

## **Is the Unborn Human?**

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Most advocates for abortion choice do not dispute that the unborn is a human being. Rather, they hinge their arguments on the philosophical question of whether it is a “person” which therefore possesses a right to life. However, some who support an unfettered right to abortion object to viewing the unborn as even human. The first such objection discussed by Beckwith is that advanced by Bernard Nathanson, specifically the suggestion that the unborn is not a human until implantation, “because it is at that time that it establishes its presence by transmitting hormonal signals to its mother” (Beckwith 2007, 73).

Beckwith notes two flaws in this reasoning. First, one’s existence is not dependent upon someone else being aware of one’s existence. This confuses epistemology with ontology. How we come to know something is true is distinct from whether that thing is true. Second, in the case of a “test-tube baby,” the zygote exists in the culture dish before it is implanted into the uterus. Nathanson concedes that in this scenario the zygote has “announced” its existence prior to implantation. However, he has thereby admitted that there is no relevant difference between an implanted and a non-implanted zygote (Ibid., 73-74).

The first flaw observed by Beckwith can be illustrated via *reductio ad absurdum*. If existence is dependent upon the awareness of others at the beginning of life, then there is no logical reason why it would not be a criterion for existence throughout one’s life. To say otherwise, with no relevant distinction between the two, would be special pleading. Thus, a hiker who gets lost in the woods may pass in and out of humanity. Prior to her hike she was human because her friends and family were aware of her. However, once she became lost, no one was aware of her continued existence. She may have been dead or alive so much as anyone was aware. Thus, per Nathanson, she was no longer a human being (and by implication

we would be under no moral obligation to look for her). If she happened to find her way out of the woods, then she would become human again as soon as a passerby noticed her. This absurd situation illustrates the logical implications of Nathanson's position and why ontological existence must be something separate from epistemological awareness.

#### REFERENCES

Beckwith, Francis J. 2007. *Defending Life: A Moral and Legal Case Against Abortion Choice*. New York: Cambridge University Press.