When a Mentally Ill Woman Refuses Abortion

Ann Brown is a twenty-seven-year-old woman with a diagnosis of chronic paranoid schizophrenia. She has a history of prolonged institutionalization, with intermittent attempts at independent living. Presently living in a mental hospital, Ann Brown is now twelve weeks pregnant. She has firmly indicated her desire to continue the pregnancy and to keep the child. Abortion, she declares, “is against my principles.” The father is unknown.

While Ann’s psychiatrist does not consider her capable of responsible parenthood, he does think that she is capable, at times at least, of meaningful moral decisions. Her schizophrenia and medication taken early in pregnancy slightly increase the possibility of fetal defect.

Ann Brown’s mother wants her to have an abortion, and has secured legal custody of her daughter in order to secure that result. She feels that the experience of pregnancy and the trauma of labor and delivery will worsen fears that Ann will suffer further if she is forced to give up the child to strangers.

The hospital attorney has indicated that she will oppose Ann’s mother’s request for an abortion. She will argue that it cannot be performed without consent.

There is little likelihood that Ann Brown would be allowed to care for her child. However, because of the ambiguity surrounding parental consent, the child would probably be placed in foster care rather than with adoptive parents.

Should the abortion be performed? Why or why not? Can legally incompetent individuals make moral decisions? Does it matter who decides whether the abortion should be performed? Are there other factors in the case that might influence the decision to have/not have an abortion? Argue this case in light of the arguments we have discussed concerning abortion.

DUE: Thursday, May 4, 2006, beginning of class.

FORMAT: Paper Guidelines: (i) 3-4 pages, absolutely no more than four pages; (ii) double-spaced, pages numbered with one-inch margins, Times font, 12 point; (iii) cover page with name, date, title--do not place name or other identifying marks anywhere else on the paper; (iv) stapled, no binders or loose sheets.

ELEMENTS: Your paper should contain the following elements:
   i) Introduction: A very brief sentence or two stating your position on the issue. It should be clear from this introduction what position you will be arguing. The introduction is your thesis statement.
   ii) Clearly and briefly summarize the case.
   iii) Clearly and explicitly state your argument. What are the reasons one should be persuaded to accept your argument? If you depend on someone’s argument who we have talked about in class, then very clearly explain that argument, how it applies to the case, and how it fits with your thesis.
   iv) Consider a counter-argument: How might someone who does not agree with your argument respond to your analysis?
   v) Respond to the counter-argument: Show why the counter-argument does not defeat your original position. Failure to provide a response to a counter-argument makes it look like you have no reply and that your argument is defeated.
   vi) Brief conclusion: In no more than a sentence or two, sum up your paper. This usually involves a restatement of your thesis statement in light of what you have just argued.

For more writing tips, see the downloadable document “Writing Tips” on the Notes and Handouts page. Also, there are links to resources about writing philosophy papers on the Resources page.