NOTES ON ABORTION

What is abortion?
- Abortion is broadly understood as the termination of a developing human life at any point between its conception and its birth.

Initial problems
- There is a problem with the definition, in deciding the precise location of the beginning and the end
- For example, a 'contraceptive' which acted immediately before or shortly after the moment of conception (the 'morning-after' pill)
- The killing of a child in very late pregnancy or immediately prior to birth begins to look more like infanticide than abortion.
- A key problem is to decide what is being killed: human tissue, a human being, a person, a potential human, a potential person, a rational being, a sensitive being, the heir to something, a sacred being, a life, an independent life, a symbol, part of a woman…

Relevant values
- Value of persons (rational, conscious, self-aware, language users)
- Value of human beings (members of homo sapiens)
- Value of living human tissue, such as organs used in transplants
- Value of potential beings rather than actual (giving a zygote the same value as when it grows into an adult)
- Value of consciousness (which involves intentionality and phenomenal awareness, and may come in degrees)
- Value of reason (which is unlikely in a foetus, but is expected to develop after any birth)
- Value of a good quality of life (involving comfort, intelligence, mobility, independence, capacity for achievement)
- The autonomy of parents, and their rights over their children, or potential children
- The right of a society to insist (against individuals) on its collective values

Key facts
- A normal pregnancy lasts about forty weeks
- The age at which a foetus is 'viable' (able to survive independently of its mother) has come down to about 22 weeks
- A zygote is the initial cell created by a sperm and ovum; up to eight weeks it is an embryo; thereafter it is a foetus

Defences of abortion
- the autonomy of the mother (or parents) overrules any right of interference by the rest of society
- there is no 'beginning of life' which has to be defended, because life is a continuous process
- if a zygote must not be harmed because of its 'potential', then there is even a potential person in the meeting of a male and female
- if 'potential' is the test of value, very old and infirm people would lose their value
- if when a person dies is decided by 'brain death', the creation of a person should be the moment of 'brain birth', not conception
- although a foetus may feel some pain, it seems unlikely that death means anything to it
- it would be wicked to deny a mother an abortion if her own life was in danger
- to make abortion illegal would enormously increase the number of births of damaged children
- there have always been 'back-street' abortions, which are dangerous, so legal supervised abortion is better
- society has no right to blight the life of a young person, in order to insist on the birth of an unwanted child
- some of the arguments against abortion will also be arguments against contraception, which most people favour

Against abortion
- some of the arguments used to justify abortion will also justify infanticide, which nearly everyone is against
- if 'abortion on demand' is allowed, some people will have abortions for reasons like avoiding ruining a summer holiday
- if we do not treat life as in some way 'sacred' as soon as it appears, we lose all sense of its value, leading to a 'slippery slope'
- a religion may see conception as having a special significance, perhaps as the moment when a soul is created
- the possibility of abortion creates an irresponsible attitude to sexual behaviour
- people fail to appreciate how bad the after-effects of an abortion can be
- if the child can be successfully adopted, this negates its poor prospects with its natural parents
- we violate the commitment of doctors to save life when we ask them to kill something

Some possible views
- abortion on demand
- an assumption that abortion is not permitted, unless there is a very good reason
- liberal abortion, but with professional agreement
- abortion acceptable, but only in the early stages of pregnancy
- abortion acceptable up to the full development of the brain
- abortion up to the stage of probable viability
- abortion acceptable as the result of a rape
- abortion acceptable if foetal damage implies a very poor quality of life for the child
- abortion if the birth will lead to a poor quality of life (e.g. great poverty) for parents and child
- abortion if the birth will lead to great hardship for the parents, such as the loss of education
- abortion if the mother is below the age of sexual consent
- no abortion under any circumstances at all