevant context.^{xiv} Another important difference

is that while I think there is a good case for ceasing debates about disabled lives on the grounds that they are prejudicial (or instead reframing them to emphasize disabled people's rights), I think a different solution is appropriate for abortion lessons (discussed further below). That is, I am *not* saying we should stop discussing or debating abortion, for there are moral questions to work out. Rather, before we even get to the debate proper, we must recognize that there is likely a non-neutral reason this is a debate in the first place, and again, that this, too, is morally relevant.

Additionally, we must be careful about how we talk about pregnant persons as an object for the sake of an argument. Again, though some reductive talk is unavoidable in ethical debates that concern persons, the fact that pregnant people have already been subjected to problematic objectification in our society should give us pause in how we discuss them in our classes. For one overt instance of more worrisome objectification, consider Thomson's (1971) paper on abortion—likely the most widely read of such papers. Throughout her paper, Thomson (1971) regularly analogizes pregnancy under different conditions to unrelated (and arguably disanalogous) situations. Notably, one such analogy treats pregnant people's bodies as houses into which "people-seeds" may drift and burglars may enter (1971, pp. 58-59). The crude and literal objectification is concerning on its own, but it reinforces a way of talking about the issue that dehumanizes pregnant people and, like the second problem, seems to view them as only marginally relevant to pregnancy and abortion. That this is a *regular* way of discussing abortion in many introductory ethics classes should be deeply concerning, for it reinforces further objectification of already objectified groups (though I'll discuss a way to critically engage with Thomson's paper on this point, and so attempt to rectify the worry, below).

This problem is part of a pattern of objectifying marginalized groups for the sake of philosophical inquiry when that inquiry tacitly service to reinforce oppressive norms. For instance, some literature on moral responsibility proceeds by contrasting “normal” cases of responsibility with cases of individuals with mental illness or trauma survivors (see for instance Wolf 2015). The assumption here is that the latter cases categorically undermine responsibility to some degree, the comparison with which can help reveal the conditions of “our” standard moral responsibility. Similarly, Singer appeals to the “marginal” personhood of people with some disabilities to argue that animals have moral personhood (2009). In these cases, people with mental illnesses, trauma, and disabilities (respectively) are used as foils for the sake of an argument that has little else to do with these people. Doing so further marginalizes these groups as it encourages an objectifying caricature of these people that can be instrumentalized for philosophical ends. In the case of abortion debates, I fear that pregnant people are given a similar treatment: against a backdrop of existing objectification and concerns about how their bodies should be controlled, they have become objects for the sake of a philosophical debate that potentially reinforces the assumption that their bodies are permissibly controlled. And again, while there is nothing in principle wrong with such a debate or treating people or groups as objects of a debate (which is, again, unavoidable at some level), my worry is that the *way* in which it has been carried out in the abortion debate amplifies the already existing harms of objectification for this group.^{xv}

Taken together, I’ve argued that the conventional approach to abortion debates depoliticizes an issue that is inextricable from a history of oppression by casting it as merely rational, objective discourse. These harms, I hold, outweigh the benefits of the conventional approach to teaching abortion. If that is right, then this should motivate a change in how abortion

is taught in ethics courses. Though it may be tempting to excise the topic from ethics classes, I think a more productive strategy is to try to correct the problems with the conventional approach. I will suggest some ways of doing so below.

III. Reframing Abortion Lessons

Despite my criticisms, I am not suggesting that philosophers should stop writing about abortion or that introductory ethics courses should stop including lessons on abortion. It is not a problem to teach abortion as such; rather, as I've tried to show, it is the way in which these lessons are framed—in terms of this disciplinary signature pedagogy—that ought to change. Indeed, I think it is more important than ever that these lessons are handled comprehensively and responsibly.

What I offer below are some strategies to help address the problems found in the conventional approach. I do not offer them as exhaustive solutions, but rather as a start to rethinking these lessons. I think we can (and should) still talk about the moral status of the fetus; we can (and should) still consider the multiple sides of the moral issue; and we can (and should) still use Thomson and Marquis or other classic papers on the subject. But leaving the lesson there is harmfully myopic for such a timely and important issue. These lessons should be seated in the relevant social, political, and historical contexts so that morally relevant features about abortion's use as a tool of oppression and connection with partisan goals can be evaluated (indeed, standard papers on abortion can only be fairly assessed once this context is understood, I hold). They should incorporate considerations of lived, embodied experiences of abortion and pregnancy so that these lessons are grounded in the real world. And they should include first-person narratives or similar sources that undo the silencing of pregnant people and the objectification of them as instruments of debate. Doing so will, I suggest, not only help correct some of the harms of the

conventional approach but may help *enhance* abortion lessons by yielding richer, more informed and contextualized discussions. These suggestions are interconnected though also seek to address each of the three problems discussed in the previous section.

First, recall the argument that depoliticizing abortion commits harmful omissions of morally relevant features (the first problem). A correction to this problem is to properly situate the abortion debate within the relevant historical, social, and political context. Specifically, it should involve some lesson on the role of abortion in pregnant people's oppression, for instance by introducing the topic with a lesson on the women's liberation movement in the U.S. Non-philosophy papers may be useful here as a way to situate subsequent analysis. Additionally, some aspect of the contemporary political landscape of abortion ought to be addressed, primarily including the history of how the abortion debate has been used for partisan political ends (see for instance McKeegan 1993 and Balmer 2014). In addition to motivating the relevant historical context, a feminist perspective on the issue is indispensable to consider. Here philosophical texts outside the traditional pedagogical approach may be useful; for instance, Roth (2018) gives an excellent history of feminist approaches to abortion along with an argument about what a feminist approach to abortion should look like (among other things). Additionally, assigning philosophy papers that bring in additional moral dimensions of the debate, such as Margaret Olivia Little's (1999) paper focused on the experience of gestation, Cudd's (1990) reply to Don Marquis, or Hursthouse's (1991) virtue ethics approach can open up the analysis beyond the moral status of the fetus.

In addition to situating the debate so that it can be properly morally assessed, I think there are additional pedagogical benefits to doing so that promote critical thinking. A meta-philosophical approach can start by asking what makes a given factor morally relevant to an

ethical issue, and in particular, how political concerns should bear on moral assessments.

Following this path, we can ask students: what assumptions may be lingering behind a philosophical concept? Where do they come from, and how do they shape our understanding of that concept? Does understanding the history of abortion change how we assess arguments for or against its permissibility? How do the papers we've read talk about pregnant people, and is there anything worrisome about this? For instance, is there anything concerning about Thomson characterizing pregnant people as houses given what we know about the history of abortion, or is this an unavoidable technique for ethical reasoning by analogy? Does it matter how we talk about the objects of our study? Such questions can help students practice thinking critically about abortion itself *and* about the philosophy of abortion.

To address the second problem and part of the third—the conventional approach's double bind of ignoring embodied experiences while objectifying pregnant people for the sake of argument—narratives and lived experiences must be incorporated as morally relevant to discussions of abortion. It is past due that these lessons consider the voices and experiences of those who have lived through the choice of whether to get an abortion. Engaging with first-person testimonies or narratives (or something that similarly conveys what these experiences may be like, perhaps literature) will center the lived, embodied experience of those who stand to be affected by this debate. Additionally, first-person perspectives provide epistemic access to knowledge that cannot be gleaned otherwise—a valuable source of ethical insight. Bipartisan documentaries or blog posts (for instance, the “Abortion Stories” section of the website *Shout Your Abortion*) about people's experiences with abortions may be a good resource here.

Incorporating narratives from pregnant people serves a few reparative functions: it gives voice to those who have been silenced in these debates; it centers some of the morally relevant

fact that pregnancy and abortion are fundamentally embodied experiences (and for only part of the population at that); and by emphasizing the agentic aspects of abortion narratives, it resists the objectifying reduction of pregnant people in abortion debates. And again, I think there are additional pedagogical benefits to incorporating such narratives. It would give students a chance to understand some nuances of the moral decision: what factors do people consider as they make their choices? How did they assess their choice afterwards? If they did get an abortion, what was that experience like for them? While these perspectives won't solve the moral question, they seem indispensable for even beginning to consider it.

In addition to emphasizing embodied narratives, the third problem can be addressed by rethinking how we frame ethical debates. First, to be clear, what we should *not* do is close certain perspectives on the matter from the start, thereby effectively eliminating any debate. We must consider all sides and factors of a given ethical issue. But we can make a distinction: looking at the various dimensions of an ethical issue and carefully and empathetically considering different sides does not mean treating each side as equally legitimate or well-reasoned. Rather, we should acknowledge the politically charged asymmetries between the sides of the debate while still assessing the reasons given (though of course these reasons may be cast in a new light when viewed through the political lens). One way to put this is to move away from the 'debate team' model of abortion discussions, which involves students joining a preexisting side of the debate with the intention of justifying the beliefs one already holds, thereby 'winning' the debate.^{xvi} Approaching the issue with the inquiry of what moral factors bear on abortion may create a more comprehensive lesson that does not devolve into binary options. Additionally, educators may also ask students to consider why *this* lesson is a lesson at all. That is, there is a meta-philosophical question to be asked about why certain subjects and issues are (or are not)

discussed in a discipline, and whether or to what extent political forces may have influenced this inclusion (or exclusion). Rights and moral statuses can only be responsibly assessed once questions like these have been asked given the political history of abortion.

As educators, our choices matter. Framing these lessons according to the realities, struggles, and experiences surrounding abortion can yield richer moral discussions that don't reduce to (but also do not exclude) the traditional questions of the conventional approach. More importantly, this new approach can yield a more accurate picture of the moral landscape that resists complicity in the political control of pregnant people's bodies. Our responsibilities as educators call upon us to make this change. [xvii](#)

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ⁱ A quick sampling of three popular ethics readings each use the Thomson-Marquis pairing in the abortion section: (Shafer-Landau 2020), (Cahn and Markie 2020), and (Boonin and Oddie 2009).

ⁱⁱ One notable exception is Hursthouse's (1991) virtue ethics account of abortion, which I find to be more morally comprehensive than rights-based approaches.

ⁱⁱⁱ By 'separated,' I mean more than 'distinguish.' I take it those who hold this objection think we should *never* talk about political considerations when doing ethics because they are morally irrelevant.

^{iv} For example, feminist critiques of utilitarian and deontological theories note the overreliance on impartial rationality as the moral standard, thereby dismissing the private, emotional, caring dimension of morality which is, no surprise, traditionally associated with women. See for instance (Held 1993).

^v I don't claim that this was the *only* motivation for this phenomenon; see Balmer (2014) for the role of maintaining segregation in motivation the early religious right. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this article.

^{vi} For instance, see (Totenberg 2022).

^{vii} I thank an anonymous reviewer for this clarificatory point.

^{viii} By 'lived experiences' I mean primarily the experiences of being or being capable of getting pregnant and getting an abortion, but nearby experiences like being a medical health professional or the parent of a pregnant teen may also be relevant to moral assessment.

^{ix} I thank Hope Sample for emphasizing this point.

^x For example, Thomson (1971) assumes the fetus is a person yet argues that abortion is permissible in cases like these.

^{xi} As I will explain below, this does not mean I'm not arguing that we should stop debating abortion's permissibility.

^{xii} I here draw on Martha Nussbaum's (1995) distinction between problematic objectification as denying someone's status as an end in themselves versus neutral or unproblematic objectification.

^{xiii} For more information, see <https://notdeadyet.org/>

^{xiv} Consider also that not too long ago, the gay marriage "debate" was an acceptable topic in some ethics classes. I think the same underlying problem of positing lives as up for debate existed in these cases, too.

^{xv} That is, the central problem with objectification is not that we sometimes take people as objects of debate; it is that in this case, we are taking already deeply objectified members of our society as rather reductive objects of debate where that debate already concerns control of their bodies and thus stands to be dehumanizing. This makes abortion debates disanalogous to others ethical debates (e.g. a Utilitarian calculus of lives and who should live) in which we objectify people in the first sense. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to clarify this point.

^{xvi} I thank Ronald Loeffler for this point.

^{xvii} An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Society for Ethics Across the Curriculum 22nd Annual Conference. An abbreviated version of the paper appeared in the *Blog of the APA: Women in Philosophy* in 2022. I thank Hope Sample, Ronald Loeffler, and Peggy Vandenberg for helpful comments, discussions, and general encouragement that contributed to the development of this paper. I also thank Lucy Schultz, Lou Vinarcsik, and Stephanie Tillman for helpfully sharing their own approaches to teaching abortion, some of which I've included as text recommendations. Finally, I thank an anonymous referee for *Teaching Ethics* for helpful comments that improved the paper.