Northern Ireland’s abortion law doesn’t exist to deny rights to women; it’s intent is to protect the rights of the fetus. This difference is more than semantical.

There is only one moment in the whole process of human reproduction when the entity at issue (what to call it: a life, a human, a baby?) ceases to be something and becomes something else. This is the moment when the father’s sperm and the mother’s ovum, with the respective DNA of each, fuse to produce a new human organism, with its own unique DNA complex and genetic makeup. The resulting zygote ceases to be either a sperm or an ovum and from this moment contains everything necessary for its future development into adult life. It is complete; after this nothing is added or subtracted. Life begins at fertilization. Disputing this scientific fact is no more respectable a position than believing the earth to be flat.

There is no other point, birth included, at which such a transformation occurs, and claiming that life begins at any other moment is arbitrary and contradictory, reflecting nothing more than a stage of development. The human pregnancy is unique among similarly sized mammals because its duration is comparatively shorter by more than half. This means that for the first year a new-born baby is basically still a developing fetus, helpless, incapable, and demanding the utmost care and attention. Unlike other animals, birth doesn’t signify a readiness to face the natural world. The fetus is unchanged by birth except in that it begins to breathe air and take nourishment through the alimentary canal.

But the question of when life should be valued is not necessarily the same as when it begins, and is perhaps more subjective. At times in history it was decided that certain lives wouldn’t be valued due to race or religion. Most of us are repelled by such ideas today. But is using a stage of development any better? And is it improved by then adding the fallacious claim that those lives less developed than an arbitrarily chosen stage (in the UK’s case, 24 weeks’ gestation) are not actually human? The Nazis and slave owners used the same tactic - it’s easier to kill and subjugate when the victims are dehumanized.

If life is not to be valued *per se* from fertilization, perhaps the next most logical claim is that life should be valued when consciousness is manifested. In his *Practical Ethics*, Australian moral philosopher Peter Singer argues that the value of human life should be determined by rationality and self-consciousness. But these only reveal themselves as a child begins to understand and speak words, between the ages of one and two years. Singer famously followed his argument through to its logical corollary, condoning infanticide in the first year after birth, in cases of birth...
defects or severe disability. This timeframe nicely matches up with the uniquely missing half of human pregnancy, noted above.

Laws exists to balance rights; to protect some rights against the encroachment of others. Women have a right to bodily autonomy. But to speak of a woman’s body when there are two DNA signatures, two heartbeats, two central nervous systems, is to speak an absurdity. Does a woman’s right to bodily autonomy extend to complete control over the fate of that second body, just because it is inside her, attached to her and reliant upon her? Or does the second body have a right to existence that supersedes the woman’s bodily autonomy? This is precisely the point at issue.

Abortion does make people's lives easier, especially women who have suffered tragedy, but at what cost? Slavery made people’s lives easier too, but at what cost? Women’s rights are important because they are a branch of human rights; in other words women have rights because women are human, just as black and Jewish people have rights because they are human. All of these have had to fight at different times and in different places for a full recognition of this. But if being human is the deciding factor, we know where women’s rights end - they end where the rights of other human beings begin. What sets the abortion issue apart is that the unborn aren’t capable of fighting for their own rights.

To call abortion, the intentional destruction of a human life, a human right is malicious. And under such a pretense, for Westminster to try and impose a substantial legislative reversal on Northern Ireland, to which abortion policy was devolved in 2010, constitutes an offense against the people of Northern Ireland. History judges how a society treats its most vulnerable, most innocent members. With the current law, which serves to value and protect life, in and of itself, Northern Ireland is setting a life-affirming and humane (and, I might add, progressive) example for the rest of the world, built on solid scientific and philosophical grounds. But if it is changed Northern Ireland will first embrace contradiction and then, with no solid line to draw on when life should be valued, will watch as human rights gradually erode, first from the young, then the old, then the suffering, the inconvenient, the unfit, the disabled, all in the name of compassion and tenderness. It's a slippery slope. Flannery O'Connor put it best: ‘tenderness leads to the gas chamber’.

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