

Jonathan Wells on Why a Baby Should Live

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Austin Egbert:

Why should a baby live? Our guest host, Dr. Michael Egnor, tackles this question today on Mind Matters News.

Announcer:

Welcome to Mind Matters News, where artificial and natural intelligence meet head on.

Michael Egnor:

This is Dr. Michael Egnor from Mind Matters News. And the topic of today's podcast is the question, why should a baby live? It's a very important and rather disturbing question. And my guest today is Dr. Jonathan Wells. Dr. Wells has a PhD in developmental biology from University of California at Berkeley, and he is also a very popular author on issues of evolution. And Dr. Wells recently wrote two blog posts for Evolution News and Views, on the topic of abortion. They were centered around a question, and the question is, why should a baby live? Dr. Wells, welcome.

Jonathan Wells:

Thank you, it's a pleasure to be here.

Michael Egnor:

Thank you. Where did that question come from?

Jonathan Wells:

I adapted that from a 2012 article by two philosophers, Alberto Giubilini and Francesca Minerva titled, After-birth abortion: why should the baby live? And their article, as the title implies, is a defense of after-birth abortion, what some people might call infanticide, and they've turned the logic of Catholic doctrine around. Catholic doctrine says that babies, or unborn babies, fetuses that is, have the same rights as babies that have already been born.

Jonathan Wells:

And these two philosophers argue that since babies that are already born don't have these rights, why should fetuses? So they're in favor of abortion, and as it turns out, infanticide.

Michael Egnor:

What sort of reasoning do they use to arrive at such a conclusion? Why would anyone ever conclude something like that?

Jonathan Wells:

Well, their main point seems to be that abortion is now largely accepted. Those are their words. So because it's largely accepted, therefore it must be good, and therefore fetuses have no value.

Michael Egnor:

Well, if they're equating the moral status of a newborn with the moral status of a fetus, and they are saying that the idea that fetuses can be killed by the will of the mother, wouldn't that seem to argue that, in fact, we're making a mistake? That if the moral status of a fetus is analogous to the moral status of a newborn, we all acknowledge that newborns have a right to life. Wouldn't it imply that fetuses also have a right to life?

Jonathan Wells:

Well, these two philosophers do not believe that a newborn has a right to life. And apparently, judging from their article, they're following on the heels of Peter Singer, who many years ago, wrote something to that effect. He is an advocate of infanticide and so are they. So they argue backwards and say that therefore, the fetus likewise has no value.

Michael Egnor:

How does Singer arrive at an opinion that newborns and fetuses don't have a right to life? What criterion does he use for that?

Jonathan Wells:

Well, I have not read enough of Singer's work to comment authoritatively on that. But basically because of evolutionary theory, which Singer totally accepts, he argues that human beings and animals have the same rights. We kill animals, therefore, why shouldn't we kill human beings?

Michael Egnor:

Sure.

Jonathan Wells:

Now that's a caricature of his position, I'm sure, but that's the basic logic of it.

Michael Egnor:

My understanding also is that Singer believes that the ability to understand that one is alive, the ability to look to the future, are criteria that confer the right to life. And if you're a creature that doesn't have that ability then killing you doesn't really cause you any particular harm because you don't know what you've missed. So he kind of puts us, he feels like a well-trained dog has more of a right to life than a newborn baby, because a well-trained dog is closer to rationality than a newborn baby is. The question then is when does life begin? My understanding of Singer is that he, at one point, although I think he's backtracked on this, felt that children even into like a year or two of age didn't necessarily have a right to life because they weren't sufficiently sentient. When do you believe that life begins?

Jonathan Wells:

Well, I think even Singer would concede the children, one or two years of age, are alive.

Michael Egnor:

Sure.

Jonathan Wells:

So for me, the question is not, when does life begin, but when does human life begin? And as a developmental biologist, it seems to me to be pretty clear that it begins when the human sperm unites with the human egg to make a single-celled embryo. And at that point, human life has begun.

Michael Egnor:

Many supporters of abortion, including many scientists, argue that the embryo or the zygote, the embryo, or even the fetus, is really just a bundle of cells at that point. That it's not a real human life and that the acquisition of humanity happens sometime after conception. Many people say when the fetus is first able to feel pain. Many people say that it's up to birth, and as we've already talked about, sometimes even after birth. Do you believe that those kinds of arguments make any biological sense?

Jonathan Wells:

Speaking as a biologist? No, I don't. I can imagine how one could look at the single-celled embryo, or even the early multicellular embryo as just a bundle of cells. But after only a couple of weeks, those cells start undergoing orchestrated movements to peruse the form of the human being. And those movements are human. And certainly by eight weeks after the sperm and the egg unite, the embryo, which is now called a fetus, looks human. It's got arms and legs, eyes, and ears, mouth, many of the organs, or all of the basic organs it needs as an adult, even though they're not quite functioning yet. So it seems to me that, at the very least, it's undeniable that as of eight weeks of age, the fetus, the baby human, is fully human.

Michael Egnor:

It seems to be kind of an odd argument to say that even a zygote isn't fully human, when the fact is that we as human beings have all been zygotes. And in fact, if a zygote looked like a human being, that would be really odd because that's not how human biology works. So there's nothing that's not human about, even just a one-celled zygote. It's still a human being. Do you feel that there's a difference between human being and personhood? Between human being and a person? Is there a semantic difference there?

Jonathan Wells:

Well, if there is, it's purely semantic. If you look at definitions of human in the dictionary, almost all of them include the word person. But various philosophers have managed to separate the word person from the word human so that now certain animals even can be regarded as persons, while human embryos and fetuses cannot. So that's a philosophical and semantic move. It's certainly not a biological one.

Michael Egnor:

It does seem strange that there would be scientists who would actually make an argument that an embryo or fetus, or even a zygote, is not human, when the biology of human development really has been settled science for several centuries now. There really is no ambiguity about the biological status of the human being from the moment of conception. It's a distinct individual human being. It would seem to me that the idea of persons has to do with whether an entity has rights or not. That one could say, well, an embryo is a human being, but doesn't have the right to life. But that gets to be a really disturbing argument, because then what one is saying is that there are certain classes of human beings who don't deserve protection under the law. Who don't have a right to life. And that particular idea has a terrible history.

Jonathan Wells:

It certainly does. It was intimately involved in the Nazi Holocaust or the Soviet Famines that killed millions of people. Or the things that have happened in communist China, and things like that. Or in the ancient past. You decide that certain human beings are persons and some are not, and you've started down a very, very slippery path that gets very steep very quickly.

Michael Egnor:

Absolutely, absolutely. Since Roe vs. Wade was enacted in the United States, which essentially made abortion legal in all 50 States, do you know how many abortions have been performed in the United States?

Jonathan Wells:

I've seen various estimates, but I think it's quite reasonable to say that at least 60 million babies have been killed since Roe v. Wade, in the United States alone.

Michael Egnor:

There has been a great deal of discussion in the public arena, in the press, over the past couple of months about racial disparities in this country. About bias against minorities, particularly against black people. Are there racial disparities in abortion?

Jonathan Wells:

Absolutely. And even abortion advocates, I think, will acknowledge this. Black people are far more likely to get abortions than white people. Hispanic, somewhat more likely. So there's a definite racial, ethnic divide here. And to me, it's evidence of something very sinister at work.

Michael Egnor:

My understanding is that black babies are, in the United States, are aborted at three and a half times the rate of white babies. And that, in fact, the number of black children who are killed by abortion each year is equal to the total of all black mortality in this country, besides abortion. So half of the black people who die each year die because of abortion. But it's interesting that this never seems to come up in discussions of racial disparity. It seems to not be part of the conversation, and it's certainly ought to be, I think.

Jonathan Wells:

I agree. And some opponents of abortion have courageously painted things like, black babies lives matter, in front of abortion clinics. They end up suffering for it, sometimes arrest, because it doesn't go with the woke narrative that we're all supposed to swallow.

Michael Egnor:

Another topic that is related to abortion, and I think is a very important matter, is the question as to whether fetuses can feel pain? And the question as to whether aborted children suffer during the process of abortion. When do you believe a fetus is capable of perceiving pain?

Jonathan Wells:

Well, as you know, perhaps better than I, as a pediatric neurosurgeon, there is good evidence that fetuses feel pain quite early on. But what I know, from direct experience, is that a fetus 20 weeks old, that is about halfway through pregnancy, can definitely feel pain. Because sometimes fetuses around that age are delivered, and a few of them are viable. And I spent several decades as a laboratory technologist. One of my duties was to do pinpricks on the heels of these babies to get a drop of blood, to test them for something that could lead to mental deficiency if left untreated. And these babies scream their heads off, and they're only halfway through a normal pregnancy. So at that point, I'd say the evidence is absolutely indisputable that a fetus feels pain.

Michael Egnor:

Absolutely. The argument commonly used by abortion advocates, and by physicians and scientists, who argue that fetuses do not experience pain, is that the central nervous system is too immature to process pain at that age. But I think that that's clearly a misunderstanding of the neurobiology. Pain, as far as we know, is the only sensory modality that does not require cortical representation to be experienced. That is that it seems that we probably feel pain at deeper levels of the brain, probably at the level of the thalamus. And what the cortex does, is it actually suppresses our experience of pain and helps us interpret it. So decorticate animals seem to experience pain much, much more intensely. So the thalamus in fetal life, it develops around the sixth or eighth week of fetal development. And the thalamic tracks that connect the thalamus to the periphery, that would allow the fetus to feel pain, are present at that stage.

Michael Egnor:

So it would seem that the fetus is capable of feeling pain because pain is experienced at the thalamus. And even more so that the fetus may feel pain more intensely than an adult would because he doesn't have a developed cortex that modulates the experience of pain. And that goes along, as you had mentioned, with your experience with premature babies. I've had the same experience. If you prick an adult's heel, we might say, "Ouch," we don't scream and convulse. But a newborn baby, especially a premature baby, will go absolutely crazy if you do that. So I think fetuses not only experience pain, at least after the sixth or eighth week of gestation, but they feel it more intensely than adults do.

Jonathan Wells:

That's certainly consistent with the evidence I've seen. Now, the most powerful evidence I've seen, and I'm almost hesitant to mention it, is a video, a live video of an actual abortion via ultrasound. The fetus is 12 weeks old, it's a girl. And I won't describe the abortion because it's too horrible to describe. The video is available from Campaign Life Coalition in Canada. That's Campaign Life Coalition. And it shows on ultrasound this 12 week old fetus doing what the video calls, a silent scream. And it certainly looks like that on ultrasound. The fetus also recoils and tries to escape the abortionist's instruments. And to me, it's just absolutely an inescapable conclusion that this fetus senses pain.

Michael Egnor:

Yes. I've seen the video and it's a shocking thing. It's very hard to see that video and come away with the belief that abortion is anything but an atrocity. But an absolute atrocity. And I think actually that the improvements in ultrasound, over the past couple of decades, have helped to reduce the abortion rate that we would have otherwise. Because parents are able to see their babies now much more clearly in the womb before they're born. And you realize that they suck their thumb, they move, they have facial

expressions, they're human beings. So ultrasound has played a major role, I think, in our understanding the real nature of abortion.

Jonathan Wells:

Well, I certainly agree. And I think it might be important to point out that fetuses beyond a certain age, such as the 12 week old fetus in this video that we just mentioned, are most often aborted by dismembering them in the womb. That is tearing apart their limbs, their organs, and so on. And again, I don't want to go into detail because it's just too horrible to talk about, but in 2015, a law was introduced in the Montana state legislature that would require such fetuses to be given anesthetics before being dismembered.

Jonathan Wells:

Now, this was not an anti-abortion law, obviously, but it just wanted fetuses to be given anesthetics so they wouldn't feel the pain. Well, pro-abortion advocates opposed it, as they oppose any restrictions on abortion whatsoever. And one of the spokesmen for the opponents of abortion, or for the defenders of abortion, the opponents of the law, said, and this is a quote, "I'm sorry if women's bodies get in the way of some people's political beliefs. I'm sorry that women have autonomy, self-determination and constitutional rights, but that's the way it is. And until men can carry babies or artificial incubators can build babies, you're stuck with that reality. That women have our own rights, our own lives, our own wills." Well, that may be so, but it seems to me that the baby, likewise, has a life and a right to life, and a will. And nobody, male or female, it seems to me, has the right to deprive them of that.

Michael Egnor:

Certainly. Well, it would seem, with the nomination of Judge Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court, that the legal status of abortion may be up for review in the near future. Do you have any viewpoint on that, and what do you suspect will happen there?

Jonathan Wells:

Well, that's a tough one. I'm not a lawyer. I don't know Judge Barrett personally. I know what I read in the news, which most of which I don't trust. But personally, I think it's time to get someone on the court, or more people on the court, who are willing to do, what I think, is the duty of government. And that is to protect innocent, defenseless children. And I certainly think that's the case here in abortion. You know, I think in almost every state in the union, killing a human being deliberately is murder, and doing it with a plan, that is planning it ahead of time, is first-degree murder. Now I'm not saying that people who perform abortions are therefore guilty of first degree murder, but the logic is certainly the same. They're killing a human being after planning to do so. And it seems to me that the Supreme Court has a duty to weigh in on this and prevent this sort of widespread atrocity.

Michael Egnor:

I certainly agree. I think the problem with Roe vs. Wade, that even many advocates for abortion admit, is that the legal basis for granting this right to abortion, that Roe vs. Wade did, is really non-existent. That is that abortion is not a right protected by the Constitution. And it should be a matter for individual state law. So if Roe vs. Wade is overturned, which I hope and pray very much that it will be, that doesn't mean that abortion will then become illegal in the US. What it means is that abortion will then return to the individual states and individual state legislators will then regulate abortion according to the wishes of the electorate in those states, which is the way it should be. I think it'll change the debate

considerably. It'll go from a national debate over court nominees to a debate in state legislatures over the morality of abortion, but that's the way it should be.

Jonathan Wells:

Well, I agree. As a person, as I said I'm not a lawyer, but I'd like to add one thing here as a biologist. That during the debates around Roe v. Wade in 1973, and before and after, an important argument in favor of abortion was based on evolutionary biology. There are some drawings made to support Darwin's view that we are all modified descendants of common ancestors.

Jonathan Wells:

The drawings were made by German Darwinist, Ernst Haeckel in 1968, and they purportedly show that human embryos look very much like tiny fish. And these drawings were used to persuade people that human embryos really don't deserve the rights of a full human being. We're just highly-developed fish. Well, the drawings themselves were faked, as Haeckel's own contemporaries recognized. They grossly distorted the look of early human embryos and ignored the fact that, at the earliest stages, mammals in general look very, very different from fish, amphibians, turtles and so on. So phony science was used in the 1970s to persuade people of abortion.

Michael Egnor:

Yes, absolutely. And I think the debate on abortion is going to change radically if Roe vs. Wade is overturned, and I suspect that it will be overturned. It's going to be a very different and difficult debate, but I think that it can't help but be better than what it is, and that abortion will be restricted in many states, and children's lives will be saved because of that.

Jonathan Wells:

I certainly hope so.

Michael Egnor:

Well, thank you. And thank you very much for your blog posts on Evolution News and Views. And I think we both agree that this is one of the most important topics we face in the public arena today. The lives of millions of people depend on the decisions we, as a society, make about abortion. And I also think that abortion mentality leads to the devaluation of the lives of other people.

Michael Egnor:

I think it leads to the devaluation of lives of the handicapped and the lives of the elderly. If we sacrifice our children's lives for convenience, we will begin to sacrifice other inconvenient people. So abortion is lethal, not only to the innocent children who are killed by it, but to a number of different people who have health problems and cognitive disabilities. And it's a terrible thing.

Jonathan Wells:

I agree. And as my Discovery Institute colleague, Wesley Smith, has said, basically what we have in this situation is a culture of death and that's not the way it should be.

Michael Egnor:

Right. Thank you, Jonathan. It's been a pleasure to speak with you, and I appreciate your taking the time to speak with us.

Announcer:

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