

What Do I Teach?

Part III: Do All Humans Have an Equal Right to Life?

JOANNA WAGNER'S MONTHLY UPDATE

AUGUST 2014



It was one of those days when I wanted to do *anything* but stand outside and have conversations about abortion. It was freezing cold, and relatively few people were walking past our “*Should Abortion Remain Legal?*” poll table.

Then “Daniel” walked by.

Joanna: *Have you had a chance to sign our poll?*

Daniel: *No...*

I could tell, in that split second, that he was trying to decide whether to trust me. Finally, he turned to our poll table and walked straight toward the “Yes” sign signifying, “Yes: Abortion Should Remain Legal.” After he had had a chance to write, I asked:

Joanna: *Do you think abortion should remain legal through all nine months?*

Daniel: *No ... I mean, it gets to a point when it's too late to get an abortion. But when most abortions take place, that “thing” isn't even conscious [pointing to an embryo on our human development sign].*

Joanna: *So, help me understand. Do you mean:*

- 1) that the unborn isn't biologically human until it is conscious? Or do you believe:*
- 2) that it is biologically human, but until it has conscious thought, it lacks the same basic right to life as other human organisms?*

Daniel: *I mean the second option.*

At this point, I knew that Daniel's pro-choice views came not primarily from a lack of knowledge about biology, but from a philosophical perspective about which we disagreed. In past newsletters, I have written about the importance both of focusing a dialogue about abortion on the central question, “What is the unborn?” and of demonstrating that from fertilization the unborn is a whole human organism.

Daniel had already narrowed in on this central question, and he had given the correct scientific response. Our disagreement was instead about whether this whole human organism has a certain kind of value. Daniel said that the unborn isn't a *person*. The word “person” has historically been used to mean a variety of things, and thus, it can be an ambiguous word. But in my conversation with Daniel, we clarified that he was using the word “person” specifically to mean “one who has an equal right to life to you and me.” It seemed that there was something about an embryo that he believed is different enough to disqualify her from this basic right to life. From his previous statements, I had an idea of what that difference might be, and I had made a mental note of it. Thankfully, Daniel's next question gave me the perfect opportunity to discuss it: He asked me to explain why I cared enough to be out talking about abortion in the first place.



During this seminar at Wichita State University, I taught volunteers how to use the Equal Rights Argument, which you can read about in this and next month's newsletters.



JUSTICE FOR ALL TRAINS THOUSANDS TO MAKE ABORTION UNTHINKABLE FOR MILLIONS, ONE PERSON AT A TIME.

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Joanna: *Daniel, when you look around this campus, you see a lot of different kinds of people, right? Some are young and some are old; some are really smart and others struggle to grasp basic concepts; and some are tall and others are really short (like me!).*

Daniel: *That's true!*

Joanna: *But, Daniel, can we at least agree that all of these people, despite their differences, deserve to be treated equally? [Step 1]*

Daniel: *Of course.*

Joanna: *Right. So if we deserve to be treated equally, then doesn't that mean that there is something the same about us? [Step 2]*

Daniel: *Yes... I guess so.*

Joanna: *So Daniel, what is the same about us? [Step 3]*

Daniel: *Well, we're all human.*

Joanna: *Exactly. See, that's why I'm out here. I believe that having a human nature is what makes us equal. Because the unborn share that same human nature, I believe that they also need to be protected. But currently, they are being killed at the rate of over one million abortions each year in this country. By my estimation, that's a huge human rights violation, and I want to do what I can to fix it.*



Our staff and volunteer team after a day of outreach at the University of Kansas, complete with April showers

This explanation for my pro-life convictions is what is described in our seminar as the Equal Rights Argument. We learned this line of reasoning from J.P. Moreland, a professor of philosophy at Biola University.

In many instances, the three steps of the Equal Rights Argument are enough to help people see that simply *having a human nature* is sufficient for membership in the community of those who have the basic right to life. Sometimes, those people then tell us that they can no longer be pro-choice. But in other conversations, like the one with Daniel, the Equal Rights Argument helps in a different way. With Daniel, it clarified our core philosophical difference related to abortion so that we could discuss it more productively. After hearing my

explanation for equal rights, Daniel stated an alternative explanation – one that would exclude the unborn from being considered “persons.”

Daniel: *Okay, but like I said before, I don't agree that being human is what makes you a “person.” Rather, being **conscious** is what grants you equal rights. All of the people you pointed to have conscious thought, which makes them equal. The unborn doesn't have that (up to a certain point), so abortion is okay.*

Daniel's perspective is a common one. To see how I responded to him and read about the rest of our conversation, be sure to check out next month's newsletter!

In the meantime, note the three questions (steps 1-3) in the dialogue above for a simple way to remember the Equal Rights Argument. For many of our staff and volunteers, this argument has proven to be one of the best ways to help others understand the equal rights that unborn human beings share with the rest of us. Please study this argument, practice it, and let me know if you would like more resources to help you learn how to use it in your conversations.

[The approach I describe in this letter follows JFA's training material closely. Citations can be found in that material. For other stories of the Equal Rights Argument in action, see www.jfaweb.org/Equal-Rights.]