

4/12/2016

To Citizens Assembly



UCC

Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh, Éire
University College Cork, Ireland

Submission on Eighth Amendment of
The Constitution

Coláiste na hEolaíochta, na
hInnealtóireachta agus hEolaíochta Bia
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I enclose a submission on the Eight
Amendment of the Constitution. The
title of my submission is A Rational Argument to
Demonstrate that Human Embryos Have a Right to life.

I would also like to address the Citizens Assembly
on this topic if the Assembly would like to
invite me.

Regards
William J. Reville

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Emeritus Professor William J. Reville, BSc, PhD

Ollscoil na hÉireann, Corcaigh
National University of Ireland, Cork

A Rational Argument To Demonstrate That Human Embryos Have A Right to Life

By

William Reville

Emeritus Professor of Biochemistry

UCC

Abortion halts a natural biological process; science understands this process and this understanding is an essential aid to ethical decision-making. But science does not deal in values and, on its own, science cannot adjudicate on the ethics of abortion. *I will outline the biological process involved and I will argue, using a combination of biology and philosophy, that abortion is morally wrong in all cases where pregnancy does not threaten the life of the mother.*

Every individual human life begins at conception when a sperm cell from the father fuses with an egg cell from the mother to form a zygote. The zygote divides into two daughter cells, each daughter divides into two and so the process goes, on and on. This developing life continues to grow and develop, eventually emerging 9 months later as a new-born baby. The first three months in the womb is the embryonic stage, after which the developing embryo is called a foetus.

Conception marks the start of a continuum of a unique individual human life that ends eventually in death. Some of the successive stages after conception are embryo, foetus, baby, child, adult, elderly person. The gradual and smooth unfolding along the biological continuum is automatic and self-regulating under normal circumstances. This human continuum is fundamentally different from both the sperm and egg cells that precede it and the corpse that succeeds it.

The developing embryo/foetus is unambiguously alive and genetically human from conception and, at every point along the continuum, displays the human properties appropriate to that stage. The complete human genetic instructions are present in the zygote and guide development along the continuum. Full human essence is present everywhere along the continuum.

Everyone accepts the human right to life and agree it is morally wrong to deliberately kill a person. But many people believe that personhood doesn't exist until birth and that it is therefore morally permissible to kill an embryo/foetus under circumstances where continuing the pregnancy would cause psychological distress to the mother. I believe this argument is false.

Personhood as defined under philosophical *functionalism* is the ability to do human things – eg. think, feel, remember, anticipate. Early embryos are incapable of these behaviours and do not qualify as persons under functionalism, only as *potential* persons. This is the pro-choice position.

The alternative philosophical position of *essentialism* defines things on the basis of *essence*, not behaviour. Potential refers to behaviour, not to essence, and personhood, defined by essentialism, is present everywhere along the human continuum. Thus, a zygote or a foetus is a person who is a potential musician, swimmer, singer, etc. - a person with potential, not a potential person.

Functionalism confuses being with doing and, for example, would deny personhood status to a comatose patient or one with severe dementia. But, essentialism harmonises with objective scientific understanding of the biological continuum.

In summary, human personhood is present from conception and automatically confers the right to life. Therefore I am opposed to repeal of the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution.

ENDS

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