All living beings that strive to be alive have the right to life; no other beings have a right to life. The right to life here is defined as the right to continue living and not be killed unjustly. This right is applicable to all life forms, including humans, dolphins, cockroaches, plants, jellyfishes, bacteria, etc. so long as they are alive and want to stay alive. The realization may seem really shocking because humans act as though most living beings do not have the right life in comparison to themselves. In this paper, I will argue that in fact they all do. A living being can own its life by its instinctive effort to sustain its existence. If a living being owns its life, then it has the right to it.

It is fairly uncontroversial to argue that if one owns something, then one has the right to it. It would be wrong for others to take away something that one owns. For example, if I own my house, then it would be wrong for other to take it from me unjustly. In a non-human case, one could imagine a fluffy squirrel finding a wild, juicy nut on the ground and is about to put it in his mouth. Most could agree that it is wrong to take the nut out of the squirrel’s mouth because the nut belongs to him. He is the one who found the nut first and he would fight for his nut, scratching the penetrator with all his might. Likewise, if a living being owns its life, then it would be wrong for others to take its life unjustly. One should notice that justice is the key here. The right to life protects living beings against being killed unjustly. In certain situations, self-defense for example, it may be justified and hence, permissible to kill a living being without violating its right. I will address those situations and how a world in which all living beings have the right to life can function in later section.

The focus of my argument is that living beings can own their lives because they sustain their existences. One’s effort to sustain one’s life is relevant to ownership because without it, there would not be a life to dispute over. It is common sense that contribution does matter in determining who has the right to something. For example, if squirrel and human have equal right to ownership and if a human being finds a squirrel possessing a life (since it is alive), the squirrel would have the right to own its life against the human who discovers it, because clearly the squirrel contributes more to its life than the human ever has. In fact, the squirrel eats, drinks, and sleeps to keep its body alive all this time while the human has yet to do something that affect the squirrel’s body.

Thus, a being can own its life if it sustains its existence. All living beings instinctively sustain their own lives and contribute the most to their existence. Babies cry when they are hungry. Animals breathe involuntarily. Plants perform photosynthesis to obtain food daily. Animals run at the sight of danger. Plants push through the crack in the concrete to grow. Living beings resist disease, damages, and death. The instinct to keep living is in every action the body takes. It breathes, it consumes fuel, it excretes waste, it shrivels in the cold. This instinct to stay alive is very strong in living beings, as most find it hard to give up life. However, for a small number of living beings who try to override this instinct and seek death instead, they forfeit their right to life in doing so. Only living beings who strive to be alive and sustain their being can own their lives and thus, have the right to it.

What about cases where one being actively contributes to the life of another being and the receiving being would not survive without this assistance? One may examine the case of Sally, who is human and has a child. This baby child would surely die if Sally does not feed him or take care of him. Thus, Sally significantly contributes to her child’s life. She brings him into existence and feeds his body and provides for all his needs. In this case, does Sally own her baby’s life? Since it is would be considered murder if Sally killed her baby, our common sense obviously dictates that Sally does not own her baby’s life. This common sense is consistent with my argument, because although Sally gives birth to her baby and gives him life, what she has given him is only a seed of life. It is the baby’s effort throughout his life to grow and keep his body alive that contributes more to his life. Furthermore, although Sally feeds the baby, it is the baby’s own effort to take the food into his mouth, digests it and absorb the nutrient that ultimately keeps him alive. Every time Sally helps, the baby’s body also has to work. Since the baby operates on a more fundamental level to keep his body alive while accommodating support from his mother, it is still the baby who contributes more to his life than his mother. Consequently, even if one receives crucial assistance from another, one still owns one’s life over all other beings.

One common objection to the idea of living beings owning their own lives is that if a being is not conscious of the concept of ownership, it cannot have ownership. It seems plausible that rights and rules may be applicable only to those who know the rules. Humans are capable of understanding ownership and respecting rights. Squirrels, on the other hand, present no evidence that they could be capable of understanding ownership in the way that humans do. This would explain why a human can own a squirrel’s life when he finds one, and why squirrel is not capable of owning its life even if it contributes the most to its life.

My response would be that although some rights which are more complicated such as the right to vote or the right to education require certain capacities in the recipients in order to be applicable, the right to life addresses a very fundamental aspect in all living being that it can apply to all, even to beings that are not consciously aware of or follow it. For one, it would still be murder if one unjustly kills a baby, even though a baby cannot understand that he has right or respect other people’s right. One may argue that a baby still has to the right to life because he has the potential to become conscious of ownership and rights. That may be true, but most also think that mentally challenged people who are not capable of reasoning and understanding still have the right to life. It would be outrageous to euthanize all the patients in mental hospital. Here, one may argue that those people have the right to life because they belong to a species that can understand rights. However, it is hard to see how belonging to a species could give rights, unless species has rights. Species having rights is very controversial; moreover, right to life should be addressed at the individual level since each individual has its own circumstance that determined its right and right may come into conflict with another of the same species. Overall, our intuition seems to suggest that awareness of ownership may not be relevant to owning one’s life.

Regan and Singer would object that beings who cannot experience do not deserve moral considerability. Experience seems important because it gives life its meaning and value. A being can have welfare only because it can experience life to be better or worse. However, I think that the ability to experience is irrelevant to the right to life. All living beings may not experience life the same way, but they are still experiencing life. They are subject of a life, of which all their beings try to maintain. Although a tree cannot feel, a tree’s life can be for better or for worse. A tree may grow or a tree may be diseased. Its health clearly matters to the tree because the tree responses to damage and attempts to heal. Even bacteria would attempt to move away from encountering substances that are poisonous to them. Although having the ability to feel and conceive damage may make the overall damage worse, the physical damage is still there. Physical damage may be just as bad as emotional damage. Thus, non-sentient lives can be harmed physically and their lives matter morally because they also have a stage of life that they are trying to maintain. **I’d like to hear more on this; it seems like it might be stretching the meaning of “experience” to say that trees experience life.**

**It also seems like corporations and machines can “strive to survive,” and maybe even experience their existence at least to the extent that trees do. Do you think that they have rights to continue to exist? This needs to be addressed.**

Even though there may be a justifiable argument that all living beings have the right to life, the implications of all living beings owning their lives and having the right to life seems to go against our common sense. If all beings have the right to life, it would be wrong to kill off millions of bacteria off of our skin when we wash hands. It would also be wrong to eat anything that is alive, plants or animals. Likewise, it would be impermissible to exterminate harmful bacteria causing diseases because those bacteria have the right to life too. Obviously, we could not exist without harming any other living beings. I think this is just a misconception of what it means to have the right to life. Right to life is the right to not be killed unjustly. Killing in cases may be permissible; the killing just has to be just and necessary. Since all living beings that want to be alive have the right to life, you also have the right to life. In many cases, you can protect your right to life while respecting others’ right to life. However, there is a clear conflict of rights in predator-prey and parasite-host relationships where both sides have the right to life. This is a self-defense case where both sides are simply protecting their own right to life and the death of the other is a foreseeable side effect. In this case, it would be a justified killing due to necessity. Since humans need to eat and fight off diseases and prevent the spread of bacteria to protect their health, it is permissible for them to do so. It would only violate living beings’ right to life if they are killed for no good reason at all.

One non-obvious objection would be the case of a brain dead patient who can be maintained physiologically on the ventilator but there is no hope of recovery for him. His body still holds the instinct to survive and maintain its existence. The heart still wants to beat; the cells want to keep working. According to this argument, brain dead patients should have the right to life just like anyone else. However, most people would agree that it is permissible to unplug the ventilator and let the brain dead patient die, even if his family could maintain him on life support infinitely at little cost to themselves. The argument is that brain dead patient can no longer feel or think. His life is no longer worth living since he cannot experience any more. If the ability to experience indeed does not matter to the right to life, brain dead patient should be allowed to live. This case seems to demonstrate that my argument against experience must be false because it leads to the wrong conclusion.

I agree that it is permissible to unplug brain dead patients, however, it is not because they can no longer experience life. Since they are brain dead, their instinct to stay alive is actually compromised. They can no longer support their life internally. That is, if one take them off the ventilator, their lungs would simply stop breathing and their hearts stop beating. This does not satisfy the conditions of an internal bodily effort working to sustain its own life. In brain dead patients, the body no longer possess the ability to sustain its life. If they do not sustain their lives, they do not own their lives, and thus do not have the right to life. **What would you say about fetuses? A lot of the same things are true of them, suggesting that they lack a right to life on your view. Whatever you think about abortion, it’s plausibly wrong for A to kill a fetus while it is B’s body. That suggests that most people think that fetuses have something like a right to life.**