

The Ontological Primacy of Life as an Argument against Abortion

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THESIS

- Primacy of Life Argument
- Conception as a boundary of lifespan
- Numerical identity between a zygote and an adult human being
- Not all empathy is created equal



THE PRIMACY OF LIFE ARGUMENT

When the existence of a moral fact A necessarily depends upon the existence of a moral fact B, B is at least equally important.

When there is asymmetry of the type, “A depends upon B, but not the other way around,” the relationship between the two facts is such that prevention of B is a necessary condition for the prevention of A, while the prevention of A is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the prevention of B.



THE PRIMACY OF LIFE ARGUMENT

What person S decides to do with his or her body, upholding the value of bodily autonomy, is necessarily predicated upon S having a life.

Interests (rights, claims) in bodily integrity, to which most pro-choice arguments appeal, must by their very nature coexist with an interest (right, claim) in life and the latter must be at least equally important to the interests (rights, claims) in bodily integrity.



THE PRIMACY OF LIFE ARGUMENT

Biologically, human life begins at conception, the fusion of a human ovum and a human sperm (as we know from empirical science).¹

This process sets off a causal mechanism, which in the typical case results with a person able to uphold the value of bodily autonomy herself.

¹ Definitions of life tend to emphasize the ability of an organism to extract energy from the environment to its own benefit, in a nonrandom way, and in service of its own reproduction goals. For an example see Daniel E. Koshland, Jr., "The Seven Pillars of Life," *Science* Vol. 295, Issue 5563, pp. 2215–2216, DOI: [10.1126/science.1068489](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1068489).



THE PRIMACY OF LIFE ARGUMENT

Therefore, aborting life out of concerns for bodily autonomy is in the paradigm case respecting the less important moral fact A at the expense of the more important moral fact B.

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P1. When a morally relevant and value-generating fact A is made possible by a morally relevant and value-generating fact B, the upholding of B is primary in importance to the upholding of A

P2. Having governance over one's body is a morally relevant and value-generating fact

P3. Having a life is a morally relevant and value-generating fact

P4. Having governance over one's body is made possible by having a life

C1. The upholding of having a life is primary in importance to the upholding of having governance over one's body (*modus ponens* from 1 and 4; instantiation of 2 and 3 into 1)

P5. Any action that in the paradigm case results in upholding a morally relevant and value-generating fact A over a morally relevant and value-generating fact B, as defined in P1, is wrong

P6. Abortion is an action that in the paradigm case results in upholding having governance over one's body over having a life

C2. Abortion of a healthy fetus is morally wrong

THE PRIMACY OF LIFE ARGUMENT

- Ontological dependence
 - Parenthood²
- Life is a requirement for all who have a relationship with it
- Values are impossible without life
- Then the value of life is ontologically prior to other values
- If x has a right to y, then x exists

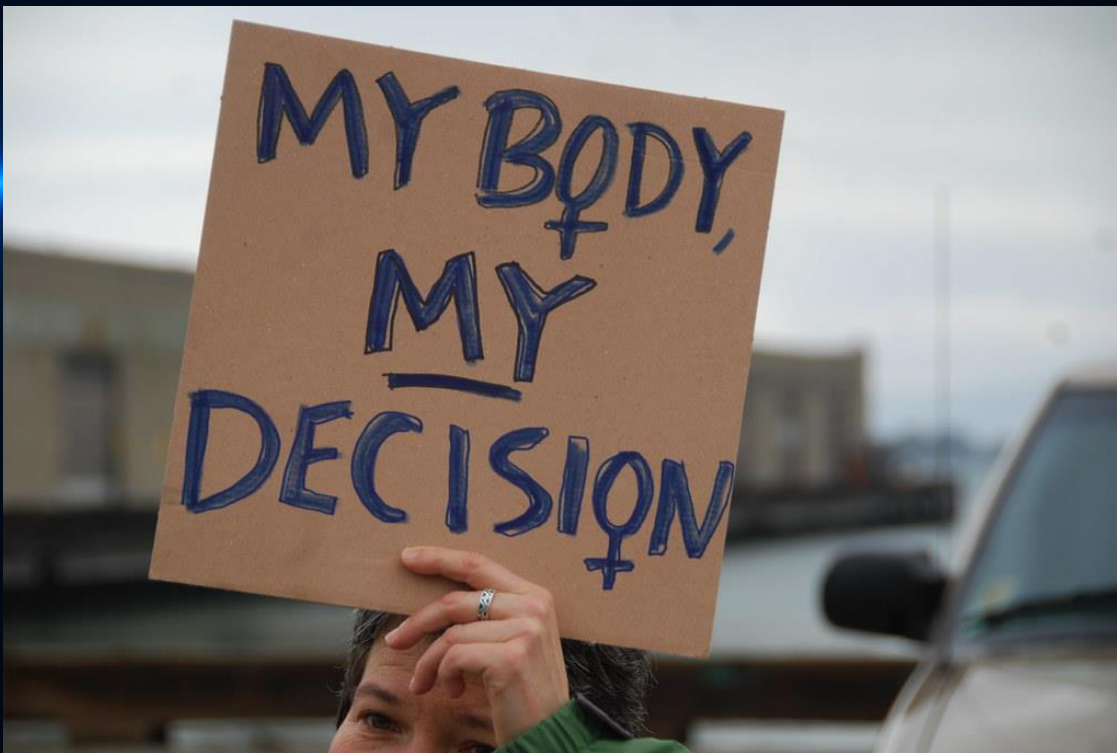
² Saul Kripke, who introduces the concept of essentiality of origin, uses precisely this example: Nixon exists because his parents exist. Such a relation of existential dependence is “rigid,” that is, it exists in all possible worlds. Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 48

THE PRIMACY OF LIFE ARGUMENT

- Application to the abortion debate
 - If L is ontologically prior to A, then any claim on A depends on L

- Other ethical problems
- The right to bodily integrity³ in context
- Exceptions

³As argued in Judith Jarvis Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion" in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* Vol. 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1971), pp. 47–66.



CONCEPTION AND IRREVERSIBILITY



- No obvious border
- Except for:
 - Conception
 - Brain death
- Some accounts capture too much
 - Whose existence could be denied?
 - Is the revulsion warranted if we accept the premises?
- Metaphysical bedrock: the point of irreversibility

First insight

NATURE AND CONTINUITY

- No obvious border
- Adult humans = late stage fetuses⁴
- Continuity of identity
 - The same organism is affected by earlier changes
 - Effects of the prenatal environment
- Strong potentiality
- A conceptus is a necessary condition for all future existence
- Overly focusing on the now
- What if there were artificial wombs?

Second insight

⁴ Jim Stone, "Why Potentiality Matters," pp. 818–819.

EMPATHY: PROPER USES AND SIDE EFFECTS



- Difficult to feel empathy for a zygote
- We are not them and they are not us⁵
- What target of empathy is appropriate?
- Jack Nicholson: “My only emotion is gratitude, literally, for my life.”
- “These women gave me the gift of life.”

⁵ Mary Anne Warren, “Do Potential Persons Have Rights?” in *Responsibilities to Future Generations*, edited by Ernest Partridge (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1981), p. 264.

EMPATHY: PROPER USES AND SIDE EFFECTS



Case A



Case B

Empathy for a non-existent human

Third insight

COMMENTS?



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