

"Do You Want to Practice Your Idea?"

MONTHLY UPDATE FROM SUSANNA DIRKS

JULY 2020



"This is the kind of conversation that will change the world." - Michelle (Sept. 18, 2019)

Dear Friend,

In February, I attended a JFA outreach in New Mexico. The last time I was in New Mexico was October 2017, and I was excited to return. Blessed with good health, our team was able to engage over 50 college students at University of New Mexico over two days of outreach. Here's one of the several extraordinary interactions I had with students:

At the end of the day on Tuesday, I was getting a moment to myself on a bench with a great view of the outreach. As I sat there, three students sat down nearby. I overheard a small piece of their conversation:

Erica: He was saying something about a tree and how it's alive, and I was so confused.

Terrence: You should have said conscious thought is what trees don't have that humans do.

Erica: I'm going to go say that to him right now!

Just as the three jumped up to confront whichever staff member they were talking about, it clicked in my mind what they were about to do. I spoke up: "Hey, I overheard a bit of what you guys were saying. Before you go back over there, do you want to practice your idea?" We exchanged names, and they enthusiastically sat back down with me.

I started by explaining to them that the staff member probably meant that some things deserve equal rights to you and me, and he was beginning to go through how to determine who gets equal rights. Trees may be living, but we can chop them down and not be causing the same kind of wrong we would commit if we did the same thing to a human. Since we need a different criterion than "it's living," I brought up Terrence's example of "conscious thought":

"Here's where I think you're going to run into a problem. If conscious thought is your basis for which living things belong in the equal rights box, then a lot of animals are brought in because they also have conscious thought." Our discussion diverted briefly as we discussed why humans get to be different from animals at all. Terrence said, "Why should there be a hierarchy?" I clarified that I was really only making a minimal point. I wasn't saying animals can be treated cruelly or any way we want, but I was simply saying it should not be considered the same crime to kill an animal as it is to kill a human. With this in mind, they agreed that conscious thought is not enough for explaining the human rights we had been discussing.

The third friend, Pearl, said, "What about sentient awareness of the fact

Pregnancy and Support Update

With one month to go, Andrew and I are so excited to welcome Baby James into the outside world. After delivery, my work will slow down, but I anticipate being able to continue working part-time for Justice For All over the next year. Thanks to you, my support account is in a very good place. This means that if those who have committed to give at a regular interval continue to give, I do not need to raise additional support. Thank you for helping us as a couple to prepare for parenthood and stay active with JFA through the beginning of our new adventure with James.



JUSTICE FOR ALL - TRAINING THOUSANDS TO MAKE ABORTION UNTHINKABLE FOR MILLIONS, ONE PERSON AT A TIME

WEB: WWW.JFAWEB.ORG

EMAIL: SUSANNA.DIRKS@JFAWEB.ORG

OFFICE: 316-683-6426

that you're alive?"

"Well, then we run into problems," I said. Pearl, remembering the animals, immediately added that gorillas would be in our human rights box. I agreed and added that newborns would not be included, since they gain self-awareness around one year after birth. We cordially dismissed that criterion and continued to process through the concept of human rights.

Unfortunately, Pearl had to leave at this point, so I continued the conversation with Erica and Terrence. It was his turn to bring up a criterion: "I believe what Hume said about human experiences. A fetus doesn't experience anything, so it shouldn't be included, but any born human is in." Wanting to avoid the problem of including animals in the equal rights box, Terrence chose "human experiences," combining two characteristics so that equal rights are only had by those who both have humanness and have experiences. This is an example of "Human, Plus." This type of explanation for equal rights is formulated to include all born humans, but also exclude animals and the unborn.

To show the problem with this "human experiences" view, I said, "Experiences are very interesting. We all experience things differently from one another, and we may forget how experiences actually happened or whether they happened at all. Our memories are unreliable, rendering experiences—which would otherwise be concrete—transitory or maybe even meaningless. We don't even remember our experiences from when we were toddlers, so how would we know that we had not experienced things inside the womb?" I mentioned the interactions that fetuses can have with their mother in utero and also doctors when in utero surgery is done. We agreed that having experiences is not a good metric for determining value.*

By this point we had returned to one question many times: "So what we really need to determine is whether or not the fetus counts as a human person in the same way you and I do, on the basis of our shared humanity."

Finally Erica asked me, "What is the reason why you believe the fetus counts?" So I started with an account of biology: sperm and egg are functional parts of a man and woman's body respectively, but when the two come together, they cease to exist and a new organism is created. This organism has human parents, so it's human. It is also on its own path of development, growing via a proper environment, food, and time. This growing human organism has been, from conception, the same kind of thing that you and I are. Terrence and Erica accepted that I had made an argument that the unborn are human and have no differences from us that would deny the unborn a right to life.

Processing through the implications of this, they asked about bad environments. We talked about what it means to have a good environment and were able to agree that a bad environment is a bad thing and children in bad environments ought to be protected. Abortion removes a fetus from the good environment and puts it into a bad one where it can't survive. If fetuses are just like other children, abortion is a bad thing. I took a moment to show them how I could tell that they cared about protecting people, and how I think the unborn ought to be included in that protection.

They thought for a long time, and that's when Terrence told me his emotional stumbling block to accepting my arguments for treating the unborn equally. He knew two friends who had had abortions, and he stands with them "100 percent." After receiving more details, I told him that the situations his friends had been in were bad, and I agreed that they themselves ought to have been protected. We parted with my final words: "We've been talking a lot about who gets to be a protected person. I advocate for the fetus, but all of us here advocate for every human being we know. We can embrace both concepts and love our friends and the smallest of us from here on out." We shook hands all around (because you were allowed to do that in February), and they walked away.

I smile every time I think about this conversation. Usually, I expect that talking about philosophy and equal rights will be one of the more difficult parts of a conversation, but this was so easy-going, and these students were so open to working with me on all of their ideas. Far from the drudgery you might expect from "practice," God enabled all of us to have a lot of fun with the whole thing!

In Christ,



* My response here was sufficient to help Terrence and Erica abandon the "human experiences" view, but this approach wouldn't apply to early embryos, who don't have human experiences in the way Terrence meant. Clarifying why "human experiences" isn't a good reason to disqualify the early embryo is more complicated than I can describe in this space. If you'd like to hear my response or discuss this, please contact me or drop me a note at www.jfaweb.org/contact.

