



# Life's Dominion: An Argument About Abortion, Euthanasia, and Individual Freedom

By Ronald Dworkin

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At the heart of *Life's Dominion* is Dworkin's inquest into *why* abortion and euthanasia provoke such controversy. Do these acts violate some fundamental "right to life"? Or are the objections against them based on the belief that human life is sacred? Combining incisive moral reasoning and close readings of individual court decisions with a majestic interpretation of the U.S. Constitution itself, Dworkin gives us a work that is absolutely essential for anyone who cares about the legal status of human life.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Dworkin's landmark essay on abortion, euthanasia, American legal history and the Constitution.

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From Library Journal

Today's debate over the proper place of abortion in an ethically committed society has proven every bit as divisive as was slavery in 19th-century America. Dworkin, an eminent lawyer and legal philosopher, believes that a new way of examining the central issue is now required. He argues that the key question to be resolved is how far society can go to impose a single official view upon personally held convictions of the inherent value of all life. Dworkin's analysis requires that the abstract moral principles set out in the U.S. Constitution be interpreted to insure equal concern for the dignity of all human life, and he analyzes other issues, such as euthanasia, in the same framework. Continuing the examination of moral issues raised earlier in Dworkin's *A Matter of Principle* (Harvard Univ. Pr., 1985), his new book can be favorably compared with other recent works about abortion such as Lawrence Tribe's *Abortion: A Clash of Absolutes* (LJ 2/1/91) or Roger Rosenblatt's *Life Itself* (LJ 3/15/92). While a difficult book, it is also an important one that should be read by as many concerned readers as possible. Highly recommended.

- *Jerry E. Stephens, U.S. Court of Appeals Lib., Oklahoma City*

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From Kirkus Reviews

An eloquent attempt to clarify the abortion and euthanasia debates by seeking to articulate and analyze the unspoken assumptions underlying them. To Dworkin (*Law/NYU and Jurisprudence/Oxford; A Matter of Principle, 1985*), the view of many antiabortion proponents--that a fetus is "a helpless unborn child with rights and interests of its own from the moment of conception"--is absurd and untenable. Dworkin goes further: He argues that "very few people...actually believe that, whatever they say." Instead, he contends that most people who oppose abortion do so not because they view a fetus as a person but because they believe that a human life has a "sacred" quality when its biological life begins. The author uses this distinction to explain the contradictory feelings (as reflected in polls) that many have about abortion: Most people, Dworkin reports, feel that although abortion is sometimes justifiable, it's "a kind of cosmic shame when human life at any stage is deliberately extinguished." The author expands this insight into a wide-ranging constitutional argument: "that because opinions about abortion rest on differing interpretations of a shared belief in the sanctity of human life, they are themselves essentially religious beliefs." Thus, he argues, prohibitions of abortion amount to an unconstitutional establishment of religion. This dovetails with his rejection of the "originalism" espoused by conservative legal scholars: Dworkin argues that the Bill of Rights was intended not as a rigid system of limited rules but as an invitation to reinterpretation by successive generation of judges. The author also applies his analysis to euthanasia in cases of terminal illness and debilitating disease, arguing--without resolving the issues presented--that each person's particular reasons for living will determine his or her point of view on this question. Dworkin won't convince "pro-lifers" or advocates of strict constitutional construction. Nonetheless: an original contribution to the abortion debate, as well as a stimulating discussion of our contradictory feelings about the meaning of human life. --  
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