

When Does a Human Life Begin?

Opinion, Fred Stoll, June 25, 2022

One cornerstone of anti-abortionist thought is the premise that a human life begins at conception. Based on that premise, anti-abortionists conclude that intentionally aborting a pregnancy, even on the literal “morning after,” is murder. However, a brief look at the science of pregnancy shows that this position does not hold water.

How we start to grow. Zygote is the term for the fertilized egg, a mother’s egg which has been joined by a sperm cell of the father. During the first few days following fertilization, the zygote splits through about three cycles of mitosis into a collection of about eight cells, which are all genetically identical, undifferentiated and unconnected. On occasion during this process or even a few days after cells begin to differentiate, the collection of cells will split into two or more groups, each of which goes on separately to develop toward becoming a baby^{1,2} (“identical” twins, triplets, etc.).



Photograph of a zygote, from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zygote>

Can a soul be split in two? Now, if the claim that a human life begins at conception were true, then a zygote would be that basis for a unique human life, and if you believe in an immortal soul, it would be the zygote which receives the soul at its inception. But as noted above, in general a zygote is NOT the basis for a unique human life because in some cases it will produce two or more people. So unless you contend that a human can be split in two, or that one immortal soul assigned at conception can be shared or split to accommodate multiple people, then you can NOT contend that a human life begins at conception. A zygote is alive, just as a human egg and a sperm cell are both alive, but none of these is “a human life.”

What about miscarriage? There is a general problem with the idea that the sanctity of human life begins at conception. Pregnancy research shows that roughly half of all successful conceptions end in natural miscarriages³, often before a girl or woman knows she is pregnant. If you believe that every fertilized egg has achieved personhood, then you must consider every miscarriage of an embryo or fetus to be just as tragic as an intentional abortion, and if you furthermore believe in an all-powerful God, then you would have to consider God to be the greatest abortion instigator and murderer of all time. Looking at it another way, if every potential life represented by a fertilized egg were holy and precious to an all-powerful God, would not He/She have made the process of pregnancy more robust, to avoid dooming over half of His/Her human creations to suffer death during gestation?

Gradual personhood. Maybe, as many of us believe, one grows into one’s personhood during gestation, acquiring human status gradually as one approaches viability as an individual life. This makes intuitive sense based on physical development during gestation. The fact that we cannot use biology to identify one instant that an embryo or fetus or baby has attained personhood does not mean that one can arbitrarily say that personhood is achieved at the moment of conception; we have seen above that the idea is nonsense. For religious people, could not an all-powerful God have designed the soul to emerge gradually, as a life approaches viability?

A good thing. The knowledge that human development in the womb fails as often as it succeeds should soften any instinctive sense that an intentional abortion is a tragic murder. On the contrary, the availability of abortion services for a girl or woman who is not prepared for a(nother) baby to enter her life should be celebrated as a means by which girls and women can live lives of self-determination, stability, and accomplishment, just as boys and men can.

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References:

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