

The SLED Test – Four Top Arguments

How to Use the SLED Test in Real Conversations

STEPHEN WAGNER

THE SLED TEST¹³

We all agree that toddlers are valuable human beings with rights. Yet the unborn differ from toddlers in only four ways: Size, Level of Development, Environment, and Degree of Dependency (the first letters of each of these differences spell an acronym, SLED).

- The unborn is smaller than the toddler, but toddlers are smaller than adults.
- The unborn is less developed than the toddler, but toddlers are less developed than elementary school kids.
- The unborn is in a different location than the toddler, but toddlers can change environments without changing their value.
- Finally, the unborn is more dependent than a toddler, but toddlers are more dependent than adolescents (even if some parents would deny this). And many other born people depend on medications, caregivers, and spacesuits to sustain their lives. They are more dependent than those who don't need these things.

So, there are only four ways the unborn differ from toddlers, but many toddlers and other born humans differ in exactly the same ways. So how can we justify killing the unborn on these grounds, when we protect born humans who have the same deficiencies?

THE SLED TEST MEETS THE REAL WORLD

Anyone who has talked with an abortion advocate knows that the dynamics of real conversation many times make it impossible to give a four-step argument like the SLED Test. Sometimes people have a short attention span or want to focus on just one of these points. Even still, items from the SLED test come up frequently in any conversation on abortion. All you have to do is keep watch for them, then respond with a response from the SLED Test.

Here are the SLED concerns I hear repeated most frequently on campus, followed by my most favored response(s). Learn these and you'll be in good shape!

Size: "How Can Something So Small Be a Person? It Looks Like a Clump of Cells."

"Why should we believe that microscopic human beings aren't persons? Are you saying those who are larger have the right to determine whether those who are smaller deserve to exist? Doesn't that sound like discrimination? Would that be called **sizism**? And to disqualify someone because her body is undeveloped sounds mean. How is your statement different from saying to a disabled person that he doesn't count because of how his body looks or functions? Should we call that **developmentalism** – discrimination against someone for the body she's developed?¹⁴ Think of a two-year-old: Isn't she smaller than the rest of us? But she has equal value to adults in spite of her small stature. If she's valuable, size is irrelevant to value, right? Isn't the embryo valuable too?"

¹³ See Steven Schwarz, *The Moral Question of Abortion* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1990), pp. 15-19. See also Steve Wagner, "The SLED Test: Who Created It" at str.typepad.com/weblog/2006/11/the_sled_test_w.html.

¹⁴ Trent Horn related to me that some have suggested there's a form of discriminatism called "ableism." According to Harvard professor Thoms Hehir, "Ableism is essentially like racism and sexism and homophobia. It's a societal prejudice against people with disabilities, some of which is blatant – like when disabled people aren't able to attend an event because they use a wheelchair – and some of which is more subtle, such as the desire for disabled people to perform life tasks in the same ways as non-disabled people." See <http://www.hepg.org/hel/article/299>.

Level of Development: “The Unborn Can’t Think or Feel Pain or Know That It Exists.”

“Well, in the earliest stages at least, I agree. There’s a debate about when we develop these abilities, but the embryo can’t do any of these things. But is our value really based on our abilities? After all, even adults differ in how well they think or how sensitive they are to pain or how self-aware they are. How can you value all of these people the same even though some of them can’t think well? And some children, like Gabby Gingras,¹⁵ can’t feel pain at all. Are they disqualified? Some severely disabled people aren’t self-aware. People in a reversible coma aren’t thinking, feeling pain, and they definitely aren’t aware of themselves. In order to be consistent, aren’t you going to have to disqualify all of these people with disabilities too? And if not, shouldn’t we value the unborn who is also a human being?”

Environment: “It’s Not in the World Yet. It Doesn’t Even Breathe Air.”

“What do you mean by saying the unborn isn’t ‘in the world’? Surely the unborn is in the world – it’s simply hidden from view. It doesn’t interact with you and I like a toddler does, but isn’t he interacting with his mother in exactly the way someone at his stage of development should? It’s interesting that you claim the unborn is not breathing air. Do you mean that he isn’t even undergoing oxygen exchange, or respiration? All of us did that from the moment we began to exist as zygotes. But you must think breathing air into the lungs is critical for value. What is it about the unborn’s method of respiration or the location of her respiration that diminishes her value? Let me ask you a question. How long can you breathe under water?¹⁶ For about one swallow of water, right? Well, did you know that the unborn is not only surrounded by amniotic fluid, she is breathing it in and out of her lungs? If you can’t survive in her world, why do you expect her to survive in yours? Isn’t that a bit arbitrary and unfair?”

Degree of Dependency: “The Unborn Is Totally Dependent on Only One Person.”

“So let me see if I understand your concern. Are you saying that since the unborn can’t survive without the mother, that it’s dependent in a different way than a toddler, who can survive with any caretaker? So, being dependent on only one person is what disqualifies the unborn? Imagine that you are the last person to leave a swimming pool area and you know everyone else has left and are miles away. As you’re closing the gate, you hear a splash as an infant falls into the pool. Evidently, her parents forgot her and left her at the pool. How are you going to respond? You would save that infant, right? But why? She’s dependent on only one person – You. Isn’t it the case that human beings are valuable even if they’re dependent on only one person? If we don’t disqualify the infant that’s totally dependent on only one person, why disqualify the unborn? Dependency is irrelevant to value...and doesn’t dependency usually signal that we have an obligation to the dependent person, not a right to terminate them?”¹⁷

“But I’m Making a Cumulative Case”

Once you’ve shown that the unborn can’t be disqualified by each of SLED criteria, beware of a possible next move: “You’ve only refuted these qualities when taken by themselves. My argument is that the embryo is the only human being that doesn’t have any of these qualities. So it makes sense to disqualify the unborn on account of the fact that she has none of the important qualities.” See the “The SLED Test – Four Leaky Buckets” article for a response to this argument.

¹⁵ See news stories about Gabby at http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2005-05-08-chronic-pain-cover_x.htm and <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/4788525>.

¹⁶ I owe this question and the ensuing discussion to David Lee.

¹⁷ I owe the pool story to David Lee.