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## WHY BIOLOGISTS TEND TO MAKE BAD ETHICISTS

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### SYNOPSIS

Scientists often confuse the abortion issue by making imprecise statements such as, “There is no scientific consensus about when life begins.” The problem is that they are conflating two different senses of the word “life”: the scientific and the philosophical senses. Since science is now largely seen as the final arbiter of human knowledge, even nonscientific claims, as long as they fit within their own worldview, are seen as scientific claims.

“Life” can be a concept notoriously difficult to define. This poses a problem because when having discussions on any topic, it is important to define terms clearly and make sure both parties are understanding words in the same way. A failure to do so can lead to fallacies of ambiguity.

There are at least two different senses of the word *life*: biological and philosophical. In the biological sense of the word, sometimes called the *genetic* sense, there *is* scientific consensus. Embryologists consistently agree without significant controversy that human life begins at fertilization. However, in the philosophical sense of the word, sometimes called the *moral* sense, there is not a consensus among scientists. This should neither surprise us nor concern us, since personhood is a philosophical question, not a biological one. Personhood is usually understood as what grounds our rights. It takes philosophical reflection to determine what rights are and who qualifies for these rights. Since this is a philosophical concern, science can’t tell us what persons are, only what counts as a person after you have engaged in the proper philosophical reflection.

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There's been a tremendous shift in scientific thinking in the last hundred years. Because Christians developed modern science, it traditionally has been seen as a tool used by scientists to discover things about the universe that God created. As Scripture says, "It is the glory of God to conceal a matter. But the glory of kings is to search out a matter" (Prov. 25:2 NASB). However, since the time of Darwin, the number of atheists following scientific pursuits has increased. The theistic philosophy that undergirds science already has been proven (e.g., there is regularity in the universe), so atheists can now safely use science without having to worry about why we are able to use science.

### THE DEIFICATION OF SCIENCE

Not only do atheists practice science without a deity to account for why science is even possible, but they also have created a god out of science. Science is now seen as the final arbiter of human knowledge and wisdom. If something is not scientifically testable, we are told, it cannot be proven and therefore should not be believed.

What is missed is that there are many questions that science is not equipped to answer. Science can tell us the *how*, but it cannot tell us the *why*. That is the realm of philosophy and theology. Nevertheless, atheists now look at science with a religious fervor. How many times have we heard someone say, "Thanks, science!" when a beneficial scientific discovery has been made, rather than thanking the scientist who made the discovery? Christian thinkers have referred to this religious devotion to science as scientism.

This religious devotion to science, as well as the celebrity status enjoyed by atheistic scientists such as Richard Dawkins, Neil deGrasse Tyson, and Lawrence Krauss, has led to a confusion of scientific and philosophical claims. Since science is seen as the final arbiter of human knowledge, scientists can now make philosophical claims disguised as scientific claims. This leads scientists to think they have the philosophical acuity to argue philosophically, and this often can be disastrous.<sup>1</sup> A scientist cannot speak authoritatively on philosophical matters just because he has specific training in science. To speak authoritatively in philosophy requires a different set of skills and training.

This idea that scientists can speak authoritatively on issues for which they have no particular training has emboldened scientists such as PZ Myers to make clearly philosophical claims about the abortion issue and disguise them as scientific ones. PZ Myers is a biologist who runs a popular Internet blog called Pharyngula, in which he has unfairly criticized pro-life apologists Scott Klusendorf and Kristan Hawkins for exactly this reason.<sup>2</sup>

### MYERS'S CONFUSED ARGUMENTS<sup>3</sup>

It's beyond the scope of this essay to give a full defense of the biological humanity and personhood of the unborn from fertilization.<sup>4</sup>

**The Scientific Case.** There is scientific consensus among embryologists that, biologically, a human being's life begins at fertilization. Since even pro-choice embryologists concede the case that human life begins biologically at fertilization, this is something that we can accept by stipulation.

Fertilization is the point at which the sperm and the ovum cease to exist as separate entities but fuse together into a new, biologically unique individual human being. At that point, this human being begins guiding her own development from within herself, along a path to natural death and remains numerically identical to herself at all points in her life.

**The Philosophical Case.** You are the same person now as you were as a human zygote. There have been numerous changes that you have undergone, but all of these changes were within your nature to undergo. As you had the same nature as a rational agent when you were conceived as you do now, you were the same person at all points in your development. If you were identical to yourself then, and you have a right to life now, you likewise had a right to life then. Being a person is about the kind of thing you are, an entity with a rational nature, not the kind of things you can do.

**On PZ Myers.** Let's first address Myers's statements about personhood. Myers has consistently shown his disgust with the entire discussion of personhood. In his rebuttal of Kristan Hawkins, Myers says that the question of personhood is "fuzzy" and therefore not worth having. He just seems to know that the unborn aren't persons. Of course, this raises the fundamental question of how he knows *he* is a person. Myers can't know that adult human beings are persons if he doesn't know what a person *is*. And since there is a pro-life argument to be made that the unborn are persons, Myers has to talk about it. He either needs to refute the pro-life argument or accept the personhood of the unborn.

Blacks, Jews, and women have all been denied rights at one time. I'm sure he wouldn't agree that because the personhood question is "fuzzy," it's not worth talking about if blacks, Jews, or women have rights. After all, Myers agrees that *taxonomically* (to use his phrase), the unborn are biologically alive and human. Additionally, if the question really is fuzzy, and you're not sure if the unborn are persons, then it seems you have a moral obligation not to kill them, in case they actually are persons.

Early in Myers's article against Scott Klusendorf, we get an idea of how Myers conflates science and philosophy. He says that pro-lifers lie by saying life begins at conception, then asserts that the zygote cannot legitimately be called a "person,"

because it has none of the attributes of a conscious being. However, person is a philosophical concept and not a scientific one. Myers is doing philosophy by arguing that only conscious beings can be persons. Philosophy answers “why” and “what” questions. Science can answer only “what” questions. Why are conscious beings the only ones that can be considered persons? Only after you have settled the philosophical question can you then use science to tell you who qualifies as a person. Even if zygotes can’t be called persons, to say they’re not human beings (or biological members of species *Homo sapiens*) is scientifically wrong.

Myers additionally mentions that there has been continuity of life for four billion years, but he is not saying anything important. That’s an interesting fact—but we are not concerned with when humans first entered the scene; we are concerned with when an *individual human’s life begins*. Even more, he admits that the developing entity in the womb is the same developing organism at all points. One might wonder what Myers thinks a developing organism of the human species is.

Hawkins has argued that at fertilization, a unique, whole human being comes into existence, with a unique combination of DNA. Myers, missing the point, focuses on the word *unique* and argues against Hawkins’s point based on uniqueness. Myers argues that cows are unique, so why isn’t Hawkins arguing for the rights of cows? Of course, Hawkins did not argue that the uniqueness grants them rights; she says the unborn is unique because it is a numerically different entity from the mother and father.

Further in Myers’s response to Klusendorf, he doesn’t seem to understand the pro-life *reductio ad absurdum*<sup>5</sup> that shows that denying the unborn personhood because they lack some property X means that all people *outside the womb* who also lack property X would be excluded from the moral community. Myers seems to think that a culture can decide arbitrarily that a newborn counts as a person, and then anyone who is past the newborn stage will automatically be a person, but he misses Klusendorf’s point entirely. Denying a certain class of humanity personhood rights has always resulted in atrocities. The Nazis denied personhood status to Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, and others. The United States and England once denied personhood status to blacks. If you are going to argue that the unborn clearly are not persons for one reason or another, then you must also accept the logical implications of your position, or renounce your position altogether.

Let’s now address Myers’s confusion of terms. In his rebuttal to Klusendorf, Myers asserts that there “is no such thing” as unborn women. This is a pretty significant mistake for at least two reasons. First, even though the sexual organs haven’t yet developed, they have either the XX chromosomes or XY chromosomes. This means that they are still female or male, even if we can’t tell what they are yet. Second, you can call something a male or female without attributing personhood to it. Dogs and cats are male or female, yet they are not persons. He goes on to say that calling an unborn entity a “woman” is like looking at a tree and calling it an unbuilt house, or calling a cow an

uncooked hamburger. Myers made the same mistake in his article against Hawkins, in which he says that the unborn organism has a life of development ahead of it, so it is not a whole organism. To Myers, calling the zygote a whole organism is like calling an iron ingot a car.

As many a pro-life thinker has pointed out, an unborn entity is not a potential human life but an actual human life with potential. In these cases, Myers is conflating two different senses of potentiality: *active* and *passive* potentiality. An active potential is a potential that a thing has within itself to develop by nature. A human embryo will develop a working nervous system because it is in her nature to have a working nervous system. This will develop from within herself according to her genetic code. Artifacts, however, do not have it within themselves to develop themselves into anything. A hunk of metal (an iron ingot) is not a car because it is merely a heap. It can be turned into anything, be it a car, a boat, or a house, and it requires an outside builder to make it so. The potential for an iron ingot to become a car is a passive potential, because it will not become a car on its own. The hunk of iron must lose its identity and become part of the car once the car is made. There is a very important reason for this distinction: active potential is an identity-preserving potential, whereas passive potential is an identity-changing potential.

Additionally, while living things have active potential to develop their properties and parts from within themselves, they have passive potential to become things that are not in their nature to develop. So while a calf has the active potential to become a mature cow and a sapling has the active potential to become a mature tree, the cow has a passive potential to become a hamburger, and the tree has a passive potential to become a house. It requires an outside force to kill the thing in question and turn it into something else (the hamburger or house). They lose their identities because they undergo a substantial change.

The sperm and the ovum are analogous to the iron ingot. In the same way the hunk of iron has the passive potential to become a car, the sperm and ovum have the passive potential to become a human organism. Once the human organism comes into existence, she has the active potential to develop her parts and properties according to her nature. Since all of the changes she has undergone are changes that are within her nature to undergo, she was the same entity as an embryo as she is now.

This also means that human embryos *are* either male or female, because sex is a property of human organisms. That unborn human girl will develop into a full-blown human woman and will remain the same person ontologically the entire time.

In Hawkins's article, Myers goes on to talk about cancers. They are alive and they have human parents, Myers tells us. But here, Myers is equivocating on the words "alive" and "parents." There is an obvious difference between a human zygote and a human cancer. A human zygote has a unique genetic code; the cancer is a corruption of the host's genetic code. A cancer is not a human organism; a human zygote is (as even

Myers himself admits). A cancer has human parents in a different way than the zygote. The cancer has parents in the same way that Ford was the father of the automobile (i.e., in only a figurative sense). An unborn human being has parents that conceived the organism and gave her a unique genetic code that guides her development into a more mature human. We assign rights to people because they are human, not because they are conscious or because they have any other arbitrary criteria that unborn humans lack.

Hawkins made the argument that there is no fundamental difference between a human zygote and the adult that you are now. Myers takes issue with this claim, arguing that *of course* there are differences between even a toddler and an embryo. A toddler is outside the womb, interacting with and experiencing the world. However, Myers has mistaken qualitative differences with quantitative differences. I have different properties than I had as a zygote, certainly. I am older, I am taller, I am capable of engaging in rational thought, and I am able to write this essay that you are reading. However, none of these differences matter *fundamentally*. I am the same entity now as I was when I was an embryo, and at all points in between. So while a toddler may be outside the womb, interacting with the world, Myers doesn't even begin to argue for why this difference matters to where we can kill the unborn human being but not the toddler. He just asserts it as if it is obvious.

### ON MYERS'S MORAL RELATIVISM

Finally, let's address Myers's statements about morality. Myers takes the position that morality is not objective, rather that society is what determines right or wrong. He even goes so far as to say that while he would disapprove of a culture that didn't grant personhood to human beings until they are five years old, it would not be wrong for a culture to set that as the point at which the right to life is established. The problem with Myers's view should be painfully evident to anyone. Without an objective standard of right and wrong, morality becomes a collection of mere preference claims. I may not like that men rape women, but if a society believes that act is right for them, then while I disapprove of it, they are not wrong to do so. However, if it is "right for them," it becomes incomprehensible how you could say you disapprove. Why would you disapprove of something that is morally licit? Would anyone seriously disapprove of someone giving money to the poor or saving a child who's drowning? The very act of saying "I disapprove" seems tacitly to imply a moral judgment.

As many ethicists have pointed out, there are other flaws with social relativism. Reformers such as Martin Luther King, Jr., and William Wilberforce would have been immoral for going against the socially accepted morality of their country. Additionally, by finally eliminating slavery, England and the United States did not improve as nations; they merely changed preferences. Also, tolerance is a very popular idea now,

but if morality is socially relativistic, there is no basis for being tolerant. There are many more problems with this idea that I won't cover here.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, Myers talks about the "greater good," but as a relativist, he can't appeal to the greater good under his worldview, because there is no such thing. Myers says he wants to live in a society that will protect him, but Myers can't believe in such a society because a relativistic society, and a society that believes they can arbitrarily define personhood, is a society in which no one is safe.

In responding to Klusendorf's article, Myers agrees that you can't get intrinsic value and rights in an atheistic society. However, what Myers gets wrong is that he claims that value and rights are "emergent properties" of societies. Aside from not offering any evidence for this claim, Myers is also mistaken.

You can't generate rights just by forming a society. While there is agreement about some rights, there are many rights about which humans disagree. Rights cannot be left up to humanity, because all humans, including the lawmakers, must be subject to these rights. The inevitable result of such an arrangement is tyranny. Unless rights come from outside of humanity, there can be no objective basis for them. Myers, of course, forgets that he's living in a country in which the Founders believed that rights actually are objective, grounded in human nature, and bestowed on us by our Creator. A society that denies this reality is a society in which no one is safe.

Myers also admits that atheism can't ground equal rights for all. He says that he can look at a woman as his equal and believe she deserves equal rights, but Myers continues to miss the point. There is no objective way to argue that his position is correct over someone who believes that women should be slaves of men. How does Myers know he is correct and someone who wants to enslave women is wrong to do so without an objective standard?

### **ABUSE OF LANGUAGE**

Myers is a biologist, but most of his arguments are arguments that you frequently see from a lot of pro-choice people. As a biologist, he really ought to know better in some areas. Embryologists can tell the difference between a human embryo and a cancer, so it's a wonder that Myers apparently can't. There is a severe lack of philosophical understanding from people who argue in favor of abortion rights. If pro-life people do the intellectual work of understanding these philosophical concepts, and learn to clearly and graciously expound them, we can help to show how the pro-choice side misunderstands these concepts. Understanding them shows that we must afford respect and rights to even our youngest citizens, those who exist but are at risk of becoming another casualty of abortion before they've even experienced the light of day.

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## NOTES

- 1 As an example, philosopher Michael Ruse has gone on record to say that Richard Dawkins's book *The God Delusion* makes him "ashamed to be an atheist."
- 2 Scott Klusendorf is the president of Life Training Institute, and Kristan Hawkins is the president of Students for Life of America. I have written two separate articles responding to PZ Myers's responses to Scott's and Kristan's presentations.
- 3 In this essay, I'll be responding to arguments made by PZ Myers in his articles "Anti-Choicers Arguing against Me *In Absentia*," <http://freethoughtblogs.com/pharyngula/2013/09/03/anti-choicers-arguing-against-me-in-absentia/> (accessed August 3, 2015), and "Kristan Hawkins at UMM," <http://freethoughtblogs.com/pharyngula/2015/02/04/kristan-hawkins-at-umm/#more-22431> (accessed August 3, 2015).
- 4 For a wonderful book that presents a fuller philosophical case for unborn personhood, see Francis J. Beckwith, *Defending Life: A Moral and Legal Case against Abortion Choice* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- 5 *Reductio ad absurdum* is a style of argumentation where you take someone's argument to its logical conclusion, show it leads to absurdities, and then, on the basis of that, reject the original claim.
- 6 See, e.g., R. Scott Smith, *In Search of Moral Knowledge: Overcoming the Fact-Value Dichotomy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 160–62.