

('just for fun'). But there may well be non-frivolous reasons which could justify such action. Since the moral issue is wholly a matter of respect and symbolism, not actual consequences, it all comes down to the *motives* of the agent, and how they conceived of their action. As such, it become *extremely* difficult on this view to insist that all such actions ought to be prohibited as a matter of law.

Labels: [ethics - family](#). Posted by Richard Y Chappell at [12:21 pm](#)

Related Posts by Categories

ethics - family

- [Worthless Harm-Prevention and Non-Existence](#)
- [Assessing the NMC's Defense of its Independent Midwifery Ban](#)
- [Medical Indemnity: Protection or Compensation?](#)
- [UK Shuts Down Independent Midwives](#)
- [Sex Selection and Gender Norms](#)

40 comments:



Brandon [4:32 pm, September 05, 2008](#)

It is, contrary to most pro-choice advocates, *not* a standard claim of pro-lifers that "The embryo has the same moral status as an adult human"; while there are scattered exceptions, it's pro-choicers, not pro-lifers, who primarily think in terms of moral status. Pro-lifers tend to think in terms of rights, which are usually thought of as an ordered hierarchy, not all of which an embryo may have. The pro-life position typically boils down to the claim that embryos have a basic right to life, in common with all human beings, consisting of (a) a positive side, namely, the right to certain very basic protections from being deliberately killed; and (b) a negative side, namely, the recognition that nobody has the right ever directly and deliberately to bring about the death of the embryo. Beyond this there is considerable variation in the pro-life camp.

[Reply](#)



Eric [4:53 pm, September 05, 2008](#)

"Reflection on these cases reminds us that embryonic death is not a significant intrinsic bad, in stark contrast to the deaths of mental persons."

I wonder if we can assert this as if all sorts of embryonic death were equal. Here's an example: do you see a difference, with respect to embryonic death and the moral considerations about it, between a woman who has an abortion and a man who strikes a woman in the stomach in an attempt to kill the unborn child (assume that the women are both in the same, rather early stage of pregnancy)? It seems to me that most of us would say that the man in the second example was guilty of much more than an assault on the woman, or of destroying her property! We would

[#39;oblig...](#) - Richard Y Chappell

Favourite Posts

[Philosophical Pluralism and Modest Dogmatism](#)

[What Makes Your Papers Worth Reading?](#)

[Lessons from the Pandemic](#)

[Pandemic Moral Failures: How Conventional Morality Kills](#)

[Singer's Pond and Quality of Will](#)

Blogroll

Leiter Reports

Pathological liar Alex Jones faces \$1 billion dollar judgment for his defamation of parents of Sandy Hook victims



Daily Nous

Philosophical Dialogues: Beyond The Usual Suspects



Siris

Secondary Causes



Richard Hanania's Newsletter

Please Don't Call Me "Heterodox"

Hands and Cities

Moving to joecarlsmith.com



Astral Codex Ten

Links For October



Overcoming Bias

More Academic Prestige Futures



The Splintered Mind

What Makes for an Appropriately Rigorous and Engaging Online College Major?



Good Thoughts

When Metaethics Matters



PEA Soup

Passing the Soup

[Show All](#)

want to say that he has violated more than the rights of the woman; it seems that he's guilty of violating the rights of the unborn child as well (though just how this works is of course difficult to say). Now, this thought experiment may be nothing more than an intuition pump, and may not tell us anything about the moral status of the unborn, but it does seem to me to present a puzzle that at least makes it prima facie implausible to assert that embryonic death is not an intrinsic bad.

[Reply](#)



[Richard Y Chappell](#) [5:13 pm, September 05, 2008](#)

Brandon, I agree (note my talk of the 'crudest pro-life position'), but I'm not sure whether translating it into 'rights' talk helps much. We may think, for example, that the purpose of rights is to safeguard things that matter or have value (e.g. people). So it remains a puzzle why embryos would have a right to life if their deaths are not intrinsically bad. The posited right would seem baseless or ad hoc.

Hi Eric, I think [forced abortion can be a great harm to the prospective parents](#). Technically this might fall under "destroying her property", but I wouldn't want to trivialize her loss. I see no reason to think that "he's guilty of violating the rights of the unborn child as well" -- I certainly don't have any intuition to that effect.

[Reply](#)



[Brandon](#) [5:39 pm, September 05, 2008](#)

It's certainly neither ad hoc or baseless; after all, one of the common arguments is that there is no principled transition-point in the development of the embryo for when the right to life would suddenly come to apply, so &c. So even if it is a puzzle, it would have to be (for the pro-lifer) an after-the-fact puzzle, about the relationship between this sort of attribution of right to life and intrinsic badness of death, rather than a before-the-fact one that would problematize the attribution itself.

But I'm not convinced the right to life is grounded on the intrinsic badness of death, but on the intrinsic goodness of human life. And the two are not same. For instance, if the right to life were based on the intrinsic badness of death, it would seem to require a great deal more to prevent death in the case of adults than anyone thinks it does (or, indeed, than anyone would think is reasonable); but the right to life is generally taken to be a pretty basic and minimal right protecting people from gross negligence and deliberate slaying rather than guaranteeing them life under any circumstances. So there's reason to think that the right to life is based on something other than the intrinsic badness of death even in the case of adults.

[Reply](#)

Links

[- About this blog -](#)

[- GiveWell -](#)

[- Giving What We Can -](#)

[- Helen Yetter-Chappell -](#)

[- Utilitarianism.net -](#)

[Ask Philosophers](#)

[Philosophers' Carnival](#)

[PhilPapers](#)

[Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)

Archives

Sep 2008 (18)

Subscribe To

 Posts

 Comments

FOLLOW ME ON [twitter](#)

Miscellaneous



One moment, publications loading ... (or view them [here](#))



Unknown [6:09 pm, September 05, 2008](#)

"things that matter or have value."

Value, of course, being arbitrary and difficult to assign.

Then there's the whole question of "potential". If you had 5% of Microsoft's shares at "conception" of the company, they would have had very little "value" at that time. I wonder if a "strong" pro-life position could be made based on the status of the fetus past the time at which the vast majority of spontaneous abortions occur?

So as a Bayesian, I might have this probability I assign to the "success" of the fetus at the various stages of pregnancy. It becomes most probably morally repugnant to terminate a pregnancy when there is some significant probability that the fetus would otherwise live successfully were it not for the desire of the mother to terminate it?

[Reply](#)



Richard Y Chappell [6:39 pm, September 05, 2008](#)

Brandon - just as embryonic death is not an intrinsic bad, embryonic life is not an intrinsic good. (I suspect we must mean different things by these terms. I'm talking about the things which make the world a better or worse place. And the distinction between making the world better and making it worse is not going to do the sort of work you have in mind. If the badness of death cannot ground the right to life, I can't see how the goodness of life would do a better job. It is even stronger: much the same except it gives us extra reasons to bring new lives into existence, rather than merely preserve them once they're here.)

But in any case, I don't see why a right based on the intrinsic badness of death would *"seem to require a great deal more to prevent death"*. After all, *"guaranteeing them life under any circumstances"* would be far more burdensome, imposing costs which might well outweigh the benefit gained from postponing a few more deaths. It's not as though I'm claiming that death is the *only* intrinsic bad, as your counterargument would seem to require.

Alex - I'm not entire sure I understand your view, but it looks to imply the absurd conclusion that preventing spontaneous abortion (the waste of all that "potential") must be our top research priority. I'm taking it as a premise that spontaneous abortion is no great tragedy, and hence embryos lack intrinsic value (their death is not an intrinsic bad).

Some such deaths may be instrumentally bad, in virtue of the lost 'potential' (more precisely: if it causes a future less valuable than the one with the extra person would have been), but exactly the same may be said of contraception.

[Reply](#)



AW [7:29 pm, September 05, 2008](#)

I don't think the lying case and the abortion case are so similar. In the lying case you are undermining another person's agency, and that is what allows it to be bad. Presumably, if you asked them, they'd say they would prefer people didn't deceive them. If you intend to hurt them by deceiving them then you are acting in bad will. It would be meaningless, on the other hand, to talk about an embryo's preferences.

Even if we have an evil will and abort the embryo purely because we want to hurt it, I still don't think it parallels the lying case. If the embryo has no preferences, then aborting it cannot be worse than attempting to cause harm to a rock or a tree.

Perhaps you could argue that an irrational person who wants to harm a rock or a tree is a bad willed ('unvirtuous') person, but that seems like a strange position to me.

[Reply](#)



Brandon [7:41 pm, September 05, 2008](#)

just as embryonic death is not an intrinsic bad, embryonic life is not an intrinsic good.

Why would it have to be? To use the rabbinical phrase, we 'build fences out' from intrinsic goods all the time -- i.e., protect and promote things that are not intrinsic goods because of their non-random connection with things that are. In fact, I would argue that most of the things we consider our rights, even our natural or moral rights, have nothing *directly* to do with intrinsic goods and bads in your sense; rather they have to do with things *circumstantially* related to them -- as conducive to them, as too close to them to be distinguished from them for practical purposes, etc. (I do think we were originally using the phrases in slightly different senses, though.)

I'm still inclined to think that the argument about intrinsic badness still works if we change "under any circumstances" to "all other things being equal." This is still much, much stronger than most people take the right to life to be, even for adults.

I'm not sure I understand your claim about intrinsic goodness of life being 'stronger'. But the reason intrinsic goodness of life is a better ground for general kinds of rights like right to life than intrinsic badness of death is not its strength but the fact that conceptually life and death are not symmetrical. Death as an intrinsic bad is universal and inevitable. Thus no rights can be predicated on eliminating that kind of badness from the world; nothing could guarantee such rights, and we are not in a position to protect people from death. But life is something that can easily be either promoted or impeded, encouraged or eliminated; thus rights can be built in view of these possibilities, allowing us to hold people accountable for eliminating it or failing to uphold it. The intrinsic goodness of

human life would indeed (and does, I would argue) give us reasons (although certainly defeasible ones) for bringing new life into the world -- and so is stronger in the sense that it gives us more reasons for doing things than the intrinsic badness of death, ultimately unavoidable, possibly can. But rights are a very particular sort of rational structure, simultaneously very constrained and very constraining; they don't arise just anywhere, or in the context of just any sort of reasons for doing things.

(I think this is relevant to the spontaneous abortion case. Our attribution of rights is sharply curtailed by what can possibly be done, and the fact of the matter is that we can't do much now, and, given the biology, it is unlikely we will ever be able to do much -- even if we had the means of saving some, we would never have the resources to save them all. So, regardless of intrinsic goods and bads, we can't reasonably attribute to embryos the *right* to be saved from spontaneous abortion, even if we were to regard it as a good thing to do when it is feasible. Rights require at least in-principle enforceability; they depend on what we can rationally hold people responsible for. But I take it you are primarily interested in exploring this issue of intrinsic goodness and badness in the case of embryos rather than spontaneous abortion as such.)

[Reply](#)



John A [7:43 pm, September 05, 2008](#)

"[R]easons that do not depend upon the false assumption that embryonic death is a bad thing"

I'm not sure you have successfully put this assumption to bed. You say that embryos die with a high frequency, which is true but not morally relevant - it seems to me that in "moral value" terms the murder of someone about to die of cancer is still murder, even if the effect is the same. I would argue from a pro-choice perspective that embryonic death IS an intrinsically bad thing, like running over a hedgehog in a car. If it saves an existing human being from madness and trouble, then I'd argue it's worth it.

[Reply](#)



Brandon [7:53 pm, September 05, 2008](#)

I just saw your other post on the life and death issue; I think we're agreed on this point.

[Reply](#)



AW [8:08 pm, September 05, 2008](#)

Carrying on from my last comment:

I don't think embryos and dead people (in reference to hilzoy's point) are too comparable. We share this intuition that we should respect corpses, I think, because we would prefer people remembered *us* with respect after our death and act accordingly (i.e.

not frivolously dismember our body), and so we sort of just agree that everyone deserves this treatment after death. We tend to value some form of immortality (whether it be through our contributions to the world, an afterlife - whatever).

We don't, on the other hand, value 'pre'-mortality. There isn't anyone *to* disrespect in cases of frivolous abortion.

[Reply](#)



[Richard Y Chappell](#) [8:37 pm, September 05, 2008](#)

Aaron - I agree with you that there are some important differences here, especially regarding the second-personal aspect (where respect is due *to* another particular person). I don't think abortion is fundamentally bad or wrong. But I think that's compatible with Hilzoy's claim that a general respect for human life is a good character trait to have (maybe it will tend to have good consequences in other situations), and so we might at least conclude that a virtuous person would not endorse frivolous abortion. This is a very indirect (and not especially strong) sort of moral condemnation.

John - I'm having trouble following the chain of thought in your last couple of sentences. But I agree it's not morally relevant that many embryos actually die. (That's why I said it is merely a real-life version of the 'fire in a fertility clinic' example. The argument works just as well in the hypothetical. Reality just makes it especially vivid.) The point is simply that when we think about this (real or imaginary) situation, it seems obvious that *the event of the embryos dying is not an especially bad thing* (the way it would be if we imagine real people dying in their place). I guess one might dispute this premise, but that would go beyond the scope of this discussion. I'm happy to just assume it as a premise for now.

Brandon - much of your last comment sounds very sympathetic to my indirect consequentialist approach to rights. But what good is done by granting embryos a right to life? (Especially when you consider all the harms that result from criminalizing abortion.) Better just to draw the line at birth, it seems to me.

[Reply](#)



[Unknown](#) [8:40 pm, September 05, 2008](#)

Not supporting the notion that spontaneous abortion should be prevented, just recognizing that there is a time element that changes the ability to create a belief statement about value of whatever it is inside the woman.

If you were to create a Bayesian belief network for the probability of success for the pregnancy at various points in the gestation cycle, you'd get significantly different answers. I think it's a mistake not to

acknowledge that change and it's impact on the decision to abort.

But your comment did make me think - what if we could all suddenly agree for some reason that life *did* begin at conception. Does (should?) difficulty in execution (stopping the spontaneous abortion) effect the morality of the statement?

[Reply](#)



John A [8:58 pm, September 05, 2008](#)

Sorry, my thoughts were all over the place.

My argument was that embryonic death is a bad thing, just not a bad thing of any serious weight compared with most reasons for abortion. Choosing to kill an embryo for the pleasure of killing an embryo would still be a worse action than not killing it, even if it would not be of the same magnitude of evil as murdering a human being.

I can't see the logic behind your latest post. Surely if life is a positive thing and cutting life short is a negative thing (and those are your sole objections to murder etc.) then killing an embryo which would have otherwise been born, become a person and had a 50 year life would be equivalent to killing a 20 year old who would have lived to 70? Calling embryos non-people doesn't change the principle.

[Reply](#)



Richard Y Chappell [9:06 pm, September 05, 2008](#)

"I can't see the logic behind your latest post."

[There](#) I'm talking about the life of a person. An embryo is not a person, so by killing an embryo you do not "cut short" the life of an already existing person, you merely *prevent a person from coming into existence* (again, just like contraception). We should continue this discussion in the other thread, though.

[Reply](#)

Anonymous [9:30 pm, September 05, 2008](#)

Even if an embryo isn't a person, why should we not grant it this status? I mean, comparing an embryo to a rock or a tree is not getting the case, and worse, it's objectifying the fetus. We obviously know that an embryo is not growing to be a rock or to a tree, so why should we treat it as an object?

More than that, shouldn't we grant the right to what is human to live? I'm not saying we should force it to live, but maybe should give the human in potency the actual possibility to live.

You can rightly say, if you want, that fetuses are not persons, but you cannot say they aren't human. And

our morals might just be based on the concept of humanity instead of on this strange, arbitrary and inhumane concept of "person" as you put it.

[Reply](#)



Clark Goble [10:04 pm, September 05, 2008](#)

So it remains a puzzle why embryos would have a right to life if their deaths are not intrinsically bad. The posited right would seem baseless or ad hoc.

I'd say that 90 year old sick people have the right to life but it seems obvious to most people that their deaths are not intrinsically bad.

[Reply](#)



Clark Goble [10:08 pm, September 05, 2008](#)

But what good is done by granting embryos a right to life? (Especially when you consider all the harms that result from criminalizing abortion.) Better just to draw the line at birth, it seems to me

Isn't the problem in determining the calculus of what harms are done by one versus the other? It seems to me that gets at the very debate at hand. You may discount harms done to a fetus as really harms but that appears to be the central bone of contention.

I think the problem at drawing the line at birth is because in terms of the baby there doesn't appear to be much difference to it as a person 5 minutes before birth versus 5 minutes after. While it's a slippery slope argument to extend from that to conception it seems very problematic to say it all begins at birth. That *does* seem ad hoc.

[Reply](#)



Richard Y Chappell [10:43 pm, September 05, 2008](#)

Clark - nobody's claiming that birth has *fundamental* moral significance. I was just drawing on Brandon's point that we assign rights to 'build fences out' to protect intrinsic goods. Assuming that moral personhood begins some time later in infancy, but we cannot tell exactly when, 'birth' seems as salient and safe a time as any to begin this safeguarding. It is the rule (I think) that will have the best consequences. (Conception is the most salient alternative, but seems unnecessarily early, and again would have terrible consequences in terms of illegal abortions.)

"You may discount harms done to a fetus as really harms but that appears to be the central bone of contention."

No, my whole point is that embryonic deaths, as seen in examples like spontaneous abortion, *don't* seem (to hardly anyone, even most pro-lifers) to be "really harms". So I meant to take this out of contention.

"I'd say that 90 year old sick people have the right to life but it seems obvious to most people that their deaths are not intrinsically bad."

I expect their death is still a bit bad, at least insofar as there is more they still wish to get out of life. (See my new post on '[Evaluating Life and Death](#)'.) We might also raise the pragmatic 'building fences out' point again.

[Reply](#)



Brandon [11:22 pm, September 05, 2008](#)

But what good is done by granting embryos a right to life? (Especially when you consider all the harms that result from criminalizing abortion.) Better just to draw the line at birth, it seems to me.

Someone in a pro-life position will simply reason in the other direction: better to draw the line at conception as the most salient point, and then work around the problems resulting from criminalization of abortion in some other way, for the sake of rational and moral consistency. And, it has to be admitted, there is something that people often find attractive about the position: i.e., if the right to life really is at stake, better safe than sorry, and compromise on such questions doesn't really have a very good track record. Also, not everyone accepts a mentality account of moral personhood, and so not everyone will put that point as late as you do; and it seems, at least from your comments, that you find birth a comfortable point at least in great measure because you put the point of personation at such a late point in development. Even a lot of pro-choice people would put it at least a bit before birth; and most people would be extremely uncomfortable putting it in 'later infancy'.

[Reply](#)



Richard Y Chappell [12:22 am, September 06, 2008](#)

I may have a more restricted notion of 'better' in mind. I'm thinking that there's some fact of the matter as to which of the proposed 'lines' (or some other alternative -- start of the 3rd trimester, say) would have the best *consequences* (in terms of what's intrinsically valuable). Given that embryonic deaths aren't intrinsically bad, and that it'd be extremely difficult to "work around the problems resulting from criminalization of abortion in some other way", it seems to me exceedingly unlikely that the conception rule is the one that would yield the best consequences. But I guess I don't have much more to say on this particular point.

[Reply](#)

Anonymous [12:09 pm, September 06, 2008](#)

So the two major objections one could make to Richard are: (i) embryonic death might just be intrinsically bad, for it's a life that didn't come to be, and (ii) not always the best consequences are the best simply put. One could rightly choose the absolutely best instead of the arbitrarily subjective best (some dictator could have absolutely wrong thoughts about what would be the best consequences).

[Reply](#)



Jeremy Pierce [9:01 am, September 20, 2008](#)

I would have taken the standard pro-life view, at least among theists, to be that embryonic death is intrinsically bad but that there are worse bads, and God is in a position to determine which bad is worse: the death of the embryo or its continued existence. In the particularly Christian context, given an afterlife and a soul and the common enough view that a soul not given a chance to understand the notion of sin and repentance does not face a bad afterlife, it seems that an embryo snuffed out is unfortunate but that there are much worse fates, and it's at least minimally ok for God to allow it. But then humans don't have the kind of knowledge necessary to make such decisions and are specifically told not to, since life and death are God's prerogative.

It's sort of like John Locke's view that murder is primarily a violation of God's rights, since human rights are derivative of God's property rights over us, except it doesn't make us out to be God's property but just God's responsibility except to the limited extent that God has allowed a human being to be in a position of making decisions for the well-being of another, which never allows for deliberate killing.

I'm not pretending to argue for this view. There are several places where I might take issue with it. But it seems to me to be the predominant view among pro-lifers who are Christians, anyway, and it doesn't seem to me to face the problem of inconsistency. It also makes sense of the talk of "playing God" that I find somewhat suspicious about matters like cloning and genetic engineering but makes a little more sense with abortion or creation of embryos for the purpose of killing them, given this sort of background view.

[Reply](#)



Richard Y Chappell [11:17 am, September 20, 2008](#)

Jeremy - how would such a view justify treating research into (say) cancer treatment as more important than research into preventing spontaneous abortion? If God decides who lives and decides, who needs doctors? (And if God acts through humanity, why aren't we to conclude that we're grossly failing in our obligations to save the unborn on his behalf?)

[Reply](#)



[Jeremy Pierce](#) [4:37 pm, September 20, 2008](#)

Spontaneous abortion usually results from missing or mismatched chromosomes, which make it impossible to get a viable fetus, never mind a live birth. There's nothing we can do in that case except to figure out how to perform genetic engineering on that scale without harming the embryo in any other way, and that's after testing every developing embryo.

Cancer, on the other hand, destroys someone who most of the time has nothing else wrong with them, and we've already seen much success at many different ways of fighting cancer. So the prospects are much, much better by a huge order of magnitude.

I think any pro-lifer would accept that we (if that means humanity) are grossly failing in our responsibility to save the lives of the unborn. It doesn't follow that pro-lifers are failing, as long as they're doing what they can best contribute and not doing unhelpful things like bombing abortion clinics.

[Reply](#)



[Jeremy Pierce](#) [4:43 pm, September 20, 2008](#)

Also, non-consequentialists can distinguish between moral status in terms of what we ought to prevent and moral status in terms of when it's ok to kill something. Maybe this doesn't amount to much different from what Brandon was saying, but I wouldn't myself want to explain anything in terms of rights if it's at all possible to do it in terms of obligations, which I think are more fundamental.

Given such a distinction, I think most pro-lifers could consider it intrinsically less of a tragedy for a human being with severely messed up chromosomes to die very early than it is for an infant to die, ignoring all concern for impact on society, the parents, and so on. But they might maintain that it's wrong to create an embryo to kill it and not rely on any inconsistency.

[Reply](#)



[Unknown](#) [4:49 pm, October 23, 2008](#)

I find it extremely difficult to believe that anyone *really* considers a zygote to be human. What exactly about it is human? It's DNA? That just doesn't seem important. When we do decide something is human we do so because of the way something looks, behaves, thinks, empathizes etc. etc. Zygotes have no distinctly human qualities.

Their "human-ness" lies only in their potential to become human. But potential humans can't possess human rights in the present. For one thing, that potential human being may be said to have "potential" when my girlfriend and I decide to have a child. Or perhaps extending back to when my girlfriend reached puberty.

We have to look at what the thing at hand actually IS

and ask ourselves whether that thing has rights. In the case of zygotes or blastocysts that answer is absolutely not.

[Reply](#)

Anonymous [5:13 pm, October 23, 2008](#)

DNA is usually how we decide which biological category to put an organism in, at least nowadays. That's how we decided pandas are bears after all, and so on.

It doesn't have to be an issue of rights. I don't myself believe rights are fundamental for moral status. Rights are only derivative of others' responsibilities toward one. But it does seem to me that whether I have responsibilities toward a zygote is certainly not something I can answer in the negative pretty much a priori, and that's what the pro-choice view has to do. I've not seen a real argument for it that isn't question-begging.

[Reply](#)



Unknown [11:14 am, October 24, 2008](#)

@ Parableman:

DNA is usually how we decide which biological category to put an organism in, at least nowadays. That's how we decided pandas are bears after all, and so on.

So one of my skin cells is a human being?

DNA tells us where something comes from. Not necessarily what it is.

[Reply](#)



Jeremy Pierce [12:10 pm, October 24, 2008](#)

Skin cells aren't a counterexample to the claim that we determine what kind of organism something is by its DNA. Skin cells aren't organisms.

[Reply](#)



Unknown [3:06 pm, October 24, 2008](#)

I really don't think that this distinction is a very good stand in for the distinction between those entities which we can dispose of pretty much as we please and those which possess their own set of rights.

So you've got a one-celled *organism* with human DNA. It seems to me that the DNA bit is really just an attempt to import modern taxonomical certainty into what isn't a taxonomic question, but a question of moral standing.

When we say "human rights" we don't mean rights possessed by organisms with certain sequences of DNA and it's silly to pretend otherwise.

An egg ain't a chicken, in spite of the fact it is an organism with the appropriate DNA.

[Reply](#)



[Richard Y Chappell](#) [4:54 pm, October 24, 2008](#)

Eric, it may help to distinguish the *biological* category 'human' from the *moral* category 'person'. We may think that a single (human) organism can develop from a moral non-entity to a sentient creature (to which we shouldn't inflict undue pain) to a fully-fledged person (with all the rights we think that entails).

[Reply](#)



[Jeremy Pierce](#) [8:11 pm, October 24, 2008](#)

If you define 'person' the way Mary Anne Warren does, then it certainly isn't conceptually equivalent to 'human' in ordinary language. But I'm not certain she's using 'person' in the ordinary way, and I'm also not sure how conceptual non-equivalence means the two won't always go together. There are lots of cases of co-extensive but not conceptually equivalent concepts.

I'm a little hesitant even to equate personhood with having moral status on the conceptual level. I think there are three concepts at work: biological humanity, personhood as defined in terms of having certain complex mental and self-reflective capacities, and moral status (or rights if you prefer, but I don't).

I'm not prepared to give a philosophical argument that moral status is always present with biological humanity, but such an argument need not tie itself to thinking biological humanity is equivalent to personhood as defined by Warren.

I haven't made an attempt to prove a particular view on this, just to be clear. This post wasn't even about whether pro-life views have philosophical support. It was about the internal consistency of the pro-life position. I don't think the pro-choice position can be easily established, and I'm confident that the pro-life position is no worse off philosophically. The arguments for a pro-choice position usually slip between the categories I've just distinguished without acknowledging the conceptual difference. I think the standard pro-life argument at least has the virtue of starting with moral status and asking when it might begin. If that argument has other problems, then it needs to deal with them. But I don't think it's on any worse footing than arguments that confused moral status, personhood as defined by Warren, and biological humanity, which are all distinct concepts even if some pair of them might be coextensive either actually or even necessarily.

A fertilized egg is a chicken, by the way. It's a chicken in the embryonic stage of development. Any embryology text would say this sort of thing. It's only in pro-choice political or philosophical talk that you find people denying it. There's no need to deny it to get a

pro-choice position going, and it's no real help in establishing a pro-choice position anyway, so I don't see the point of denying basic science, something people on the pro-choice end of things are happy to complain about when politicians do it but then happily do it themselves when they start thinking about abortion.

[Reply](#)



Unknown [9:51 am, October 27, 2008](#)

Ahhh. I think this is where philosophy kind of totally loses its social bearings.

An egg isn't a chicken. If you ordered fried chicken at a restaurant and got a fried egg, you'd be surprised. And you probably wouldn't pay.

If an egg is a chicken, then an embryo is a person and there is no reconstructing a "pro-choice position" from there. Here again: making a distinction between "human" and "person" where none exists in common parlance is just predetermining how the argument will run. When most people speak of human beings they mean people, not a zygote. To call that zygote "a human" is to imbue it with all kinds of qualities it does not, in fact, possess.

And, science doesn't define "chicken." Common parlance defines chicken. And in this case an egg ain't a chicken. Full stop.

"Basic science" has much to say about what "chicken" means. If people want "chicken" to mean only the fully adult bird, or only red adult birds, or only red adult birds that are trained to do quality control at a prophylactic plant, then that's what chicken will mean, "basic science" be damned. I believe "chicken" has already changed meaning over the years.

What science does tell us is that the egg and the chicken are the same species. Science doesn't tell us what we must mean when we say "chicken."

And knowing where the science stops is the most "basic" scientific knowledge there is.

[Reply](#)



Richard Y Chappell [1:25 pm, October 27, 2008](#)

"Here again: making a distinction between "human" and "person" where none exists in common parlance is just predetermining how the argument will run."

Rubbish. 'Common parlance' fails to make the kinds of fine-grained distinctions we need in order to think clearly about matters. Once we are clear about what we mean (whether a biological, psychological, or moral category) *then* we can make progress. It is by no means "predetermined" that observing the basic fact that a zygote is *biologically* a "human organism" entails either of the other two claims. Indeed, I would

most strongly deny the claim that a zygote is either a psychological or a moral person. So that just straightforwardly falsifies your meta-philosophical hypothesis.

But anyway, this has gotten way off-topic. You might want to shift this to my post on '[Linguistic Paternalism](#)' if you want to pursue the semantic issue any further.

[Reply](#)



Unknown [2:46 pm, October 27, 2008](#)

"Indeed, I would most strongly deny the claim that a zygote is either a psychological or a moral person. So that just straightforwardly falsifies your meta-philosophical hypothesis."

What in the world makes you think "the argument" is taking place inside your head? The argument is taking place in the real world, among people who already know what they mean by "human" and "person." (They mean the same thing.)

Your "fine grained distinctions" are sloppy and biased from the perspective of where this issue will actually get thrashed out. So I'd suggest, if philosophy wants to contribute to or inform that discussion, that philosophers use terminology that doesn't queer the discussion from the outset.

If on the other hand philosophers only intend to make fine-grained distinctions, completely ignoring and being ignored by the wider public discussion, I suppose you can use whatever terminology you please.

But, again, science doesn't decide what we mean when we say "human" or "chicken." If you want your own words, just use impenetrable jargon that no one else has a stake in.

[Reply](#)



Richard Y Chappell [3:39 pm, October 27, 2008](#)

We're talking past each other. You'll notice that this is a philosophy blog, where we explore **philosophical arguments** (in the abstract). You are concerned about *political argument* -- something altogether different and not my (immediate) concern here.*

"Your "fine grained distinctions" are sloppy and biased from the perspective of where this issue will actually get thrashed out."

Um, no. They are not 'sloppy' or 'biased' at all. What you mean to say is that they might be misunderstood by ignorant people. But there's a difference between a *claim* being sloppy or biased vs. it *causing* sloppiness or bias in *people who fail to understand it*.

More importantly, you are conflating the distinct issues of 'terminology' and 'fine-grained distinctions'. The latter (fine-grained distinctions) are **absolutely**

essential to thinking clearly about the issue. So they're non-negotiable.* But the *terminology* is more flexible; in general, we should use whatever terms make the underlying ideas easiest (for the relevant audience - and again we may have different concerns here)* to understand. Hence my talk of 'biologically human organism' (which I think is pretty easy to understand) rather than the ambiguous 'human'.

Once we are clear on our terms, I hope everyone will agree there is an important difference between the biological, psychological, and moral categories (whatever terms we end up using to denote them). We can then avoid stupid and pointless terminological disputes about whether zygotes are "human". Again: because different people mean different things by this word, the debate soon devolves into mere semantics. That's why we try to introduce some rigor into the argument by offering clear, stipulative definitions of terms, so that everyone is on the same page. By offering three disambiguations of 'human' as meaning either X, Y, or Z, we can move past mere semantics and address the substantive question whether zygotes have properties X, Y, and Z.

(Obviously you can't then carry this rigorous terminology over into broader debates unless you first *explain what you mean* by the terms so that others can understand it too. But it's hardly "impenetrable".)

* = Really, what would be the point of academic philosophy if it were as sloppy as ordinary discourse? The whole point is that *we think more clearly in order to get things right*. Once we've obtained these insights, it's a separate question how we might best **communicate** these insights to a non-academic audience. Perhaps some simplification will then be in order. But again, I must emphasize that my primary concern here is not imparting truth to the masses, but the prior problem of *working out what the truth is*. That's my project. Not everyone shares it; they might prefer to go elsewhere.

[Reply](#)



Unknown [4:26 pm, October 27, 2008](#)

Two things: the question of whether zygotes or blastocysts are human is not a stupid and pointless dispute. It is precisely the dispute that is taking place, say, in my state where we'll vote on whether to make stem cell research legal next week.

Second, in a matter of public import, philosophy ought to defer to the usages of common parlance unless there is some compelling reason not to. It asks for misunderstanding and misuse.

Because people mean different thing when they use this word is precisely the reason you ought to stop using it.

The true answer to this question--Is a zygote "human" in the respect of having "human rights"?--isn't to be found by making fine distinctions that don't have

reference to common parlance. Because the answer to that question is OUT THERE, amongst the people and in their discussion.

Helping people figure out what *they* mean when they say "human" or "person" would be quite helpful. And what we'd find out, I'm pretty certain is that it's slippery enough not to admit any clear-cut categorical distinctions. Helping people deal with this sort of ambiguity might also be a positive contribution.

Seeking truth as if it existed somewhere other than the discussion--and often non-discussion-- that's taking place about this issue is illusory.

[Reply](#)



Jeremy Pierce [3:15 pm, October 28, 2008](#)

No, the debate being had right now is not about whether an embryo is human. It's over whether it's ok to kill embryos for scientific research, whether it's ok for tax money from conscientious objectors to such research should fund such research, or whether it's ok to create such embryos in order to do such research. Those are ethical questions, not scientific species classification questions, which is what the question of whether an embryo is human is.

I certainly think the answer to the ethical question is out there in the sense that there are people who accept the correct position, but I think it's crazy to think the answer is out there in the sense that we just have to figure out how people will answer the question to know what we should do. You sounded like you endorsed the latter view. Ethics depends on metaphysics. If you get the metaphysics wrong, your ethics is suspect. If you distance ethics from reality in any way, you have a bootstrapped ethics. You seem to be endorsing that. I think it's downright dangerous.

[Reply](#)



Roscoe [4:21 am, April 12, 2009](#)

So I know this is an old post, and I know I'm not technically supposed to post (because I'm far from the academic level you are all at, though eric boosts my self-esteem ;). But I've been really involved in pro-life here at pton and I've handled a lot of arguments concerning the issue.

Anyway, I think that one can still hold on to saying that embryonic death is a bad thing, as long as you don't say it's the same kind of bad as person death, and I'll explain. I am fully willing to accept personhood, and all the morals that come from that. I think, from what I've read, that it is indeed the person (or rather what they experience) that gives force to your view of harm. But when I say embryonic death is bad, you ask for who. I agree that it must be bad for someone, but you seem to think that that someone can only be the person. But I still think that, while embryos and infants' minds don't persist over time, they do persist physically as

humans (though not as persons). So, we are basically compelled to say that fetuses are humans (although not persons), but that persons are also humans. Particularly, they are ESSENTIALLY humans (or essentially aliens). That is, persons aren't a category like human, chicken, beef, etc.

Moreover, a human isn't unique once they become a person (and this touches on your irreplaceability of chickens as compared to infants). The world, I think, could be said to be objectively worse off from not having an infant because it's not just an infant, it's a unique human infant. Infants will behave differently from one another and aren't just automatons until personhood. So, I really think that what we mean by person is really just the human's self-definition. The person is nothing more than all those electrical signals and all the physical things that occur within the human (but notice so is an embryo). A person comes to be when the human can make the kinds of decisions that reflects them knowing they are human (knowing in a rational sense, in a self-aware sense). Personhood then, correct me if this sounds wrong, is just self-awared experience by the human. I think that by defining a concept (person) that is separate from human, we get to some shady ground, as how can one harm a person unless they are harming a human? I think it would help a lot if we stopped referring to harms done to the person and rather called it as harms done to the human that has personhood. This way, we basically say everything you have said in your posts, but that it's bad for the human (and how bad because they are persons too). So, it's still bad for the human embryo, but we just have to find a reason why it's bad, a reason that isn't biased towards persons. Like someone noted, I don't think it would be best to argue everything here, but if one honestly takes this view when arguing all this, then that it's easier to accept that harming human embryos is bad, just different than the bad than is harming human persons. Better said, the harm you are saying that matters, matters only because you define it as having to do with persons. One can still harm an embryo, just not in the same way that they harm a person. Notice, this could also help with saying that harming an adult person is different than harming a child person, at least in the sense that it is better to frustrate a child person's preferences than an adult's while embryos don't even have preferences (at least not rational, self-aware ones. They do, though, still have preferences that they will communicate to you, just not very sophisticatedly), but all should enjoy not dying. Basically, to say that only harms that harm a person are important and thus only persons deserve to enjoy moral status when it comes to existence/life, seems a little question begging.

Rambling, but basically, here is a thought experiment (short I swear, with no comments) take a human who was born and before personhood gets in an accident that makes them fall into a coma until, well, god knows when. When that person is 20, 30, etc. I feel compelled to not kill them, and I think they have moral status, but it seems like they don't really have an enduring sense of self, do they? I'm interested to see

what you say about this thought experiment.

Sorry again, I realize this is very jumbled, but it means a lot to me and I have enough sense to understand your arguments, but still not have it affect my, what I think is, sophisticated pro-life stance. Please don't judge it on how poorly worded it is, and if you need clarification, I'd be more than happy to give it to you. thanks.

[Reply](#)

To leave a comment, click the button below to sign in with Google.

SIGN IN WITH GOOGLE

Visitors: check my [comments policy](#) first.

Non-Blogger users: If the comment form isn't working for you, email me your comment and I can post it on your behalf. (If your comment is too long, first try breaking it into two parts.)

Note: only a member of this blog may post a comment.

[Newer Post](#)

[Home](#)

[Older Post](#)

Subscribe to: [Post Comments \(Atom\)](#)

Categories

[\[favourite posts\]](#) (64) [\[papers\]](#) (53) [academia](#) (47) [admin](#) (29) [blogging](#) (43) [CasparHare](#) (7) [compendia](#) (34) [economics](#) (20) [education](#) (27) [epistemology](#) (79) [epistemology - metaevidence](#) (25) [epistemology - probability](#) (11) [ethics](#) (123) [ethics - agency](#) (73) [ethics - allocation](#) (18) [ethics - applied](#) (115) [ethics - consequentialism](#) (121) [ethics - emotion](#) (18) [ethics - family](#) (47) [ethics - good life](#) (57) [ethics - meta](#) (84) [ethics - nonidentity](#) (17) [ethics - pandemic](#) (25) [ethics - philanthropy](#) (30) [fun](#) (53) [guests](#) (51) [history](#) (10) [internet](#) (27) [language](#) (44) [language - 2Dism](#) (20) [links](#) (27) [logic](#) (33) [media](#) (10) [metaphysics](#) (53) [metaphysics - identity](#) (19) [metaphysics - modality](#) (60) [methodology](#) (40) [mind](#) (41) [mind - representation](#) (17) [mind - zombies](#) (24) [Parfit](#) (58) [personal](#) (34) [philosophy](#) (51) [philosophy - lessons](#) (35) [philosophy - overview](#) (8) [political theory](#) (50) [politics](#) (70) [politics - civics](#) (59) [politics - electoral](#) (23) [politics - identity](#) (29) [politics - immigration](#) (6) [politics - property](#) (16) [public philosophy](#) (7) [quotes](#) (30) [religion](#) (38) [reviews](#) (7) [science](#) (26) [social commentary](#) (17) [teaching](#) (18) [time](#) (41)