

What Do I Teach?

Part IV: Why Do Human Beings Matter?

JOANNA WAGNER'S MONTHLY UPDATE

OCTOBER 2014



In my [August 2014 newsletter](#), I introduced you to “Daniel.” He is a pro-choice student I met earlier this year, who believed that while the unborn is a human being, the unborn is not 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.” After using the Equal Rights Argument to share why I believe that a human nature is all one needs in order to have the basic right to life, Daniel explained his view further:

Daniel: *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. But the unborn doesn't have that (up to a certain point), so abortion is okay.*

Joanna: *What do you mean by “conscious thought”?*

This was a critical point in our conversation. Instead of assuming what he meant by “conscious,” I let him explain. I wanted to get a clear picture of his view, and I also wanted to make sure that he wasn't saying that our value is based on our *level* of thinking capability. After all, we can't get a foundation for equal rights from something we don't have equally. As you can imagine, grounding equal treatment in one's level of thinking capability would produce horrifying results: those with higher IQ's would then be more worthy of life than those with lower IQ's. Thankfully, this was not Daniel's perspective.

Daniel: *I guess what I mean is that to be considered a person, you have to be able to think at least a little bit. You just need to have your first thought in order to be counted as equal.*

In our seminar, JFA staff members teach three questions we can ask ourselves as we assess someone's criterion for equal rights, such as the one Daniel shared. These three questions are as follows:

- 1) Does his criterion for equal rights entail that adults be treated equally?
- 2) Does it entail that infants be treated equally?
- 3) Does it entail that animals be excluded from that equal treatment?

As I explained to Daniel, while I am certainly not a proponent of animal cruelty, it seems clear that the killing of an animal should not be regarded as the same kind of crime as the killing of a human being. He agreed. As we discussed Daniel's view, a fascinating thing happened: he began to talk himself out of it.



Last week I talked with this University of Kansas student about whether or not she believes unborn humans have the same basic right to life that we have. We also discussed some of her conflicted thoughts about the religious perspective with which she was raised.



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

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Daniel: *Well, I guess basic consciousness wouldn't be a good explanation for equal rights, because most animals share that – even birds and dogs. It shouldn't be the same kind of crime to kill them as it would be to kill us.*

Joanna: *Exactly...*

Daniel: *But if we raised the level of consciousness you have to have to something higher, like having self-awareness, then that would disqualify infants from the equal rights community. But I don't think it is okay to kill infants.*

Joanna: *I'm really glad to hear you say that!*

Daniel: *Well... I guess I'm stumped. What do you have to say? I mean, what's the big deal about humans anyway?!*

As we discussed Daniel's view, a fascinating thing happened: he began to talk himself out of it.

Daniel had begun to see that any criteria for equal rights, other than simply having a human nature, either grants equal treatment to some animals, or denies equal treatment to human infants. He was uncomfortable with his view, so he was left considering mine. What about the idea that simply “being human” makes us equal? It made sense to Daniel, but he wondered, “Why?”

Joanna: *Daniel, I'm not sure you're going to like my answer. Do you really want to know why I think humans are so significant?*

Daniel: *Yes!*

Joanna: *Daniel, I think humans matter because there was this man in approximately 30 AD who walked out of his own tomb. I'm sure you know who I mean. It was Jesus. And Jesus affirmed that the books of the Old Testament are true. The Old Testament says that God made man “in his own image,” that he created them with significance. Because there is good evidence to believe that Jesus rose from the dead, I think he's an authority I can trust. I believe what he believed about human beings; namely, that they have special significance.*

Daniel: *But that's a religious argument. I'm not religious, and those kinds of arguments don't persuade me.*

Joanna: *Fair enough, I have appealed to religion, but only to answer a very difficult question... one that we all need to answer. Why do we have the intuition that human beings matter so much? ... What do you think?*

Daniel: *Abh... I don't know. [Visibly thinking] Honestly, I don't really have a reason to think I'm valuable. I mean, in the end, everything is valuable, right? Everything has a life force – even that tree over there.*

Joanna: *But Daniel, it's one of the clearest things in the world to me that you matter far more than that tree. Don't you believe that?*

Daniel: *[Long pause] Abh... You're making me think so hard. I've gotta go.*

And with that, Daniel walked off.

It's amazing to me how many conversations I've had that follow this pattern. I find, consistently, that my peers are deeply confused about what makes someone valuable. They are deeply confused about whether *they* are valuable, and they are looking for answers. Please pray for Daniel and other students with whom I've talked, that they would have courage to face these questions and consider the answers I've shared with them.

In addition, I encourage you to study this newsletter and my August 2014 newsletter. The three questions of the Equal Rights Argument and the three test questions on the first page of this newsletter will help you clearly address people on the issue of abortion. Talking about equal rights also provides an excellent avenue for getting to the heart of someone's perspective about his own worth and what he is living for. Perhaps, with this information, you will have the opportunity to offer hope to someone who has lost it.