

Are Human Embryos Human Beings?

NR [nationalreview.com/2024/03/are-human-embryos-human-beings](https://www.nationalreview.com/2024/03/are-human-embryos-human-beings)

March 18, 2024

By Robert P. George

Whether human embryos are human beings is a question resolved by human embryology and developmental biology.

Among the constants in human history is this: When people want to justify killing, enslaving, or otherwise abusing a class of their fellow human beings, they first dehumanize them. I suspect that the dehumanization of the victims is typically meant not only to persuade others to go along or look the other way; it is also to convince the dehumanizers themselves.

As a matter of scientifically demonstrable fact, human embryos, no less than human fetuses, infants, toddlers, children, adolescents, and adults, are human beings — living members of the species *Homo sapiens*. Those words — “embryo,” “infant,” “adolescent,” and so forth — do not name different *kinds* of entities. They name *the same* kind of entity (a living member of the human species, a human being, like you or me) at different stages of development.

But some today, for various reasons, want to justify the deliberate killing of human beings at early stages of their development — the embryonic, fetal, even infant stages. And some want to justify the deliberate killing of people in certain conditions — those suffering, for example, from cognitive disabilities or severe dementias. So, as usual, they are at pains to deny that the victims are human. They insist that those of whom they want to license the killing are “nonhuman,” or “subhuman,” or “prehuman,” or “not fully human,” or whatever.

And so, *Washington Post* columnist and editor Ruth Marcus, someone I like and respect despite our deep differences on moral and political issues, set out in a recent column to show that I’m wrong to say that human beings in the embryonic stage of development are in fact human beings. She invites her readers to reason backward: If human embryos were human beings, then things we (liberal readers of the *Washington Post*) believe, things we want to be true, things that are really important to us, would be false. But we — somehow — just know that they’re not false. Elective abortion is a woman’s right, and a regime of legal and widely available abortion is an enlightened and humane policy, so . . . embryos must not be human beings.

More on Pro-Life

It’s that constant in human history again: *Those whom others would kill or license the killing of, they first dehumanize.*

My friend Ruth’s denial that human embryos and fetuses are human beings is a flat denial of science. It’s true that gametes — sperm and egg — are not human beings. They are both genetically and functionally *parts* of other organisms — a man and a woman. But when they join, the resulting embryo has a new and complete genome of its own. More important, the embryo

does not function as a mere part of anyone. He or she — for in humans, sex is established from the start — functions as a whole organism. Like infants, toddlers, or teens, embryos and fetuses will — unless prevented by disease, violence, lack of nutrition or warmth, etc. — develop by an internally directed and gapless process into later stages of the life cycle of a human being. They will do so with their unity, determinateness, and identity intact.

What is the alternative? Since embryos are not inanimate, like minerals, but alive, each must be either a whole organism or part of one. But a part of which organism? The only candidates would be the man and woman who produced the gametes, but again, embryos are genetically and functionally distinct from both — as distinct as any children from their parents. So, embryos must be whole organisms. But any whole organism belongs to some species — and which could it be in this case, if not *Homo sapiens*? Embryos have the same (in the typical case) 46 chromosomes as newborn humans, embodying the same program, unfolding along the same trajectory: infant, child, adolescent, adult, geriatric. So, embryos can only be whole organisms of the human kind. Every textbook of human embryology and developmental biology confirms it. There is no scientific controversy about it.

Thus, Ruth Marcus, for example, is the same whole, distinct, self-integrating human organism who was, at earlier stages, the adolescent Ruth, the child Ruth, the infant Ruth, the fetal Ruth, and, at the very beginning, the embryonic Ruth Marcus. Things happened — some of lasting significance — to the individual who is now the adult Ruth Marcus when she was an embryo and a fetus, just as some life-shaping things happened to her in adolescence, childhood, and infancy. The adult Ruth Marcus is *biologically continuous* with the embryonic Ruth Marcus. She is *numerically identical* to the embryonic Ruth Marcus. That is why IVF pioneer Dr. Robert Edwards, producer of the first “test-tube baby,” recalling Louise Brown as an embryo in a petri dish, was not talking gibberish when he said at her birth: “She was beautiful then and she is beautiful now.”

Edwards went on to speak with perfect scientific accuracy of the embryonic Louise Brown as “a microscopic human being — one in its very earliest stages of development.” As he and a co-author put it, the embryonic human being is “passing through a critical period in its life of great exploration: it becomes magnificently organized, switching on its own biochemistry, increasing in size, and preparing itself quickly for implantation in the womb.” What they describe is the self-integration and internally directed process of development that I mentioned a moment ago.

The bottom line is a *fact* that my friend Ruth is desperate to resist: Embryos and fetuses do not “gradually” *become* human beings. That *is* unscientific gibberish. Our *development to adulthood* is gradual, to be sure, but we come into existence as human beings — whole living members of the species *Homo sapiens* — and develop *as* (not *into*) human beings. Embryonic and fetal human beings differ from infant human beings in many ways. But then infants differ dramatically from adults. None differ in kind, as humans do from nonhumans.

Now, one might ask: Since Ruth is so desperate for abortion to be right — and a right — why does she not just say that embryos and fetuses are human beings, but not yet “persons” — that is, not yet beings with dignity or rights equal to yours and mine? That is exactly what sophisticated pro-

choice philosophers and bioethicists say, including my famously candid and consistent Princeton colleague, Peter Singer. I suspect that there are two reasons.

First, the logic of this view leaves too many human beings out. As Singer makes clear, if embryos and fetuses are not persons, it must be because they cannot, *here and now*, exercise certain mental powers such as self-awareness. But then neither can infants. So, infants wouldn't be persons either, and infanticide, no less than abortion, would be morally acceptable — a conclusion Singer embraces. So, a couple could legitimately conceive a child and give birth to it for the purpose of, say, harvesting vital organs to save the life of an older child.

Second, to adopt Singer's position is to give up the ideas of human equality and human rights (rights that people have in virtue of their humanity). After all, if the thing that gives us moral status comes in degrees — the degree of development of some mental capacity — our moral worth must come in degrees, too. *Even among persons*, some would have to count for more than others, having more of the trait that confers moral worth. Yet Ruth, I'm sure, wants to hang on to the idea that all humans have equal moral worth and basic human rights (and for that, I salute her). So, to justify abortion she needs to posit a difference in *kind*, not degree, between unborn human beings and newborns. She needs the unborn to be nonhuman. Professor Singer's advantage is that he doesn't need to resort to science denial.

To her credit, Ruth does gesture at one *argument* for the notion that human embryos are nonhuman. She borrows it from another friend of mine, the Harvard political theorist Michael Sandel. It's superficially plausible but falls apart on inspection.

To show that embryos differ *in kind*, not just in *degree* of development, from human beings at later developmental stages, Professor Sandel offers an analogy:

Although every oak tree was once an acorn, it does not follow that acorns are oak trees, or that I should treat the loss of an acorn eaten by a squirrel in my front yard as the same kind of loss as the death of an oak tree felled by a storm. Despite their developmental continuity, acorns and oak trees are different kinds of things.

The fact that we mourn the loss of mature oaks but not acorns does not, however, prove that they differ *in kind*. After all, we don't mourn the loss of oak *saplings*, either, yet it's clear that saplings and mature oaks are the same *kind* of thing. Our reactions only show that we don't value oaks because of the *kind* of thing they are at all. We value them for their magnificence — a matter of *degree*. And in the case of oak trees, that is perfectly reasonable.

But the basis for valuing human beings is profoundly different, which is why the analogy fails. As Sandel acknowledges, human beings count because of the *kind* of entities they are. That is why all human beings are equal in basic dignity and human rights. Though we value mature oaks more than saplings, we do not value mature humans — adults — more than infants. And while we prize oaks for their magnificence, we do not think that the most developed humans — say, a wonderful athlete like Jim Thorpe or a brilliant physicist like Albert Einstein — are of greater moral worth than, say, the physically frail or mentally impaired. We would not tolerate the harvesting of organs from

an ill or cognitively disabled person to save a Jim Thorpe or Albert Einstein. And we do not tolerate the killing of infants, which on the proposed analogy would be analogous to the oak saplings whose destruction (e.g., in forest management) we don't mourn.

I began by mentioning a constant in human history. I will conclude by noting a constant in the rhetorical stratagems of abortion advocates: the ubiquitous suggestion that the pro-life view is really just a religious one, and that pro-life advocates would impose their religious ideas on those who don't share their faith. Thus says Ruth, "however much antiabortion advocates insist that their view is rooted in science, they also tend to be guided by a religious philosophy with which other Americans simply disagree."

Of course, many of the world's religious traditions rightly affirm the inherent dignity of every human person. And many decry the violence of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia — just as they affirm the dignity of young women, and so decry sex trafficking. Some, it is true, do not condemn elective abortion (although the suggestion, occasionally made, that Judaism is one such religion would be fiercely contested by such eminent scholars of Jewish law and ethics as the late Chief Rabbi of Britain Immanuel Jakobovits, Rabbi David Novak, Rabbi J. David Bleich, and many more). And certainly, there is nothing wrong with people bringing religious arguments to the public square. It was not wrong when Martin Luther King Jr. unabashedly did it in the struggle to end segregation and Jim Crow. And it is not wrong when faithful Catholics, Protestants, Jews, or Muslims do the same in their fight against the lethal violence of abortion.

But all this business about "imposing religion" is a sideshow. Whether human embryos are human beings — living members of the species *Homo sapiens* — is a question resolved by human embryology and developmental biology. It isn't any more distinctly theological than the age of the earth is. And matters of justice and human rights — what is morally owed to human beings and whether all human beings are bearers of dignity and rights — are not the exclusive province of theology either. Otherwise, we couldn't protect *any* human beings and their rights without "imposing religion."

True, the principle that all human beings have moral worth is a contested philosophical claim. But so is the idea that some human beings — those in the embryonic, fetal, and infant stages, and those who are physically severely disabled or cognitively impaired — *lack* moral worth. There is no morally neutral position.

The real difference is this. The pro-life view depends on an undisputed scientific fact plus a moral principle that explains and vindicates the worth of infants and the cognitively impaired, and affirms the profound, inherent, and equal dignity of every member of the human family. The defense of elective abortion depends on a moral view that must deny these points, a biological view that contradicts science, or both.