When Does Human Life Begin?
Equipping You to Equip Others

When talking to the undecided about abortion, pro-lifers must prove the unborn are human beings. Since the scientific evidence for life beginning at fertilization is clear, that is the airtight case that cannot be refuted by abortion supporters. Because people’s moral intuition already dictates that it is wrong to intentionally kill innocent human beings (e.g., Jews during the Holocaust), pro-lifers simply need to prove the unborn are human beings like the born.

To understand how fundamental this point is, think about all the circumstances often used to justify abortion: rape, poverty, “unwantedness,” abuse, etc. And with each situation ask yourself: would we ever kill born people for those reasons?

For example, imagine a woman is raped a day after having sex with her husband. A few weeks later she learns she is pregnant but doesn’t know who the father of the child is. After the baby is born, a paternity test is conducted. If the baby’s father is revealed to be the rapist, may the baby be killed then? Or, may we kill poor people in Africa to eliminate the existence of poverty? May we kill born children who are unwanted and abused?

In each situation the answer is always no. If we won’t kill born human beings for the very same reasons that we would kill unborn human beings, that means the unborn aren’t considered human as are the born. So that’s the issue: are they?

Some pro-lifers make the mistake of assuming that the public already knows that the unborn are human beings. But the public’s actions show otherwise. Large numbers of born children aren’t being killed for the same reasons large numbers of unborn children are. People may claim they believe the unborn are human, but they don’t really believe it, as the aforementioned situations reveal.

To use another example, when pro-lifers parallel abortion to the Holocaust, abortion supporters routinely object to the comparison, stating, “They’re not comparable!” When prompted as to why, they typically respond, “Because they’re not the same thing! You can’t compare mass destruction of human life with a woman’s right to choose.” They do not consider abortion to be “mass destruction of human life,” so that’s what pro-lifers need to prove, and here’s how:

When you’re talking to someone who supports abortion, grab a scrap piece of paper (or a napkin if you’re at a coffee shop!) and draw a line with their age (30, for the sake of the following example) at the end, like this:

```
________________________________________________
| 30 |
```

Then explain to them that we know 30 years ago they were born, and we know 9 months prior to that fertilization occurred. So, add the points of fertilization (F) and birth (B):

```
F     B          30
```

Now explain what science has been able to establish about the process of fertilization, namely that a being’s DNA is established (e.g., whether one is male or female); that the being is living (because living things come from other living things); and that the being is of its parents’ species (because living things reproduce after their own kind: dogs come from dogs, cats from cats, and humans from humans). As you explain this, add to your drawing, adding the last item only after confirming that your friend has human parents (which lets you see if your friend is keeping up and also provides a bit of comic relief ☺):

```
At F:
DNA
Living
Human
F     B          30
```

Then explain, “Now, between fertilization and birth, there are obviously some changes which occur. All changes can be summarized into one of four categories, which form the acronym SLED.” Write those changes out like this:

```
At F:
DNA
Living
Human
F     B          30
Changes between F & B:
Size
Level of development
Environment
Degree of dependency
```

Graph the changes while explaining that over the 9-month period, size increases, one’s physical and mental development increases, one’s environment changes
(from the fallopian tube at fertilization, to the uterus several days later, to the doctor’s hands at birth—although you can’t graph these changes as they aren’t simple increases or decreases), and, finally, one’s dependency decreases (the unborn are very reliant on their mother’s body early in pregnancy but can survive without it later in pregnancy if born prematurely). Your drawing should now look like this:

At F:
DNA
Living
Human

D
L
S

F     B          30

Changes between F & B:
Size
Level of development
Environment
Degree of dependency

Then ask the individual to look at the period of time between birth and 30 and to note what’s changed: the exact same things. (Although some parents would observe that their 30-year-olds are just as dependent now as they were at birth—more comic relief if you need it. 😊) Now, draw it out:

At F:
DNA
Living
Human

D
L
S

F     B          30

Changes between F & B: Changes between B & 30:
Size
Level of development
Environment
Degree of dependency

Then ask, “Would we permit someone to kill a 2-year-old because she’s smaller than you? Of course not. Or what if someone tortured a toddler and a teenager, would we say it was okay to harm the toddler but not the teenager because the former is less developed and more dependent than the latter? Again, of course not. So if one’s size or level of development doesn’t determine value after birth, then why should it do so before birth?”

Continue your explanation: “Although one’s appearance and abilities (summarized with SLED) change over time, what doesn’t change is who you are as a unique person in the human species. The differences between unborn people and born people are the same kind of differences between younger born people and older born people—they are a reflection of time, which is reflected in our age. But what isn’t different between unborn people and born people is their human nature, established at fertilization—they have that in common.”

“So,” you ask your friend, “we must simply and honestly ask ourselves this: Do those of us who are older have a right to kill those who are younger?”

When I have used this visual explanation in presentations and during conversations at Genocide Awareness Project (GAP) displays, I have seen incredible success:

At a recent GAP in Florida, I dialogued with two students, one of whom was waffling between being for and against abortion. The issue of when life begins was raised. So I showed them a graph (as above) which I had drawn during a previous conversation, explaining that abortion is essentially age discrimination. The male student objected to a comment I made, and I rebutted his statement by bringing him right back to the graph. He then started to make another point but said, “Oh, shoot. I forget.” He paused and then said, “Uh, it completely slipped my mind.”

I tried to lighten the awkward situation for him by jokingly saying, “That’s so weird! I have to tell you there must be something weird about this specific spot, because I spoke to two other people earlier today in this very area and both of them got to points in the conversation where they couldn’t remember either! There must be something in the area!”

But the female student, the one who was clearly torn between being pro-life or pro-choice, said, “No. It’s because what you drew out makes total sense. You can’t argue with that—it makes total sense!”

Now, don’t just take my word for it—try it for yourself!

Written by Stephanie Gray, May 2008. Stephanie is the executive director of the Canadian Centre for Bio-Ethical Reform: www.unmaskingchoice.ca.