

## Does making babies make sense?

Why so many people find it difficult to see humanity in a developing foetus.



In December of 2005 an op-ed piece by sociologist Dalton Conley appeared in the *New York Times*, stating that “most Americans... see a fetus as an individual under construction.” This widespread vision of the embryo and fetus as “under construction” is the key to understanding why good people may find pro-life arguments to be absurd or otherwise non-rational, eg, religious, particularly with regard to embryonic stem cell research.

The construction idea also may explain how Republican presidential candidate John McCain has been able to support both the right to life from the moment of conception and embryonic stem cell research.

Just think of something being constructed (fabricated, assembled, composed, sculpted – in short, made), such as a house, or a scholarly article – or take a car on an assembly line. When is a car first there? At what point in the assembly line would we first say, “There’s a car”? Some of us would no doubt go with appearance, saying that there is a car as soon as the body is fairly complete (in analogy to the fetus at 10 weeks or so). I suppose that most of us would look for something functional. We would say that there is a car only after a motor is in place (in analogy to quickening). Others might wait for the wheels (in analogy to viability) or even the windshield wipers (so that it’s viable even in the rain). And a few might say, “It’s not a car until it rolls out onto the street” (in analogy to birth). There would be many differing opinions.

However, one thing upon which we’ll probably all agree is this: Nobody is going to say that the car is there at the very beginning of the assembly line, when the first screw or rivet is put in or when two pieces of metal are first welded together. (You can see how little I know about car manufacturing.) Two pieces of metal fastened together don’t match up to *anybody’s* idea of a car.

I think that this is exactly the way that many people see the embryo, like the car-to-be at the very beginning of the construction process. In the first stages of construction you don’t have a house, you don’t have a car, you don’t have a human individual yet. You don’t ever have what you’re making when you’ve just started making it. This does not mean that our “constructionist” friends are anti-life. They may believe that a baby should have absolute protection once it has been fully fabricated. But until that point, for them, abortion just isn’t murder.

What happens when a constructionist hears a pro-lifer argue that a human embryo has the same right to life as any other human being? Journalist Michael Kinsley, writing in the *Washington Post*, expressed his utter bewilderment: “I cannot share, or even fathom, [the pro-life] conviction that a microscopic dot – as oblivious as a rock, more primitive than a worm – has the same rights as anyone reading this article.”

There’s a deep truth at the base of Kinsley’s puzzlement. Nothing can be a certain kind of thing until it possesses the form of that kind of thing, and the form of a thing under

construction just plain isn't there at the beginning of the construction process. It isn't there because that form is being gradually imposed from the outside and the persons or forces doing the construction have not yet been able to shape the raw material into what it will eventually be.

There is a special relevance of the construction idea to the embryonic stem cell debate. Conley admits there can be a peculiar, lesser sort of dignity even in a work-in-progress. For example, if we thought God were engaged in fabricating a new Eve, out of a bone and a breath, we wouldn't want to destroy His work-in-progress, simply out of respect for Him. Again, many of us would think a Corvette-To-Be pretty special even on the assembly line, something not lightly to be destroyed, because it's on the way to becoming something that we really care about. But if the auto factory shuts down early on, those two pieces of joined metal on the assembly line are not "to be" anything; they're just recyclable waste. Likewise, an embryo conceived outside the womb – with no plans to implant it so that it could be born – is not on its way "to be" anything. Thus it has little or no work-in-progress dignity, and work-in-progress type dignity is all that it can ever have for Conley and those who agree with his construction model of gestation.

So there is a reason that people like John McCain, and some others who are strongly opposed to abortion, even in early pregnancy, could feel free to vote for embryonic stem cell research funding. They could think that an intrauterine fetus or embryo is a great divine or human work in progress, and thus shouldn't be aborted, even when just recently conceived, but only because it is under construction. Since the thousands of frozen, test-tube-generated embryos that scientists want to use for experiments are not under construction, are just scrap left over from IVF treatments, they can be recycled without a qualm.

### **Development as an alternative to construction**

Despite the great explanatory power of Conley's construction metaphor for an understanding of contemporary life-issue debates, it is radically misleading concerning the nature of gestation. It is in fact not true that the bodies of living creatures are constructed, by God or by anyone else. There is no outside builder or maker. Life is not made. Life develops.

In construction, the form defining the entity being built arrives only slowly, as it is added from the outside. In development, the form defining the growing life (that which a major Christian tradition calls its "soul") is within it from the beginning. If Corvette production is cancelled, the initial two pieces of metal stuck together can become the starting point for something else, perhaps another kind of car, or maybe a washing machine. But even if you take a human embryo out of the womb, you can never get it to develop into a puppy or a guppy.

Living organisms are not formed or defined from the outside. They define and form themselves. The form or nature of a living being is already there from the beginning, in its activated genes, and that form begins to manifest itself from the very first moment of its existence, in self-directed epigenetic interaction with its environment. Embryos don't need to be molded into a type of being. They already are a definite kind of being.

This idea of development – as the continual presence but gradual appearance of a being – lies deep within us. Here is a non-biological example of development. Suppose that we are back in the pre-digital photo days and you have a Polaroid camera and you have taken a picture that you think is unique and valuable – let's say a picture of a jaguar darting out from a Mexican jungle. The jaguar has now disappeared, and so you are never going to get that picture again in your life, and you really care about it. (I am trying to make this example parallel to a human being, for we say that every human

being is uniquely valuable.) You pull the tab out and as you are waiting for it to develop, I grab it away from you and rip it open, thus destroying it. When you get really angry at me, I just say blithely, "You're crazy. That was just a brown smudge. I cannot fathom why anyone would care about brown smudges." Wouldn't you think that I were the insane one? Your photo was already there. We just couldn't see it yet.

Why do we sometimes find the constructionist view plausible, while at other times the more accurate developmental view seems to make more sense? The constructionist view is intuitively appealing, I think, whenever the future is shut out of our minds, even if we are using the scientifically correct term "development." Whenever the embryo or fetus is described in terms simply of its current appearance, it is easy to fall into constructionism. For example, if a snapshot is taken in which an embryo looks like just a ball of cells, its dynamic self-direction is obscured. It seems inert. Since an entity that had merely embryonic characteristics as its natural end state would indeed not qualify as a human being, it is easy to imagine that the entity in the snapshot is not human. Scientific knowledge of its inner activity may not be enough to overcome this impression, for it is hard to recognize a form still hidden from view.

However, when we look backwards in time or otherwise have in mind a living entity's final concrete form, development becomes intuitively compelling. Knowing that the developing Polaroid picture would have been of a jaguar helped us to see that calling it a "brown smudge" was inadequate. If we somehow had an old photo taken of our friend Jim just after he had been conceived, and was thus just a little ball, we'd have no trouble saying, "Look, Jim. That's you!" Thus the most arresting way to put the developmental case against embryo-destructive research would be something like this: "Each of your friends was once an embryo. Each embryo destroyed could one day have been your friend."

### **Deconstruction and the disabled**

The construction vs development clash may also help us to clarify our mutual misunderstandings regarding euthanasia. If a Corvette is gradually deconstructed (dismantled), it eventually ceases to merit the appellation "car". If you were given a disassembled Corvette body, without the motor or wheels, would you feel that you had been given a "car"? What if you got only a chunk of the frame? True, Corvette-lovers might still have a certain reverence for that body, or even for a piece of the frame, because of what it used to be part of, so that wantonly trashing it (for no good purpose) could still seem to them wrong. But it wouldn't seem nearly as bad as destroying a whole car. (Remember, there's nothing wrong with this thinking with regard to artificial creations like cars. Once the pieces necessary to form a car are gone, that form itself is gone and so the car is truly gone.)

Life, however, is different. The form (nature, design) of a living creature both precedes and perdures independently of its appearance and function. That activated form is imbedded within a living being's every part and every cell (in its active DNA). As long as a disabled creature remains anything – that is, as long as it holds itself together in some way, rather than just becoming a collection of non-integrated objects – that is, as long as it remains alive – it remains what it always was from the beginning of its development.

Indeed, our photo analogy fails fully to capture the nature of life. A photo does not hold itself together. If you scratch it after it has been developed, it won't even try to repair itself. Like a constructed entity, it is merely an assemblage of parts, without a continuing inner force maintaining its form. Since a living creature is not only an assemblage of parts, it actually cannot be merely constructed. Both ancient and modern constructionists switch (and have to switch) to the developmental understanding at

some point during gestation, or soon thereafter, in order to account for the fact that living human beings do have this active inner unifying form, until the day they die.

A deconstructionist might forget this truth and claim misleadingly that someone in a so-called "persistent vegetative state" is no longer a human being, having lost forever what we think special about our species. But in point of fact such a person never loses the unifying force that strives to express her humanity, until the moment she dies. Every part of her wasted body, even her very genes, actively, though in vain, strives to repair her injuries and to express her natural reason, will, and connection to those whom she has loved. She never becomes something else, such as a vegetable. That's why her condition is tragic, because she has a human nature that is utterly frustrated. We don't find real vegetables tragic ("Poor little heads of lettuce. Look how they're just vegetating!") because they are able to exhibit their inner design or nature.

As a result of accident or of age, many of us will become no longer capable (in this world) of expressing well, or expressing at all, the speech, reason, choice, and love for which we remain formed. Our humanity will have once more become partially hidden, as it was when we had just been conceived, but it will still be there.

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## Comments (8)

Celia B. Elumba said...

thank you very much for this insightful piece. this will help us explain better the value that there is to human life. I particularly like the photo analogy. Simple yet it captures the essence.

thanks again and all the best.

Philippines | [Wednesday, 3 September 2008 at 6:17 pm](#)

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simon said...

Rather than asking "when does one become human?" I think you can address this issue by simply examining the life cycle. When does it begin and when does it end? Are you pro-ending life or pro-protecting life?

Those who enter the human v embryo v juvenile v adult v geriatric debate are missing the point.

The debate is simple: consciously ending the life-cycle

Australia | [Wednesday, 3 September 2008 at 6:22 pm](#)

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angela shanahan said...

This is a very good explanation of two different views of the embryo's development, and why one view is inferior to the other. However it would have been good to have seen some more discussion of genetics. The human embryo is a complete growing entity with a unique human genetic code. You don't have to believe in God or anything to know that. But classifying it as a 'bunch of cells' is an easy way for the IVF industry to get over some problems. For example, a friend of mine was told that if she was having too many problems conceiving she might try using her sister's ova because (this is what the practitioner told her) "because the genetic material is the same". When I pointed out to her that it wasn't 'the same' and that she would be having her sister's baby she was rather upset. There seems to be a notion that the being is not unique of itself, but that in its development the mother bestows characteristics upon that embryo. It is also an argument used to justify abortion. We know that happens, up to a point, but it certainly doesn't change one's genetic makeup and I thought my friend's willingness to believe something like that a very curious thing in this day and age.

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Australia | [Wednesday, 3 September 2008 at 6:40 pm](#)

[Randal Marlin](#) said...

I've followed the abortion debate since the 1960s and have heard a lot of arguments. I find the polaroid analogy a genuinely novel and enlightening contribution, when I thought I had heard all there was to say. Thanks for this very helpful insight.

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Lisa said...

Very well said!

Car-photo analogies put this issue in perspective, as does the DNA in a 'clump of cells' are not programmed to be puppies.

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-- | [Thursday, 4 September 2008 at 3:59 am](#)

David Page said...

The problem in a society which doesn't have universal access to health care is, who will pay for maintaining a person in a vegetative state. It's not a frivolous question. Insurance companies routinely deny life extending treatment to people who are quite conscious. Legislation in Texas allows hospitals with vegetative patients to tell relatives to either pay for services or allow the patient to die. George Bush, knowingly or unknowingly, signed that legislation. These questions are mute in a country that sometimes denies services to patients who have a chance of recovery.

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United States | [Thursday, 4 September 2008 at 7:21 am](#)

[Fr. Larry Gearhart](#) said...

This is an excellent analysis of how the general public tends to view human fetal development, and how far that image is from reality. It is also an excellent example of how the primary technical and scientific paradigms of a civilization influence moral judgment. Even in Church history,

although the question of ensoulment never bore on the question of the moral evil of abortion, it did have an impact on canonical penalties, as the recent U.S. Bishops' statement clarifies, until the analysis of "ensoulment" vs. "quickenings" that predominated from the time of Aristotle was not invalidated until 1827, with the discovery of the human ovum and the development scientific embryology.

United States | [Thursday, 4 September 2008 at 9:16 am](#)

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Karen Ward said...

Thank you for this excellent articulation. In my simplicity of thought I have started at the end and worked backward, requiring to know when was the only time the person was not a life. The only thing that seems reasonable to me is:

before conception. Sometimes in order to perceive what something is, we have to examine what something is not. For example, we can know what the will of God is, by knowing what the will of God is not. He is not willing that any should perish, but that all might come to repentance.....for God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life. Then to further apply this kind of thought, we examine when something is, by determining when something is not. It is crystal clear. The only time there is no life, is before conception. Thank you again.