

Midterm Paper Prompt
Riddles of Existence, Winter 2015

Due: via email (barnettd@union.edu) by 9pm on Monday, February 2nd

Choose one of the following topics, or discuss a different topic of your own design with me. Those who participated in the abortion debate must select either topic (2) or (3). The length should be about 6 pages, double-spaced.

(1) Before going on to qualify his view, Michael Tooley claims that something can have a right to life only if it desires to continue existing. What is his argument for this claim, and should we accept it as sound? Is Tooley's view vulnerable to the objections put forward by Don Marquis against the desire account of why it is wrong to kill us? Do these objections apply to Warren's account of when a being is a person with a serious right to life? How might Warren or Tooley respond to a critic like Marquis? Who, if any of these philosophers, offers the most plausible account of why killing us is wrong, and what are its implications for the moral permissibility of abortion?

(2) It is widely assumed that human infants have moral rights, such as a right to life, that pigs and cows do not have. But at the same time, it is difficult to point to any morally significant characteristic that infants have but cows and pigs do not—with the possible exception of the human infant's *potential* to develop into a person. These considerations might seem to motivate the view that merely having the potential to develop into a person already gives an infant the right to life that actual persons have. However, both Mary Anne Warren and Michael Tooley offer objections to views like this, and Elizabeth Harman proposes an alternative principle which concerns the actual future rather than mere potentiality. Is a human infant's mere potential sufficient to give it a serious right to life that cows and pigs don't have? Could an infant's actual future be sufficient, as Harman might claim? What are the implications for the ethics of killing farm animals and the ethics of infanticide?

(3) In the context of discussing abortion, Mary Anne Warren and Michael Tooley each give accounts of when a being is a person with a right to life. Are these accounts 'speciesist', in Peter Singer's terms? What are their implications for the moral permissibility of killing animals painlessly? Of subjecting animals to torture without killing them? Singer claims that every animal's interests should count equally, no matter what species they belong to, and no matter whether they are equal with respect to their cognitive abilities. Is this claim compatible with the accounts put forward by Warren and Tooley? If everyone's interests should count equally, according to Singer, then how does Singer avoid the absurd conclusion that an inanimate object's interests also count equally? Who, if anyone, gives the most plausible account of when a being has moral status, and what kinds of moral obligations do we have to nonhuman animals if it is correct?