

Philosophy 501
Essay #4
18 October 2004

Susan Sherwin says that “opponents of abortion have structured the debate so that it is necessary to define the status of the fetus as either valued the same as other humans (and hence not entitled to be killed) or in lacking in all value.” (p. 423) She feels that framing the debate in this way has cast it in moral terms, where the only way out for pro-choice proponents is to try to find some way of devaluing the fetus, or at least proposing the that the fetus becomes a person by degrees.

Her analysis, in contrast, emphasizes the undeniable element of context. “Fetuses develop in specific pregnancies which occur in the lives of particular women. They are not individuals housed in generic female wombs, nor are they full persons at risk only because they are very small and subject to the whims of women. Their very existence is relational, developing as they do within particular women’s bodies.” She says it is incorrect to try to resolve the moral status of the fetus “solely in terms of abstract metaphysical criteria of personhood. Rather, “... personhood is a social category, not an isolated state.” Finally, she says that, “To be a morally significant category must involve personality as well as biological integrity.” (p. 425)

If we accept her analysis, we can say that something is not really a person until it has developed relationships; until, as an embodied entity, it has acquired a unique personality and set of experiences and memories. Anti-abortionists, on the other hand, depend on the argument that a human life begins - i.e. a person is formed - in the moment of fertilization. If the moral value of the fetus relies on its being called a person, then they are obliged to call even a 2-celled entity a “person.” So, the role of the concept of person in the abortion controversy is to literally cast the

debate in terms of good and evil, where the good is where we acknowledge a fetus as a full fledged person and evil is where we deny that the fetus is a person.

When you think about it, though, there is something rather willfully simple in the pro-life argument. To say that one is a human being is to say that biologically, one is classified as *Homo sapiens*, a primate species of mammal; but to say that one is a person means that plus the other “metaphysical properties of identity, personality, unique experience and memories, i.e. “situatedness.” If we think of FDR, Mother Teresa, or my late Uncle Dick, and we acknowledge the fact that they are no longer living, this does not also mean that they have ceased to be persons.

Similarly, if someone is on life support for all functions and considered “brain dead,” we do not consider them as “non-persons.” In both cases, we do not say that these people were just human beings; we say that they were persons. Personhood must then be something more than just belonging to a biological species. Annette Baier, quoted in Sherwin, says, “Persons come after and before other persons.” (p. 425) You cannot have the concept of person in isolation from other persons, so I believe there is something to the social category aspect of persons.

Unfortunately, saying that a fetus in the womb cannot be a person only delays the argument about when, exactly, it does begin to take on personhood! Surely the point cannot be pushed back to the moment of birth, allowing 7 and 8 month fetuses to be aborted due to their lack of personhood. Yet, if it is a timeline argument that we are making (instead of a black and white moral argument), then when are we to draw the line? This is akin to jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire!