

Conditions on the right to life*

Introduction to Ethics

2 May, 2006

A. Warren's strategy

"... the term 'human' has two distinct ... senses. This fact results in a slide of meaning, which serves to conceal the fallaciousness of the traditional argument that since (1) it is wrong to kill innocent human beings, and (2) fetuses are innocent human beings, then (3) it is wrong to kill fetuses. For if 'human' is used in the same sense in both (1) and (2) then, whichever of the two senses is meant, one of these premises is question-begging. And if it is used in two different senses then of course the conclusion doesn't follow." (p. 53)

B. Two senses of the term "human"

Moral human "a full-fledged member of the moral community;" a person.

Genetic human "the sense in which *any* member of the species [*Homo sapiens*] is a human being, and no member of any other species could be." (p. 53)

C. Criteria for personhood

"... it is useful to look beyond the set of people with whom we are acquainted, and ask how we would decide whether a totally alien being was a person or not. ... Imagine a space traveler who lands on an unknown planet and encounters a race of beings ... he has to somehow decide whether they are people, and hence have

full moral rights, or whether they are the sort of thing which he need not feel guilty about treating as, for example, a source of food." (p. 54)

1. consciousness (of objects and events external and/or internal to the being), and in particular the capacity to feel pain;
2. reasoning (the *developed* capacity to solve new and relatively complex problems);
3. self-motivated activity (activity which is relatively independent of either genetic or direct external control);
4. capacity to communicate, by whatever means, messages of an indefinite variety of types, that is, not just with an indefinite number of possible contents, but on indefinitely many possible topics;
5. the presence of self-concepts, and self-awareness, either individual or racial or both. (p. 55)

D. Status of the argument

"... I think that the concept of a person is ... very nearly universal (to people), and that it is common to both proabortionists and antiabortionists. ... on reflection even the antiabortionists ought to agree not only that (1)–(5) are central to the concept of personhood, but also that it is a part of this concept that all and only people have full moral rights." (p. 56)

* Mary Anne Warren, "On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion," *The Monist* 57 (1973).