

PassionLife

ONLY
ONE
ISSUE



Making the Case for Life
in a Secular Culture

Scott Klusendorf

Only One Issue

The abortion controversy is not a debate between those who are pro-choice and those who are anti-choice. It's not about privacy or trusting women. To the contrary, the debate turns on one key question.

What is the Unborn?

Pro-life advocates contend that elective abortion unjustly takes the life of a defenseless human being. This simplifies the abortion controversy by focusing on just one question: *Is the unborn a member of the human family?* If so, killing him or her to benefit others is a serious moral wrong. It treats the distinct human being, with his or her own intrinsic worth, as nothing more than a disposable instrument. Conversely, if the unborn are not human, elective abortion requires no more justification than having a tooth pulled. As Gregory Koukl points out, "If the unborn are not human, no justification for elective abortion is necessary. But if the unborn are human, no justification for elective abortion is adequate." (Koukl, *Precious Unborn Human Persons*, p. 7)

This is not to say that abortion is easy for most women. To the contrary, a decision to have one may be *psychologically* complex and perhaps even agonizing for some. But the topic today is not psychology, but morality: Can we know what's right even if our emotions are conflicted?

Everyone agrees that abortion kills something that's alive. After all, dead things don't grow! But whether it's right to take the life of any living being depends entirely on the question: *What kind of being is it?*

Some people want to ignore that question altogether. They simply assume the unborn are not human beings like you and me.

Here's how to clarify things: Whenever you hear an argument for elective abortion, ask yourself if this particular justification would also work to justify killing toddlers or other humans. If not, the argument assumes the unborn are not fully human, like toddlers. But again, that's the issue, isn't it?

"Women have a right to make their own private decisions."

Imagine that a woman has a two-year-old in front of her. May she kill him or her as long as the killing is done in the privacy of the bedroom? Of course not. Why not? Because the child is a human being. If the unborn are also human, they should not be killed in the name of privacy any more than we'd kill a toddler for that same reason.

Of course, abortion advocates respond that killing a toddler and killing a fetus are two different things, like comparing apples with oranges. But that's the issue isn't it? Are the unborn human beings, like toddlers? That's the one issue that matters. We can't escape it.

"But many poor women cannot afford to raise another child."

When human beings get expensive, may we kill them? Suppose a large family collectively decides to quietly dispose of its three youngest children to help ease the family budget. Would this be okay?

Abortion advocates agree it's wrong to kill the children, but insist that aborting a fetus is not the same as killing a child. Ah, but that's the issue: Is unjustly killing a fetus morally the same as unjustly killing a two-year old? So, once again, the issue is the same: What is the unborn?

"A woman should not be forced to bring an unwanted child into the world."

Abortion advocates sometimes argue that killing the fetus is the more humane thing to do. "Who wants to be part of a family that rejects you? Everyone has a right to be wanted." And if you aren't wanted, may we kill

you? Suppose a toddler is unwanted and we have good reason to think that by the time he's five, he'll also be abused and neglected. Should we kill him now to spare him future trouble?

The answer is obviously no, but it brings us back to the one issue that matters: What is the unborn?

"No woman should be forced to raise a child with physical disabilities."

Suppose that you have in front of you a small boy who is mentally disabled. He's not very bright, cannot speak or understand much of what is said, and looks strange from head to toe. Would it be morally permissible to kill him because of his condition?

Abortion advocates agree that we cannot destroy him, that we should treat him with the same care we provide all disabled human beings. But again, this raises a prior question: If the disabled unborn are human, like the disabled toddler, should we kill them for not meeting our standard of perfection? Thus, the issue that matters most in the abortion debate isn't disability. It's "What is the unborn?"

"Every woman has a right to decide what is right and wrong for herself."

Would you force your morality on an abusive mother who was physically mistreating her two-year-old? You better. No human being should be abused.

You see the issue is *not* about forcing morality; it's *not* about privacy; it's *not* about economic hardship; it's *not* about physical disabilities; it's *not* about unwantedness. The issue is reduced to one question: *What is the unborn?*

Scientific Case

The facts of science are clear: From the earliest stages of development, the unborn are distinct, living, and whole human beings. Therefore, every "successful" abortion ends the life of a living human being.

The Medical Community Speaks

In its 1859 *Report on Criminal Abortion*, the American Medical Association (AMA) understood that "the independent and actual existence of the child before birth as a living being" was a scientific truth. Nothing has changed since that time. For the past 150 years doctors have known that life begins at conception.

Consider the following quotations from medical experts in the field of embryology.

"It is the penetration of the ovum by a spermatozoan and resultant mingling of the nuclear material that each brings to the union that constitutes the culmination of the process of fertilization and marks the initiation of the life of a new individual." (Bradley M. Patten, *Human Embryology*, 3rd ed., New York: McGraw Hill, 1968, page 43.)

"Every time a sperm cell and ovum unite a new being is created which is alive and will continue to live unless its death is brought about by some specific condition." (E. L. Potter and J. M. Craig, *Pathology of the Fetus and the Infant*, 3rd ed., Chicago: Year Book Medical Publishers, 1975, page vii.)

Dr. Watson A. Bowes of the University of Colorado Medical School speaks clearly, when he says, "The beginning of a single human life is from a biological point of view a simple and straightforward matter - the beginning is conception." (Subcommittee on Separation of Powers to Senate Judiciary Committee S-158, Report, 97th Congress, 1st Session, 1981.)

A 1981 U.S. Senate report states, "Physicians, biologists, and other scientists agree that conception marks the beginning of the life of a human being - a being that is alive and is a member of the human species. There is overwhelming agreement on this point in countless medical, biological, and scientific writings." (Subcommittee on Separation of Powers, Ibid.)

Prior to advocating abortion, former Planned Parenthood President Dr. Alan Guttmacher was perplexed that anyone would question these basic scientific facts. "This all seems so simple and evident that it is difficult to picture a time when it wasn't part of the common knowledge," he wrote in his book *Life in the Making*. (A. Guttmacher, *Life in the Making: The Story of Human Procreation*, New York: Viking Press, 1933, p. 3.)

In short, a *human* life begins at the completion of the conception process.

Any Ol' Cell Will Do?

Nonetheless, Ronald Bailey of Reason magazine insists that we gain no real knowledge from these scientific facts. Bailey argues that embryonic human beings are biologically human only in the sense that every cell in the body carries the full genetic code, meaning that each of our somatic (bodily) cells has as much potential for development as any human embryo. Put simply, Bailey would have us believe that there is no difference in kind between a human embryo and each of our cells.

This is bad biology. Bailey is making the rather elementary mistake of confusing parts with wholes. The difference in kind between each of our cells and a human embryo is clear: An individual cell's functions are subordinated to the survival of the larger organism of which it is merely a part. The human embryo, however,

is already a whole human entity. Robert George and Patrick Lee say it well. It makes no sense to say that you were once a sperm or somatic cell. However, the facts of science make clear that you were once a human embryo. "Somatic cells are not, and embryonic human beings are, distinct, self-integrating organisms capable of directing their own maturation as members of the human species."

Dr. Maureen Condic points out that embryos are living human beings "precisely because they possess the single defining feature of human life that is lost in the moment of death - the ability to function as a coordinated organism rather than merely as a group of living cells." Condic, Assistant Professor of Neurobiology and Anatomy at the University of Utah, explains the important distinction between individual parts and whole human embryos overlooked by Bailey:

"The critical difference between a collection of cells and a living organism is the ability of an organism to act in a coordinated manner for the continued health and maintenance of the body as a whole. It is precisely this ability that breaks down at the moment of death, however death might occur. Dead bodies may have plenty of live cells, but their cells no longer function together in a coordinated manner."

From conception forward, human embryos clearly function as whole organisms. "Embryos are not merely collections of human cells, but living creatures with all the properties that define any organism as distinct from a group of cells; embryos are capable of growing, maturing, maintaining a physiologic balance between various organ systems, adapting to changing circumstances, and repairing injury. Mere groups of human cells do nothing like this under any circumstances."

Moment of Conception

Philosopher David Boonin discounts the pro-lifer's claim that the newly conceived zygote is a distinct, living, and whole human organism. How can this be, he argues, when we don't know the precise moment during the conception process at which the new zygotic human being comes into existence? Here Boonin is both right and wrong. True, we don't know exactly when during the conception process that the zygote comes to be. Some embryologists argue that it happens when the sperm penetrates the ovum while others point to syngamy, when the maternal and parental chromosomes crossover and form a diploid set. But as Beckwith points out, although Boonin raises an important epistemological question (When do we know that sperm and egg cease to be and a new organism arises?), he's mistaken that his skepticism successfully undermines the pro-lifers strongly supported ontological claim that the zygote is distinct, living, and whole human being. "It may be that one cannot, with confidence, pick out the precise point at which a new being comes into existence between the time at which the sperm initially penetrates the ovum and a complete and living zygote is present. But how does it follow from this acknowledgment of agnosticism that one cannot say that zygote X is a human being?" Boonin, writes Beckwith, "commits the fallacy of the beard: Just because I cannot say when stubble ends and a beard begins, does not mean I cannot distinguish between a clean-shaven face and a bearded one."

Philosophical Case

Do all human beings have an equal right to life or do humans come to be at one point, but only become valuable later in virtue of some acquired characteristic?

The SLED Defense of Life

Philosophically, there is no morally significant difference between the embryo you once were and the adult you are today. As Stephen Schwarz points out using the acronym SLED, differences of size, level of development, environment, and degree of dependency are not relevant in the way that abortion advocates need them to be.

Size: Yes, embryos are smaller than newborns and adults, but why is that relevant? Do we really want to say that large people are more valuable than small ones? Men are generally larger than women, but that doesn't mean that they deserve more rights. Size doesn't equal value.

Level of development: True, embryos and fetuses are less developed than you and I. But again, why is this relevant? Four year-old girls are less developed than 14 year-old ones. Should older children have more rights than their younger siblings? Some people say that self-awareness makes one valuable. But if that is true, newborns do not qualify as valuable human beings. Six-week old infants lack the immediate capacity for performing human mental functions, as do the reversibly comatose, the sleeping, and those with Alzheimer's Disease.

Environment: Where you are has no bearing on who you are. Does your value change when you cross the street or roll over in bed? If not, how can a journey of eight inches down the birth-canal suddenly change the essential nature of the unborn from non-valuable tissue mass to valuable human being? If the unborn are not already human and valuable, merely changing their location can't make them so.

Degree of Dependency: If viability bestows human value, then all those who depend on insulin or kidney medication are not valuable and we may kill them. Conjoined twins who share blood type and bodily systems also have no right to life.

In short, it's far more reasonable to argue that although humans differ immensely with respect to talents, accomplishments, and degrees of development, they are nonetheless equal (and valuable) because they share a common human nature. Humans have value simply because of the kind of thing they are, not because of some acquired property they may gain or lose during their lifetimes.

Abraham Lincoln raised a similar point with slavery, noting that any argument used to disqualify blacks as subjects of rights works equally well to disqualify many whites.

"You say 'A' is white and 'B' is black. It is color, then: the lighter having the right to enslave the darker? Take care. By this rule, you are a slave to the first man you meet with a fairer skin than your own.

"You do not mean color exactly—You mean the whites are intellectually the superiors of the blacks, and therefore have the right to enslave them? Take care again: By this rule you are to be a slave to

the first man you meet with an intellect superior to your own.

"But you say it is a question of interest, and, if you can make it your interest, you have the right to enslave another. Very well. And if he can make it his interest, he has the right to enslave you."

If humans have value only because of some acquired property like skin color or self-consciousness and not in virtue of the kind of thing they are, then it follows that since these acquired properties come in varying degrees, basic human rights come in varying degrees. Do we really want to say that those with more self-consciousness are more human (and valuable) than those with less? As Lee and George point out, this relegates the proposition that all men are created equal to the ash heap of history.

Conclusion

Sadly, opponents of the pro-life view believe that human beings that are in the wrong location or have the wrong level of development do not deserve the protection of law. They assert, without justification, the belief that strong and independent people deserve the protection of law while small and dependent people do not. This view is elitist and exclusive. It violates the principle that once made political liberalism great: a basic commitment to protect the most vulnerable members of the human community.

We can do better than that. In the past, we used to discriminate on the basis of skin color and gender, but now, with elective abortion, we discriminate on the basis of size, level of development, location, and degree of dependency. We've simply exchanged one form of bigotry for another.

In sharp contrast, the position I have defended is that no human being, regardless of size, level of development, race, gender, or place of residence, should be excluded from the moral community of human persons. In other words, the pro-life view of humanity is inclusive, indeed wide open, to all, especially those that are small, vulnerable and defenseless.