What is Sacred?

Scientists sometimes cannot explain their observations about the known universe except by assuming the existence of something not yet discovered—another planet or star or force. So they assume that something else does exist, and they look for it. Astronomers discovered the planet Neptune, for example, only after they realized that the movements of the planet Uranus could be explained only by the gravitational force of another celestial body, yet unknown, orbiting the sun still farther out.

I have been arguing that most of us—liberals as well as conservatives—cannot explain our convictions in the way that many politicians, self-appointed spokesmen, moralists, and philosophers think we can. They say that the different opinions we have about when and why abortion is morally wrong, and about how the law should regulate abortion, all follow from some foundational conviction each of us has about whether a foetus is a person with rights or interests of its own, and, if so, how far these trump the rights and interests of a pregnant woman. But when we look closely at the kinds of convictions most people have, we find that we cannot explain these simply by discovering people's views about whether a human foetus is a person. Our convictions reflect another idea we also hold, whose gravitational force better explains the shape of our beliefs and our disagreements.

I have already said what that different idea is. We believe that it is intrinsically regrettable when human life, once begun, ends prematurely. We believe, in other words, that a premature death is bad in itself, even when it is not bad for any particular person. Many people believe this about suicide and euthanasia—that a terrible thing has happened when someone takes his own life or when his doctor kills him at his own request even when death may be in that person's own best interests. We believe the same about abortion: that it is sometimes wrong not because it violates a foetus’s rights or harms its interests, but in spire of a foetus's having no rights or interests to violate. The great majority of people who have strong views about abortion—liberal as well as conservative believe, at least intuitively, that the life of a human organism has intrinsic value in any form it takes, even in the extremely undeveloped form of a very early, just-implanted embryo. I say "at least intuitively" because many people have not related their views about abortion or euthanasia to the idea that human life has intrinsic value. For them, that idea is the undiscovered planet that explains otherwise inexplicable convictions.

The idea of life's intrinsic value may seem mysterious, and I must try to make it seem less so. I shall have to overcome, first, an objection that philosophers have raised, which denies the very possibility that anything has intrinsic value. David Hume and many other philosophers insisted that objects or events can be valuable only when and because they serve someone's or something's interests. On this view, nothing is valuable unless someone wants it or unless it helps someone to get what he does want. How can it be important that a life continue unless that life is important for or to someone? How can a life's continuing be, as I am suggesting, simply important in and of itself?

That may seem a powerful objection. But much
of our life is based on the idea that objects or events can be valuable in themselves. It is true that in ordinary, day-to-day life people do spend most of their time trying to get or make things they value because they or someone else enjoys or needs them. They try to make money and buy clothes or food or medicine for that reason. But the idea that some events or objects are valuable in and of themselves—that we honor them not because they serve our desires or interests but for their own sake—is also a familiar part of our experience. Much of what we think about knowledge, experience, art, and nature, for example, presupposes that in different ways these are valuable in themselves and not just for their utility or for the pleasure or satisfaction they bring us. The idea of intrinsic value is commonplace, and it has a central place in our shared scheme of values and opinions.

It is not enough, however, simply to say that the idea of intrinsic value is familiar. For we are concerned with a special application of that idea—the life claim that human life even in its most undeveloped form has intrinsic value and that application raises unique puzzles. Why does it not follow, for example, that there should be as much human life as possible? Most of us certainly do not believe that. On the contrary, it would be better, at least in many parts of the world, if there were less human life rather than more. Then how can it be intrinsically important that human life, once begun, continue? Those are important questions, and in answering them we will discover a crucial distinction between two categories of intrinsically valuable things: those that are incrementally valuable the more of them we have the better—and those that are not but are valuable in a very different way. I shall call the latter sacred or inviolable values.

There is another, quite independent puzzle. I claim not only that most of us believe that human life has intrinsic value, but also that this explains why we disagree so profoundly about abortion. How can that be? How can a shared assumption explain the terrible divisions about abortion that are tearing us apart? The answer, I believe, is that we interpret the idea that human life is intrinsically valuable in different ways, and that the different impulses and convictions expressed in these competing interpretations are very powerful and passionate.

It is obvious enough that the abstract idea of life's intrinsic value is open to different interpretations. Suppose we accept this abstract idea, and also accept that in at least some circumstances a deliberate abortion would show a wrongful contempt for the intrinsic value of life. Which circumstances are these? The list of questions we must pose in deciding this is very long. Is an abortion at a late stage of pregnancy a worse insult to the intrinsic value of life than one at an early stage? If so, why? What standard of measurement or comparison do and should we use in making that kind of judgment?

What else, besides abortion, fails to show the required respect for human life? Does a doctor show respect for life when he allows a mother to die in order to save a foetus? Which decision that a doctor might make in such circumstances would show more and which less respect for the intrinsic value of human life? Why? Suppose a pregnancy is the result of rape: which decision then shows greater respect for the intrinsic value of human life—a decision for or against abortion? Suppose a foetus is horribly deformed: does it show respect or contempt for life to allow it to be born? What standard of measuring respect or contempt for human life should we use in making these judgments?

Different people with sharply different convictions about a range of religions and philosophical matters answer these various questions differently, and the different answers they give in fact match the main divisions of opinion about abortion. If we can understand the abortion controversy as related to, other differences
of religions and philosophical opinion in that way, then we shall understand much better how and why we disagree. We shall also be in a better position to emphasize how we agree, to see how our divisions, deep and painful though they are, are nevertheless rooted in a fundamental unity of humane conviction. What we share is more fundamental than our quarrels over its best interpretation.

The Idea of the Sacred

What does it mean to say that human life is intrinsically important? Something is instrumentally important if its value depends on its usefulness, its capacity to help people get something else they want. Money and medicine, for example, are only instrumentally valuable: no one thinks that money has value beyond its power to purchase things that people want or need, or that medicine has value beyond its ability to cure. Something is subjectively valuable only to people who happen to desire it. Scotch whiskey, watching football games, and lying in the sun are valuable only for people, like me, who happen to enjoy them. I do not think that others who detest them are making any kind of a mistake or failing to show proper respect for what is truly valuable. They just happen not to like or want what I do.

Something is intrinsically valuable, on the contrary, if its value is independent of what people happen to enjoy or want or need or what is good for them. Most of us treat at least some objects or events as intrinsically valuable in that way: we think we should admire and protect them because they are important in themselves, and not just if or because we or others want or enjoy them. Many people think that great paintings, for example, are intrinsically valuable. They are valuable, and must be respected and protected, because of their inherent quality as art, and not because people happen to enjoy looking at them or find instruction or some pleasurable aesthetic experience standing before them. We say that we want to look at one of Rembrandt's self-portraits because it is wonderful, not that it is wonderful because we want to look at it. The thought of its being destroyed horrifies us seems to us a terrible desecration—but this is not just because or even if that would cheat us of experiences we desire to have. We are horrified even if we have only a very small chance of ever seeing the painting anyway—perhaps it is privately owned and never shown to the public, or in a museum far away—and even if there are plenty of excellent reproductions available.

We treat not just particular paintings or other works of art that way, but, more generally, human cultures. We think it a shame when any distinctive form of human culture, especially a complex and interesting one, dies or languishes. Once again, this cannot be fully explained merely in terms of the contribution that cultural variety makes to the excitement of our lives. We create museums to protect and sustain interest in some form of primitive art, for example, not just because or if we think its objects splendid or beautiful, but because we think it a terrible waste if any artistic form that human beings have developed should perish as if it had never existed. We take much the same attitude toward parts of popular or industrial culture: we are troubled by the disappearance of traditional crafts, for example, not just if we need what it produced—perhaps we do not—but because it seems a great waste that an entire form of craft imagination should disappear.

Is human life subjectively or instrumentally or intrinsically valuable? Most of us think it is all three. We treat the value of someone's life as instrumental when we measure it in terms of how much his being alive serves the interests of others: of how much what he produces makes other people's lives better, for example. When we say that Mozart's or Pasteur's life had great value because
the music and medicine they created served the interests of others, we are treating their lives as instrumentally valuable. We treat a person's life as subjectively valuable when we measure its value to him, that is, in terms of how much he wants to be alive or how much being alive is good for him. So if we say that life has lost its value to someone who is miserable or in great pain, we are treating that life in a subjective way.

Let us call the subjective value a life has for the person whose life it is its personal value. It is personal value we have in mind when we say that normally a person's life is the most important thing he or she has. It is personal value that a government aims to protect, as fundamentally important, when it recognizes and enforces people's right to life. So it is understandable that the debate about abortion should include the question of whether a foetus has rights and interests of its own. If it does, then it has a personal interest in continuing to live, an interest that should be protected by recognizing and enforcing a right to life. If it does, then it has a personal interest in continuing to live, an interest that should be protected by recognizing and enforcing a right to life. I have argued that an early foetus has no interests and rights, and that almost no one thinks it does; if personal value were the only pertinent kind of value, at stake in abortion, then abortion would be morally unproblematic.

If we think, however, that the life of any human organism, including a foetus, has intrinsic value whether or not it also has instrumental or personal value if we think that the life of any human organism, including a foetus, has intrinsic value whether or not it also has instrumental or personal value if we treat any form of human life as something we should respect and honor and protect as marvellous in itself—then abortion remains morally problematical. If it is a horrible desecration to destroy a painting, for example, even though a painting is not a person, why should it not be a much greater desecration to destroy something whose intrinsic value may be vastly greater?

We must notice a further and crucial distinction: between what we value incrementally—what we want more of, no matter how much we already have and what we value only once it already exists. Some things are not only intrinsically but incrementally valuable. We tend to treat knowledge that way, for example. Our culture wants to know about archaeology and cosmology and galaxies many millions of light-years away—even though Little of that knowledge is likely to be of any practical benefit—and we want to know as much of all that as we can. But we do not value human life that way. Instead, we treat human life as sacred or inviolable. (As I said in chapter 1, I use those terms—and also the terms "sanctity" and "inviolability"—interchangeably.) The hallmark of the sacred as distinct from the incrementally valuable is that the sacred is intrinsically valuable because—and therefore only once—it exists. It is inviolable because of what it represents or embodies. It is not important that there be more people. But once a human life has begun, it is very important that it flourish and not be wasted.

Is that a peculiar distinction? No: we make the same distinction about other objects or events that we think are intrinsically valuable. We treat much of the art we value as sacredly rather than incrementally valuable. We attach great value to works of art once they exist, even though we care less about whether more of them are produced. Of course we may believe that the continual production of great art is tremendously important—that the more truly wonderful objects a culture produces the better—and we believe the same about great lives: even those who are most in favour of controlling population growth would not want fewer Leonardo da Vinci or Martin Luther Kings. But even if we do not regret that there are not more works by a given painter, or more examples of a particular artistic genre, we insist on respecting the examples we do in fact have. I do not myself wish that there were more paintings by Tintoretto than there are. But I would nevertheless be appalled by the deliberate destruction of even one of those he did
Something is sacred or inviolable when its deliberate destruction would dishonor what ought to be honored. What makes something sacred in that way? We can distinguish between two processes through which something becomes sacred for a given culture or person. The first is by association or designation. In ancient Egypt, for example, certain animals were held sacred to certain gods; because cars were associated with a certain goddess, and for no other reason, it was sacrilegious to injure them. In many cultures, people take that attitude toward national symbols, including flags. Many Americans consider the flag sacred because of its conventional association with the life of the nation; the respect they believe they owe their country is transferred to the flag. Of course, the flags value to them is not subjective or instrumental. Nor is the flag incrementally valuable; even the most flag-reverent patriot does not believe that there must be as many flags as possible. He values the flag as sacred rather than incrementally valuable, and its sacred character is a matter of association.

The second way something may become sacred is through its history, how it came to be. In the case of art, inviolability is not associational but genetic: it is not what a painting symbolizes or is associated with but how it came to be that makes it valuable. We protect even a painting we do not much like, just as we try to preserve cultures we do not especially admire, because they embody processes of human creation we consider important and admirable.

We take a parallel attitude, we must now notice, toward aspects of the natural world: in our culture, we tend to treat distinct animal species (though not individual animals) as sacred. We think it very important, and worth considerable economic expense, to protect endangered species from destruction at human hands or by a human enterprise—a market in rhinoceros tusks, valued for their supposed aphrodisiac power; dams that threaten the only habitat of a certain species of fish; or timbering practices that will destroy the least horned owls. We are upset—it would be terrible if the rhinoceros ceased to exist—and we are indignant: surely it is wrong to allow such a catastrophe just so that human beings can make more money or increase their power.

Why are individual species so valuable that it would be dreadful if some useful enterprise destroyed one or a few of the many thousands of species in the world? Someone might say: we protect endangered species because we want the pleasure of continuing to see animals of each species, or because we want the useful information we might gain by studying them, or because it is more interesting for us that there be more rather than fewer species. But none of these arguments rings true. Many—perhaps most—of the people who consider endangered species important are very unlikely even to encounter any of the animals they want to protect. I doubt that many who have labored to protect the horned owl have any plans to visit the habitat of those birds or to look them up in zoos, nor do I think they believe that in keeping horned owls alive we will learn enough useful information to justify the expense. These people struggle to protect the species simply because they think it would be a shame if human acts and decisions caused it to disappear.

So this is another important example of something many of us take to be of intrinsic rather than instrumental value. It is also an example of sacred rather than incremental value: few people believe the world would be worse if there had always been fewer species of birds, and few would think it important to engineer new bird species if that were possible. What we believe important is not that there be any particular number of species but that a species that now exists not
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be extinguished by us. We consider it a kind of cosmic shame when a species that nature has developed ceases, through human actions, to exist.

I put the point that way—about not destroying what nature has created—to emphasize the similarity I claim between our reverence for art and our concern for the survival of species. Both art and species are examples of things inviolable to us not by association but in virtue of their history, of how they came to exist. We see the evolutionary process through which species were developed as itself contributing, in some way, to the shame of what we do when we cause their extinction now. Indeed, people who are concerned to protect threatened species often stress the connection between art and nature themselves by describing the evolution of species as a process of creation.

For most Americans, and for many people in other countries, the evolutionary process is quite literally creative, for they believe that God is the author of nature. On that assumption, causing a species to disappear, wholly to be lost, is destroying a creative design of the most exalted artist of all. But even people who do not cake that view, but who instead accept the Darwinian thesis that the evolution of species is a matter of accidental mutation rather than divine design, nevertheless often use artistic metaphors of creation. They describe discrete animal species as not just accidents but as achievements of adaptation, as something that nature has not just produced but wrought. The literature of conservation is studded with such personifications of nature as creative artist. They are part of the fertile ground of ideas and associations in which the roofs of conservationist concern are buried. Indeed, so thoroughly have the metaphors of artistic and cultural creation come to dominate pleas for the preservation of species that the analogy is now used in reverse. An anthropologist recently pleaded that we should treat the threatened death of a primitive language with as much concern and sympathy as we show mail darters and horned owls and other near extinct species of animal life.

Our concern for the preservation of animal species reaches its most dramatic and intense form, of course, in the case of one particular species: our own. It is an inarticulate, unchallenged, almost unnoticed, but nevertheless absolute premise of our political and economic planning that the human race must survive and prosper. This unspoken assumption unites the two different examples of sanctity we have so far identified. Our special concern for art and culture reflects the respect in which we hold artistic creation, and our special concern for the survival of animal species reflects a parallel respect for what nature, understood either as divine or as secular, has produced. These twin bases of the sacred come together in the case of the survival of our own species, because we treat it as crucially important that we survive not only biologically but culturally, that our species not only lives but thrives. That is the premise of a good part of our concern about conservation and about the survival and health of cultural and artistic traditions. We are concerned not only about ourselves and others now alive, but about untold generations of people in centuries to come.

We cannot explain our concern about future humanity, of course, as concern for the rights and interests of particular people. Suppose that through great stupidity we were to unleash radioactivity whose consequences was that human beings were extinct by the twenty-second century. It is absurd to argue that we would then have done terrible injury or injustice to people who would otherwise have lived, unless we think that in some very crowded mystical space people are waiting to be conceived and born. We sometimes talk that way, and may even fall into ways of thinking that would make sense only if there were such mystical worlds of possible
people with a right to exist. But in fast our worries about humanity in centuries to come make sense only if we suppose that it is intrinsically important that the human race continue even though it is not important to the interests of particular people.

We also consider it important that people live well, and we therefore think we have a responsibility not only not to destroy the possibility of future generations but also to leave them a fair share of natural and cultural resources. That is the presupposition of what philosopher call the problem of justice between generations: the idea that each generation of people must in fairness leave the world fit for habitation not only by their children and grandchildren, whom they already know and love, but for generations of descendants whose identity is in no way yet fixed, at least in ways we can understand, but depends on what we must consider billions of independent accidents of genetic coupling. Philosophers speak of this as a matter of justice, and so do politicians and columnists: they argue, for example, that the huge national debt that the government has allowed the United States to develop in recent decades is unfair to generations yet unborn. But that way of putting it is misleading, because our concern for the future is not concern for the rights or interests of specific people. The decisions we now make about conservation and the economy will affect, in ways we cannot understand, let alone anticipate, not only what resources our descendants will have but which people they will be. It hardly makes sense to say that we owe it to some particular individual not selfishly to squander the earth's resources if that individual will exist only if we do squander them. Or, for that matter, only if we don't. Our concern for future generations is not a matter of justice at all but of our instinctive sense that human flourishing as well as human survival is of sacred importance.

[2nd reading]

The Sanctity of Each Human Life

An obscure nineteenth-century Austrian philosopher, Joseph Popper-Lynkeus, said that the death of any human being, except of a murderer or a suicide, was "a far more important happening than any political or religious or national occurrence, or the sum total of the scientific and artistic and technological advances made throughout the ages by all the peoples of the world." He added that anyone tempted to regard this extraordinary claim as an exaggeration should "imagine the individual concerned to be himself or his best beloved." His addition confuses the intrinsic value of human life with what I called its personal value. My life may be personally more important to me than anything else, but it does not follow that it is intrinsically more important, and once that distinction is made, it is ludicrous to suppose that even a premature and tragic death, let alone a natural death after a long life, is intrinsically a worse event than the destruction of all human art and knowledge would be. But Popper-Lynkeus's claim does capture, in hyperbolic form, a conviction that must now be our main concern: that in some circumstances the deliberate ending of a single human life is intrinsically bad—objectively a shame—in the same way as the destruction of great art or the loss of important knowledge would be.

We are now in a better position to appreciate that conviction. I said that we treat the preservation and prosperity of our own species as of capital importance because we believe that we are the highest achievements of God's creation, if we are conventionally religious, or of evolution, if we are not, and also because we know that all knowledge and art and culture would disappear if humanity did. That combination of nature and art—two traditions of the sacred—supports
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the further and more dramatic claim that each individual human life, on its own, is also inviolable, because each individual life, on its own, can be understood as the product of both creative traditions. The first of these traditions—the idea that nature is creative has had a prominent role as a basis for that claim. The dominant Western religious traditions insist that God made humankind "in His own image," that each individual human being is a representation and not merely a product of a divine creator, and people who accept that article of faith will understandably think that each human being, not just the species as a whole, is a creative masterpiece. A secular form of the same idea, which assigns the masterpiece to nature rather than God, is also a staple of our culture—the image of a human being as the highest product of natural creation is one of Shakespeare's most powerful, for example. "What a piece of work is a man!" says Hamlet, and James Tyrrel, who arranges the murder of the princes in the Tower for Richard III, quotes a killer as being appalled at realizing that he has "smothered the most replenished sweet work of Nature that from the prime creation e'er she framed." In these and other ways, the idea that human beings are special among natural creations is offered to explain why it is horrible that even a single human individual life should be extinguished.

The role of the other tradition of the sacred in supporting the sanctity of life is less evident but equally crucial: each developed human being is the product not just of natural creation, but also of the kind of deliberative human creative force that we honor in honoring art. A mature woman, for example, is in her personality, training, capacity, interests, ambitions, and emotions, something like a work of art because in those respects she is the product of human creative intelligence, partly that of her culture, and also, through the choices she has made, her own creation. The Greeks used two words for life that bring out the distinction: zoe, by which they meant physical or biological life, and bios, by which they meant a life as lived, as made up of the actions, decisions, motives, and events that compose what we now call a biography.

The idea that each individual human life is inviolable is therefore rooted, like our concern for the survival of our species as a whole, in two combined and intersecting bases of the sacred: natural and human creation. Any human creature, including the most immature embryo, is a triumph of divine or evolutionary creation, which produces a complex, reasoning being from, as it were, nothing, and also of what we often call the "miracle" of human reproduction, which makes each new human being both different from and yet a continuation of the human beings who created it. Levin—Tolstoy's fictional self-projection in Anna Karenina—is struck by wonder, in spite of himself, at the birth of his son:

Meanwhile, at the foot of the bed, in Lizaveta Petrovna's skillful hands flickered the life of a human being, like the small uncertain flame of a night-light—a human being who had not existed a moment ago but who, with the same rights and importance to itself as the rest of humanity, would live and create others in its own image.... Whence, wherefore had it come, and who was it? He could not understand at all, nor accustom himself to the idea. It seemed to him too much, a superabundance, to which he was unable to get used for a long time.

The natural miracle that so moved Levin begins much earlier than birth: it begins in the genetic identity of an embryo. The second form of sacred creation, the human as distinct from the natural investment, is also immediate when pregnancy is planned, because a
deliberate decision of parents to have and bear a child is of course a creative one. Any surviving child is shaped in character and capacity by the decisions of parents and by the cultural background of community. As that child matures, in all but pathological cases, his own creative choices progressively determine his thoughts, personality, ambitions, emotions, connections, and achievements. He creates his life just as much as an artist creates a painting or a poem. I am not suggesting, as some nineteenth-century Romantic writers did, that a human life is literally a work of art. That is a dangerous idea, because it suggests that we should value a person in the same way that we value a painting or a poem, valuing him for beauty or style or originality rather than personal or moral or intellectual qualities. But we can—and do—treat leading a life as itself a kind of creative activity, which we have at least as much reason to honor as artistic creation.

The life of a single human organism commands respect and protection, then, no matter in what form or shape, because of the complex creative investment it represents and because of our wonder at the divine or evolutionary processes that produce new lives from old ones, at the processes of nation and community and language through which a human being will come to absorb and continue hundreds of generations of cultures and forms of life and value, and, finally, when mental life has begun and flourishes, at the process of internal personal creation and judgment by which a person will make and remake himself, a mysterious, inescapable process in which we each participate, and which is therefore the most powerful and inevitable source of empathy and communion we have with every other creature who faces the same frightening challenge. The horror we feel in the willful destruction of a human life reflects our shared inarticulate sense of the intrinsic importance of each of these dimensions of investment.

The Metric of Disrespect

I must now try to show how this understanding of the sacredness of human life allows us better to explain the two opposing attitudes toward abortion than does the traditional account, which supposes that these attitudes are based on different views about whether and when a fetus is a person with a right to life. I shall assume that conservatives and liberals all accept that in principle human life is inviolable in the sense I have defined, that any abortion involves a waste of human life and is therefore, in itself, a bad thing to happen, a shame. And I shall try to show how that assumption explains why the two sides both agree and disagree in the ways that they do.

I begin with their agreement. Conservatives and liberals both suppose, as I said, that though abortion is always morally problematic and often morally wrong, it is worse on some occasions than on others. They suppose, in other words, that there are degrees of badness in the waste of human life. What measure are they assuming in those judgments? Let us put that question in a more general form. We all assume that some cases of premature death are greater tragedies than others, not only when we are puzzling about abortion, but in the context of many other events as well. Most of us would think it worse when a young woman dies in a plane crash than when an elderly man does, for example, or a boy than a middle-aged man. What measure of tragedy are we assuming when we think this? What measure should we assume?

This is not the question moral philosophers and medical ethicists often write about—the question of what rights different sorts of people have to live, or of how relatively wicked it is to deny them lifesaving resources or to kill them. We might believe that it is
worse—that there has been a greater waste of life—when a young person dies than when an old one does, or when an emotionally healthy person dies than a suicidal one, or when a man with young children dies than a bachelor, without suggesting that it would be any less wicked to kill an old than a young person, or a depressive than a happy one, or a bachelor than a father. Nor even—though this is obviously a different and harder question—that it would be any fairer to deny an old man scarce lifesaving resources, like kidney machines, when there is not enough for everyone who needs them, or to deny those resources to depressives and bachelors so that they could be used for spirited fathers of six.

These judgments about murder and fairness belong to the system of rights and interests, the system of ideas I said could not explain our most common convictions about abortion. Most people think (and our laws certainly insist) that people have an equal right to life, and that the murder of a depressive handicapped octogenarian misanthrope is as heinous, and must be punished as seriously, as the murder of anyone younger or healthier or more valuable to others. Any other view would strike us as monstrous. It is more complicated, as I just conceded, how these differences between people should affect the distribution of scarce medical resources. Doctors in most countries assume that such resources should be devoted to younger rather than older people, and for many doctors, quality of life and value to others come into the equation as well. But even these questions of fairness are different from the question of the intrinsic goodness or badness of events that we are considering. We might insist, for example, that the interests of a seriously depressed and gravely handicapped person should be respected just as much as those of an emotionally healthy person in allocating scarce medical resources, and yet think (as some people might, though many do not) that it is a greater tragedy when the latter dies young than the former. I am now asking, then, not about justice or rights or fairness, but about tragedy and the waste of life. How should we measure and compare the waste of life, and therefore the insult to the sanctity of life, on different occasions?

We should consider, first, a simple and perhaps natural answer to that question. Life is wasted, on this simple view, when life is lost, so that the question of how much has been wasted by a premature death is answered by estimating how long the life cut short would probably otherwise have lasted. This simple answer seems to fit many of our intuitive convictions. It seems to explain the opinion I just mentioned, for example: that the death of a young woman in an airplane crash is worse than the death of an old man would be. The young woman would probably otherwise have had many more years left to live.

The simple answer is incomplete, because we can measure life—and therefore loss of life—in different ways. Should we take into account only the duration of life lost with no regard to its quality? Or should we take quality into account as well? Should we say that the loss of the young woman who died in the crash would be greater if she had been looking forward to a life full of promise and pleasure than if she was physically or psychologically handicapped in some permanent and grave way? Should we also take into account the loss her death would cause to the lives of others? Is the death of a parent of young children, or of a brilliant employer of large numbers of people, or of a musical genius, a worse waste of life than the death at the same age of someone whose life was equally satisfying to himself but less valuable to others?

We should not puzzle over these alternatives, however, because this simple answer, which measures
waste of life only in terms of life lost, is unacceptable whether we define that loss only as duration of life or include quality of life or benefit to others. It is unacceptable, in any of these forms, for two compelling reasons.

First, though the simple answer seems to fit some of our convictions, it contradicts other important and deeply held ones. If the waste of life were to be measured only in chronological terms, for example, then an early-stage abortion would be a worse insult to the sanctity of life, a worse instance of life being wasted, than a late-stage abortion. But almost everyone holds the contrary assumption: that the later the abortion—the more like a child the aborted fetus has already become—the worse it is. We take a similar view about the death of young children. It is terrible when an infant dies but worse, most people think, when a three-year-old child dies and worse still when an adolescent does. Almost no one thinks that the tragedy of premature death decreases in a linear way as age increases. Most people's sense of that tragedy, if it were rendered as a graph relating the degree of tragedy to the age at which death occurs, would slope upward from birth to some point in late childhood or early adolescence, then follow a flat line until at least very early middle age, and then slope down again toward extreme old age. Richard's murder of the princes in the Tower could have no parallel, for horror, in any act of infanticide.

Nor does the simple interpretation of how death wastes life fit our feelings better in the more elaborate forms I mentioned. Our common view that it is worse when a late-stage fetus is aborted or miscarries than an early-stage one, and worse when a ten-year-old child dies than an infant, makes no assumptions about the quality of the lives lost or their value for others.

The simple view of wasted life fails for a second, equally important reason. It wholly fails to explain the important truth I have several times emphasized: that though we treat human life as sacred, we do not treat it as incrementally good; we do not believe abstractly that the more human lives that are lived the better. The simple claim that a premature death is tragic only because life is lost—only because some period of life that might have been lived by someone will not be—gives us no more reason to grieve over an abortion or any premature death than we have to grieve over contraception or any other form of birth control. In both cases, less human life is lived than might otherwise be.

The "simple loss" view we have been considering is inadequate because it focuses only on future possibilities, on what will or will not happen in the future. It ignores the crucial truth that waste of life is often greater and more tragic because of what has already happened in the past. The death of an adolescent girl is worse than the death of an infant girl because the adolescent's death frustrates the investments she and others have already made in her life—the ambitions and expectations she constructed, the plans and projects she made, the love and interest and emotional involvement she formed for and with others, and they for and with her.

I shall use "frustration" (though the word has other associations) to describe this more complex measure of the waste of life because I can think of no better word to suggest the combination of past and future considerations that figure in our assessment of a tragic death. Most of us hold to something like the following set of instinctive assumptions about death and tragedy. We believe, as I said, that a successful human life has a certain natural course. It starts in mere biological development—conception, fetal development, and infancy—but it then extends into childhood,
adolescence, and adult life in ways that are determined not just by biological formation but by social and individual training and choice, and that culminate in satisfying relationships and achievements of different kinds. It ends, after a normal life span, in a natural death. It is a waste of the natural and human creative investments that make up the story of a normal life when this normal progression is frustrated by premature death or in other ways. But how bad this is—how great the frustration—depends on the stage of life in which it occurs, because the frustration is greater if it takes places after rather than before the person has made a significant personal investment in his own life, and less if it occurs after any investment has been substantially fulfilled, or as substantially fulfilled as is anyway likely.

This more complex structure fits our convictions about tragedy better than the simple loss-of-life measure does. It explains why the death of an adolescent seems to us worse in most circumstances than the death of an infant. It also explains how we can consistently maintain that it is sometimes undesirable to create new human lives while still insisting that it is bad when any human life, once begun, ends prematurely. No frustration of life is involved when fewer rather than more human beings are born, because there is no creative investment in lives that never exist. But once a human life starts, a process has begun, and interrupting that process frustrates an adventure already under way.

So the idea that we deplore the frustration of life, not its mere absence, seems adequately to fit our general convictions about life, death, and tragedy. It also explains much of what we think about the particular tragedy of abortion. Both conservatives and liberals assume that in some circumstances abortion is more serious and more likely to be unjustifiable than in others. Notably, both agree that a late-term abortion is graver than an early-term one. We cannot explain this shared conviction simply on the ground that fetuses more closely resemble infants as pregnancy continues. People believe that abortion is not just emotionally more difficult but morally worse the later in pregnancy it occurs, and increasing resemblance alone has no moral significance. Nor can we explain the shared conviction by noticing that at some point in pregnancy a fetus becomes sentient. Most people think that abortion is morally worse early in the second trimester—well before sentience is possible than early in the first one (several European nations, which permit abortion in the first but not the second trimester, have made that distinction part of their criminal law). And though that widely shared belief cannot be explained by the simple lost-life theory, the frustration thesis gives us a natural and compelling justification of it. Fetal development is a continuing creative process, a process that has barely begun at the instant of conception. Indeed, since genetic individuation is not yet complete at that point, we might say that the development of a unique human being has not started until approximately fourteen days later, at implantation. But after implantation, as fetal growth continues, the natural investment that would be wasted in an abortion grows steadily larger and more significant.

Human and Divine

So our sense that frustration rather than just loss compromises the inviolability of human life does seem helpful in explaining what unites most people about abortion. The more difficult question is whether it also helps in explaining what divides them. Let us begin our answer by posing another question. I just described a natural course of human life—beginning in conception,
extending through birth and childhood, culminating in successful and engaged adulthood in which the natural biological investment and the personal human investment in that life are realized, and finally ending in natural death after a normal span of years. Life so understood can be frustrated in two main ways. It can be frustrated by premature death, which leaves any previous natural and personal investment unrealized. Or it can be frustrated by other forms of failure: by handicaps or poverty or misconceived projects or irredeemable mistakes or lack of training or even brute bad luck; any one of these may in different ways frustrate a person's opportunity to redeem his ambitions or otherwise to lead a full and flourishing life. Is premature death always, inevitably, a more serious frustration of life than any of these other forms of failure?

Decisions about abortion often raise this question. Suppose parents discover, early in the mother's pregnancy, that the fetus is genetically so deformed that the life it would lead after birth will inevitably be both short and sharply limited. They must decide whether it is a worse frustration of life if the gravely deformed fetus were to die at once wasting the miracle of its creation and its development so far—or if it were to continue to grow in utero, to be born, and to live only a short and crippled life. We know that people divide about that question, and we now have a way to describe the division. On one view, immediate death of the fetus, even in a case like this one, is a more terrible frustration of the miracle of life than even a sharply diminished and brief infant life would be, for the latter would at least redeem some small part, however limited, of the natural investment. On the rival view, it would be a worse frustration of life to allow this fetal life to continue because that would add, to the sad waste of a deformed human's biological creation, the further, heartbreaking waste of personal emotional investments made in that life by others but principally by the child himself before his inevitable early death.

We should therefore consider this hypothesis: though almost everyone accepts the abstract principle that it is intrinsically bad when human life, once begun, is frustrated, people disagree about the best answer to the question of whether avoidable premature death is always or invariably the most serious possible frustration of life. Very conservative opinion, on this hypothesis, is grounded in the conviction that immediate death is inevitably a more serious frustration than any option that postpones death, even at the cost of greater frustration in other respects. Liberal opinion, on the same hypothesis, is grounded in the opposite conviction: that in some cases, at least, a choice for premature death minimizes the frustration of life and is therefore not a compromise of the principle that human life is sacred but, on the contrary, best respects that principle.

What reasons do people have for embracing one rather than the other of these positions? It seems plain that whatever they are, they are deep reasons, drawn consciously or unconsciously from a great network of other convictions about the point of life and the moral significance of death. If the hypothesis I just described holds—if conservatives and liberals disagree on whether premature death is always the worst frustration of life—then the disagreement must be in virtue of a more general contrast between religious and philosophical orientations.

So I offer another hypothesis. Almost everyone recognizes, as I have suggested, that a normal, successful human life is the product of two morally significant modes of creative investment in that life, the natural and the human. But people disagree about the relative importance of these modes, not just when
abortion is in question but on many other mortal occasions as well. If you believe that the natural investment in a human life is transcendentally important, that the gift of life itself is infinitely more significant than anything the person whose life it is may do for himself, important though that may be, you will also believe that a deliberate, premature death is the greatest frustration of life possible, no matter how limited or cramped or unsuccessful the continued life would be. On the other hand, if you assign much greater relative importance to the human contribution to life's creative value, then you will consider the frustration of that contribution to be a more serious evil, and will accordingly see more point in deciding that life should end before further significant human investment is doomed to frustration.

We can best understand some of our serious disagreements about abortion, in other words, as reflecting deep differences about the relative moral importance of the natural and human contributions to the inviolability of individual human lives. In fact, we can make a bolder version of that claim: we can best understand the full range of opinion about abortion, from the most conservative to the most liberal, by ranking each opinion about the relative gravity of the two forms of frustration along a range extending from one extreme position to the other—from treating any frustration of the biological investment as worse than any possible frustration of human investment, through more moderate and complex balances, to the opinion that frustrating mere biological investment in human life barely matters and that frustrating a human investment is always worse.

If we look at the controversy this way, it is hardly surprising that many people who hold views on the natural or biological end of that spectrum are fundamentalist or Roman Catholic or strongly religious in some other orthodox religious faith—people who believe that God is the author of everything natural and that each human fetus is a distinct instance of his most sublime achievement. Our hypothesis explains how orthodox religion can play a crucial role in forming people's opinions about abortion even if they do not believe that a fetus is a person with its own right to life.

That is a significant point. It is widely thought that religious opposition to abortion is premised on the conviction that every human fetus is a person with rights and interests of its own. It is therefore important to see that religious opposition to abortion need not be based on that assumption. I said that many religious traditions, including Roman Catholicism for most of its history, based their opposition to abortion on the different assumption that human life has intrinsic value. The present hypothesis shows how that assumption can ground very fierce, even absolute, opposition to abortion. A strongly orthodox or fundamentalist person can insist that abortion is always morally wrong because the deliberate destruction of something created as sacred by God can never be redeemed by any human benefit.

This is not to suggest, however, that only conventionally religious people who believe in a creator God are conservatives about abortion. Many other people stand in awe of human reproduction as a natural miracle. Some of them, as I said, embrace the mysterious but apparently powerful idea that the natural order is in itself purposive and commands respect as sacred. Some prominent conservationists, for example, though hardly religious in the conventional sense, seem to be deeply religious in that one and may be drawn a considerable distance toward the conservative end of the spectrum of opinion I described. They may well think that any frustration of the natural investment in human life is so grave a matter that it is rarely if ever
justified—that the pulse in the mud is more profound than any other source of life's value. They might therefore be just as firmly opposed to aborting a seriously deformed fetus as any religiously orthodox conservative would be.

Nor does it follow, on the other hand, that everyone who is religious in an orthodox way or everyone who reveres nature is therefore conservative about abortion. As we have seen, many such people, who agree that unnecessary death is a great evil, are also sensitive to and emphatic about the intrinsic badness of the waste of human investment in life. They believe that the frustration of that contribution—for example, in the birth of a grievously deformed fetus whose investment in its own life is doomed to be frustrated—may in some circumstances be the worse of two evils, and they believe that their religious conviction or reverence for nature is not only consistent with but actually requires that position. Some of them take the same view about what many believe to be an even more problematic case: they say that their religious convictions entail that a woman should choose abortion rather than bear a child when that would jeopardize her investment in her own life.

I described extreme positions at two ends of the spectrum: that only natural investment counts in deciding whether abortion wastes human life, and that only human investment counts. In fact, very few people take either of these extreme positions. For most people, the balance is more complex and involves compromise and accommodation rather than giving absolute priority to avoiding frustration of either the natural or the human investment. People's opinions become progressively less conservative and more liberal as the balance they strike gives more weight to the importance of not frustrating the human investment in life; more liberal views emphasize, in various degrees, that a human life is created not just by divine or natural forces but also, in a different but still central way, by personal choice, training, commitment, and decision. The shift in emphasis leads liberals to see the crucial creative investment in life, the investment that must not be frustrated if at all possible, as extending far beyond conception and biological growth and well into a human being's adult life. On that liberal opinion, as I have already suggested, it may be more frustrating of life's miracle when an adult's ambitions, talents, training, and expectations are wasted because of an unforeseen and unwanted pregnancy than when a fetus dies before any significant investment of that kind has been made.

That is an exceptionally abstract description of my understanding of the controversy between conservative and liberal opinion. But it will become less abstract, for I shall try to show how the familiar differences between conservative and liberal views on abortion can be explained by the hypothesis that conservatives and liberals rank the two forms of frustration differently. We must not exaggerate that difference, however. It is a difference in emphasis, though an important one. Most people who take what I call a liberal view of abortion do not deny that the conception of a human life and its steady fetal development toward recognizable human form are matters of great moral importance that count as creative investments. That is why they agree with conservatives that as this natural investment continues, and the fetus develops toward the shape and capacity of an infant, abortion, which wastes that investment, is progressively an event more to be avoided or regretted. Many people who hold conservative opinions about abortion, for their part, recognize the importance of personal creative contributions to a human life; they, too, recognize that a premature death is worse when it occurs not in early infancy but after distinctly human investments of
ambition and expectation and love have been made. Conservatives and liberals disagree not because one side wholly rejects a value the other thinks cardinal, but because they take different—sometimes dramatically different—positions about the relative importance of these values, which both recognize as fundamental and profound.