

Fetal brain development — Is a fetus a person?

Are you comfortable with your decision to have an abortion?

If not, is it because you are concerned that you might be killing a person?

What makes a person a person? Here are two answers to that question, based on different viewpoints.

Viewpoint 1

A person comes into being from the moment of conception, because as soon as an egg is fertilized by a sperm it also receives a human soul.

Viewpoint 2

[This viewpoint is from a neurobiologist (brain scientist), and was prepared with input from experts in the field of brain research.]

The concept of person can be related to the use of language and other cognitive functions (kinds of thinking) exhibited by people to a much greater extent than by animals. Many of us have a gut feeling that a fetus is not a person, perhaps because of our experiences with newborns. We presume that prior to birth the fetus has even less in the way of cognitive functions.

That presumption has scientific support. Even at birth, a developing human's mental abilities are inferior to those of many adult animals. At conception there is only a fertilized egg, a single cell that is no more a thinking, feeling being than any other cell in your body. The human fertilized egg and its genetic content are very similar to those of many other animals. The amount of overlap in genetic content is especially great between us and our nearest relatives, the apes and monkeys.

In the first trimester, the developing brain of a human embryo passes through stages in which it resembles the brains of different animals. At a certain stage the human embryonic brain has those parts that correspond to what can be found in a frog, and not much else. At a later stage it is more like a lizard brain, and when the cerebral cortex first appears, it is smooth like that of a rat. (Very nice brain waves can be recorded from a rat! The appearance of brain waves in a fetus does not indicate the emergence of a human mind.)

Throughout pregnancy, and for a time after birth, the parts of the cerebral cortex required for the higher thought processes that distinguish humans from other animals are either unformed or nonfunctional. Movements of the fetus, including reactions to sounds, involve only lower parts of the brain and the spinal cord. It cannot experience pain or emotion on a level higher than that on which a lizard experiences them. This is the case even when the fetus has developed to the point that it has a beating heart, and it moves, and it has a face and body that are recognizable as human.

Bottom line: Becoming a person is a gradual process. Science cannot tell us exactly where to draw the line between potential person and person, but the time of birth is a reasonable place.

The U.S. Supreme Court repeatedly has rejected the argument that a fetus is a person. It is not murder to take the life of something that is not a person.

A question for you: Does the life of your fetus have the same value to you as your life, or the life of another person close to you who would be affected if you continued your pregnancy?

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