

Abortion: What is a Person? Part I – Slogans and SLED

What is a “person” and what does it have to do with abortion?

In the abortion debate many pro-choice advocates argue that the unborn are not “persons.” What they mean by this is that the unborn are not “valuable” or at least do not possess the same basic rights that you or I have and can therefore be killed without any good reason. The key question in the debate then becomes, “What is a person?” Throughout history many human beings have been denied their basic rights because they were deemed non-persons. In the 1857 case of *Dred Scott v Sanford* the U.S. Supreme Court stated, “*A black man has no rights which a white man is bound to respect.*” This ruling effectively labeled this class of humans as non-persons that could be bought, sold, or killed. The same pronouncement was made against various ethnic groups in Nazi Germany, which nearly resulted in the extinction of some of those groups.

In order to not repeat these tragedies pro-choicers cannot simply declare that the unborn are not persons just because such a declaration is made. The pro-choicer must have a non-arbitrary definition for “personhood” that does not include unborn children but includes born people. This definition must include good reasons for what makes someone a “person” or else it would simply be a self serving definition designed to exclude the unborn, just like previous definitions of personhood were designed to exclude African-Americans, women, and other ethnic groups. A definition like “the unborn are not persons because only born people are persons” falls under the fallacy of *circular reasoning*. It’s like saying the Arizona Diamondbacks are the best major league baseball team because no team is better than them. In both examples, a reason is not given to justify the claim, so the claim is simply restated without evidence, and there is no reason to believe it. Listed below are some common justifications for denying the unborn “personhood” and an analysis of why these are not good reasons to deny unborn children the right to live.

Pro-choice Claim #1: The unborn are human but they are not people, instead they are just potential people. It’s like how the egg you had for breakfast was a potential chicken, not an actual one.

This common statement isn’t even an argument since it doesn’t address when an unborn child becomes a person (except maybe birth, but no reason is even given for that assumption). Instead this slogan relies on a common misconception about a popular breakfast item. The egg I have for breakfast is probably an *unfertilized egg*. It doesn’t have enough biological components to become a grown chicken and therefore scrambling it only scrambles a by-product of chicken’s sexual reproduction. However, once the egg is fertilized a tiny chick grows inside and within a few weeks has a beating heart and exchanges waste through the eggshell. In the Philippines a common snack is Balut or fertilized duck eggs. From personal experience, biting into one of these crunchy eggs feels like biting into an actual duck, not a potential one. The same is true of a human female’s egg. If it dies, only a sex cell of the woman’s body has died. But once it is fertilized at conception a new human being’s existence has begun. (see the factsheet *Life Begins at Conception*) Rather than potential persons, the unborn are persons with great potential.

Pro-choice Claim #2: A fetus is microscopic, doesn't have a brain or other organs, is totally dependent on the mother to live and isn't even in the world yet. Therefore it is not a person.

There are only four differences between ourselves now and ourselves when we were unborn children. These differences are described in Stephen Schwartz's book *The Moral Question of Abortion* and are summarized by the acronym SLED. According to SLED these four differences are not morally relevant reasons to kill an unborn child or anyone who differs from human beings based on these criteria. The four differences are:

Size: The unborn are often times much smaller than newborns but why should that make it acceptable to kill them? Human beings come in many sizes, at what size do human beings gain value? If being bigger makes someone more valuable, then some men would be more valuable than women because they are on average larger than women. If it doesn't make sense to add value for being a bigger person, then we shouldn't subtract it for being a smaller person either. Instead, we should treat all human beings equally regardless of their size.

Level of Development: Some pro-choicers argue that because the unborn are less developed than born people they are not persons. They claim that the unborn are "insignificant specks" or just "a clump of cells" and are therefore not valuable. First, these phrases are very misleading about fetal development. During the three to four weeks post fertilization, when the first surgical abortions occur, the embryo's cells have already differentiated into organs and by the eighth week of development, a fetus has all of its organs present. Second, why should we stop the discrimination of human beings based on their level of development at birth? Maybe we don't receive the right-to-life until we develop the capacity to think rationally or even perform basic algebra? This may sound absurd but pro-choicers don't offer a better reason to grant personhood during fetal development as opposed to after birth. A better policy is to treat all human beings equally regardless of how developed they are.

Environment: Other pro-choice advocates are bold enough to say that a fetus only has value once it is born, and before that it can be killed because it is in the womb and not "in the world." However, why is birth such an important dividing point? How does it change the nature of an unborn child so that they become valuable and can be protected from being ripped apart by an abortionist? The reality is that there is no difference because human beings live in many places and a change in location does not alter their value. When I walked from the garage into my house today, did I suddenly go from being a non-person to being a person? If not, why does a trip down the birth canal make a fetus valuable?

Degree of Dependency: The last difference is dependency, a newborn is less dependent on its mother than an unborn child and pro-choice advocates argue that this high level of dependency means that the unborn aren't persons. They claim that the unborn are totally dependent on one person to live and are more like an organ than a person. However, while the unborn are dependent on their mothers for their *survival*, they are not dependent on them for their *identity*. The fetus is an integrated, genetically unique, organism on a path of self-directed development. It is not like the mother's somatic cells that are a part of her body. Instead, we have a case of two bodies sharing an intimate location, and we have decided as a society that the older more mature body can kill the younger defenseless body. Newborns, the disabled, and even fully functioning adults who use pacemakers or insulin are in some way dependent on others. Some newborns are allergic to artificial milk and can only consume their mother's breast milk. This means they are dependent on her body for survival and would not be a person. But it seems absurd that dependency, a trait we all share because we are all dependent on other people to some degree, can become a gauge for value that disqualifies some humans from having value because they are "too dependent." It seems that it would be better to help the dependent and needy, not kill them.

In conclusion, it seems clear that the pro-choice criterion for personhood is an ad-hoc construction designed from the beginning to disqualify the unborn because of an overarching agenda of promoting abortion and can't be taken seriously as a measure of human value.



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