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January 24, 2015: More Nihilism on Abortion

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Title: More Nihilism on Abortion

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1/24/2015—In a column today in the New York Times, Gail Collins puts her finger on the real issue in the abortion debate—when does human life begin? She notes that opponents of abortion grudgingly recognize exceptions to bans on abortion, like rape, because they believe that life begins at conception. But then she adds this: “But the question of when a fetus inside a woman’s body becomes a human being is theological. If you truly believe that human life begins the moment a sperm fertilizes an egg, you can’t admit any exceptions. The only real debate is whether you get to impose your religious beliefs on the entire country.” Why is this question theological? Everybody agrees that a fertilized egg becomes a human being sometime. When is it? There were cultures in which the death of a child within ten days of birth was treated differently from a death later in time—or so I remember. When is that definition not a matter of theology? At birth? But why? It has always seemed inescapable to me that my life began when sperm fertilized egg. I don’t feel like this is a theological issue and I’m not aware of any theological teaching on the matter influencing me. I just cannot think of another point at which my life could be considered to have begun. Isn’t there anything of truth here? No. Because there are interests at stake—the interests of pregnant women in being able to get an abortion. So the question becomes theological, which means subjective, which means any answer is as good as any other, which is how nihilism works. This is how global warming denial works too. Of course human life begins at conception. The question is not theological. It is biological. The legal, social, question, however, is how a society that has ultrasound images of developing babies treats early human life. Does such a society allow abortions and when? You can even call that theological, if you mean it is inescapably normative. But it is normative for everyone. Here, compromise is inevitable.