

“No One Knows When Life Begins!”

Responding to Uncertainty about Human Beginnings

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The Assertions

- “No one knows when life begins.”
- “There are no satisfactory definitions of life. If scientists don’t know, how can we say?”
- “The unborn is not a living thing!”

Response 1: Ask a Clarifying Question First

Many times people say the unborn is not alive (or that they don’t know if it’s alive) but really mean that the unborn is not a human being or human person. In order to clarify, ask this question first:

- “Do you mean the unborn is not even a living organism – that it isn’t biologically alive?”

Often the person will respond by clarifying that she did not mean “biological life.” She meant that no one knows when rights, value, or personhood begins. Some philosophers call this “biographical life.” If she is referring to “life” in this sense, the rest of this article will not help you, since it helps defend only the idea that the unborn is a living whole organism of the human species. See the entries on the SLED Test for help on these other claims.

Response 2: Ask Two More Clarifying Questions

In 2004, Allison Martinez, a high school student in Albuquerque, was discussing the question of when life begins with a male college student. She asked two questions:

- “If we don’t know if the unborn is alive, why take the risk?”
- “If it’s not alive, then why is an abortion necessary?”

The second question stopped the young man in his tracks. He said, “I think you’ve made me realize that maybe I don’t know everything about this, and I should probably think it over.”

Response 3: Answer with a Sound Bite (“10-Second Pro-Life Apologist”)

“If the unborn is growing, it must be alive.

If she has human parents, she must be human.

And living humans, or human beings like you and I, are valuable aren’t they?”

Response 4: Is the Definition of Life in Flux? Not for Most Things, Including the Unborn.

Scientists generally agree that anything that exhibits all of the following characteristics is alive:

- Irritability: reaction to stimuli
- Metabolism: converting food to energy
- Cellular Reproduction: growth

There is some disagreement about exactly what defines life, mainly because certain objects have only some characteristics of living things (e.g. viruses). But the fact that we don’t know if *certain things* are alive does not mean we cannot know if *anything* is alive. The unborn is obviously alive because anything that exhibits the three qualities above is alive.

Response 5: Ask the Person for Insight

- “If the sperm and ovum were both living cells from living human beings, and the being that results from their coming together (at least at birth) is living, how can the embryo or fetus be something other than living?”
- “Are you saying that every time we reproduce, we bring into being an unborn entity that is not alive, but that it somehow gains life somewhere along the line? At what point?”
- “If we don’t know what the characteristics of life are, how do we know if anything is alive? Are you alive?”

Response 6: Quote Scientists and Embryology Textbooks

Note on Responses 6 & 7: Appealing to scientists or philosophers is not in itself an argument. Sure, they have studied these things and they should know, but they also can be mistaken. This is why I have left these sections until last, since they are to be used when it is tactically appropriate in some conversations to give support to the reasons we've offered (responses 3 & 4). – SW

Respected textbooks affirm that the unborn is a living, whole, human organism (a human being).

- *Human Embryology & Teratology, 3rd Edition*: “Although life is a continuous process, fertilization ... is a critical landmark because, under ordinary circumstances, a new, genetically distinct human organism is formed when the chromosomes of the male and female pronuclei blend in the oocyte.” (p. 8)
- *Before We Are Born*: “Zygote. This cell, formed by the union of an oocyte and a sperm, is the beginning of a new human being (i.e., an embryo).” (p. 2)
- *Langman's Embryology*: “Development begins with fertilization, the process by which the male gamete, the sperm, and the female gamete, the oocyte, unite to give rise to a zygote.” (p. 3)

Respected scientists affirm that the unborn is a living, whole, human organism (a human being).

- Ralph P. Mieh (Brown University): “Human embryos and human fetuses are human beings, each with their own unique genetic DNA.”
- C. Christopher Hook (Mayo Clinic): “When fertilization is complete, a unique genetic human entity exists.” – quoted by Richard Ostling in an AP news story, 9/24/99

(Note: Mieh's & Hook's quotes are found on Side 1, Panel 1 of the Justice For All Exhibit.)

Response 7: Quote Pro-Abortion Philosophers

Leading pro-abortion thinkers affirm that the unborn is a living, whole, human organism (i.e. a human being).

- David Boonin: “Perhaps the most straightforward relation between you or me on the one hand and every human fetus from conception onward on the other is this: All are living members of the same species, *homo sapiens*. A human fetus, after all, is simply a human being at a very early stage in his or her development.” (p. 20)
- Peter Singer: “It is possible to give ‘human being’ a precise meaning. We can use it as equivalent to ‘member of the species *Homo sapiens*’. Whether a being is a member of a given species is something that can be determined scientifically, by an examination of the nature of the chromosomes in the cells of living organisms. In this sense there is no doubt that from the first moments of its existence an embryo conceived from human sperm and eggs is a human being; and the same is true of the most profoundly and irreparably intellectually disabled human being, even of an infant who is born anencephalic –literally, without a brain.” (pp. 85-86)
- Wayne Sumner: “A human fetus is not a nonhuman animal; it is a stage of a human being.” (p. 10)

Full Source Citations for Quotes in this Article:

- Christopher Hook quote: Richard Ostling, AP news, 9/24/99: www.ardmoreite.com/stories/092499/opE_moral.shtml
- Ronan O'Rahilly & Fabiola Muller, *Human Embryology & Teratology, 3rd ed.* (New York: Wiley-Liss, 2001), p. 8
- Keith L. Moore and T.V.N. Persaud, *Before We Are Born: Essentials of Embryology and Birth Defects, Sixth Edition* (Philadelphia: Saunders, 2003) p. 2
- T.W. Sadler, *Langman's Embryology, 9th Edition* (London: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2004), p. 3
- David Boonin, *A Defense of Abortion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 20
- Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 85-86.
- Wayne L. Sumner, *Abortion and Moral Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 10