

Life, dependence, and moral status: A commentary on “*If viruses are not life forms, should abortion always be permitted?*”

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Matti Häyry and Amanda Sukenick’s paper aims to develop a provocative and original intervention in the abortion debate by challenging the apparently simple claim that abortion kills “a life”. Rather than focusing primarily on personhood, bodily autonomy, sentience, or rights, the paper interrogates the metaphysical and biological category of life itself. Its central argument is that if viruses are excluded from the category of living beings because they lack independent metabolism and depend entirely on a host, then foetuses – especially in early and mid-stage gestation – may also be excluded from the category of life forms on similar grounds of dependence. They are using this comparison to argue that one common anti-abortion argument, namely that abortion is impermissible because it terminates a living being, becomes unstable or perhaps “evaporates”.

The paper’s strongest feature is its attempt to expose a hidden ambiguity in the term “life”. In abortion debates, “life” is often treated as self-evident, but the paper shows that this concept is philosophically and biologically more complex and contested. By bringing viruses into the discussion, the paper usefully destabilizes a simplistic appeal to biological life. It refers to Aristotle, Hursthouse, Aquinas, and Kushner to show that questions about abortion cannot be separated easily from the complexities of deeper metaphysical assumptions about substance, form, dependence, and moral standing.

Häyry and Sukenick criticize Rosalind Hursthouse (1987) from within a broadly Aristotelian framework. The discussion of Hursthouse’s “average woman” model is one of the paper’s clearest critical sections, especially in arguing that the model risks relying on outdated gender assumptions and insufficiently justified claims about women’s flourishing.

The most significant weakness is that the virus-foetus analogy is suggestive but underdeveloped. Viruses are not usually denied the status of living organisms merely because they are dependent on hosts. They are also acellular, lack independent metabolism, and do not maintain homeostasis in the way organisms do, and do not develop into non-dependent organisms, as foetuses do. Foetuses, by contrast, are cellular, metabolically active, developmentally organized, and part of a continuous organismal developmental process. The paper recognizes definitional complexity, but its final argument emphasizes dependence so strongly that it gives insufficient weight to other biological differences between viruses and foetuses. Moreover, the phenomenon of host-dependence in biology is complex, especially when viewed from an Aristotelian perspective.

As a result, the paper may conflate “dependence” with “non-life”. Many living beings are radically dependent at different stages or under different conditions. Newborn infants, severely disabled people, coma patients, and patients on artificial life support may all depend on external systems or other persons. Yet this dependence does not usually lead us to deny that they are alive. The paper needs to explain why foetal dependence on the pregnant body is metaphysically different from these other forms of dependence. Without that distinction, the argument risks proving too much.

The authors move too quickly from biological classification to moral conclusion. Even if one granted that foetuses are not “life forms” in the same sense as autonomous organisms, it

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would not automatically follow that abortion is morally permissible or that foetal moral status disappears. Moral status may depend on potentiality, sentience, relational value, species membership, embodiment, social meaning, or the rights and burdens of the pregnant person. The paper's argument is most successful as a critique of one specific anti-abortion argument, but it sometimes sounds as though it has done more: namely, resolved the metaphysical or ethical status of the foetus altogether.

Häyry and Sukenick's discussion of parasitism also needs refinement. Calling the foetus a parasite is rhetorically powerful but philosophically risky. In biology, parasitism usually involves an interspecies relationship in which one organism benefits at the expense of another. Pregnancy is not normally classified in this way, even though it involves resource transfer, immunological negotiation, and sometimes serious bodily cost. The paper's claim that the foetus is "in strictly biological terms" an obligate parasite is therefore likely to be challenged. This point requires much more careful biological support and terminological precision.

Häyry and Sukenick's approach would likely benefit from narrowing the main conclusion. Instead of claiming that fetuses are not life forms, they could argue more modestly that "mere biological life is insufficient for moral status" or that "the category of life is too ambiguous to ground anti-abortion arguments by itself". This would make their claim harder to dismiss and better align with the analysis's strongest parts.

It should also define its key terms more carefully. "Life", "life form", "living being", "organism", "substance", "autoteleonomy", "parasite", and "dependence" are doing heavy argumentative work. The paper should specify at each stage whether it is making a biological, metaphysical, moral, or conceptual claim. At present, these levels sometimes blur together.

The virus comparison should be expanded and refined. They could discuss multiple criteria for life, such as cellularity, metabolism, homeostasis, reproduction, evolution, autonomy, and organismal integration. Then the paper could ask which criteria matter in the abortion debate and why. This would avoid making dependence appear to be the only relevant criterion.

The abortion debate is one of the most discussed topics in philosophical bioethics, which has resulted in a complexity of arguments and examples. Häyry and Sukenick should address likely counterexamples. Why not include a section on newborns, conjoined twins, coma patients, and people dependent on life-support machines? The paper needs to show why the foetus's dependence is distinctive: perhaps because it is dependence "inside and upon another person's body" (?), not simply dependence on care or technology. This would more clearly connect the metaphysical argument to bodily autonomy.

The paper is ambitious and lacks neither originality nor a genuinely interesting central idea. Its best insight is that appeals to "life" in abortion debates are not as straightforward as they appear. The comparison between viruses and fetuses is bold and useful for forcing conceptual consistency. However, the paper currently overstates the analogy and underestimates important biological and moral distinctions. With clearer definitions, a more modest conclusion, stronger engagement with counterexamples, and a more careful treatment of parasitism, the paper could become a much stronger contribution to philosophical debates about abortion, life, and moral status.

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References

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