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# Are Embryos “Babies” and “Children”?

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Anti-abortion advocates frequently insist that abortion is “killing babies” and “murdering children.” “Heartbeat” bills ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heartbeat\\_bill](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heartbeat_bill)), or abortion bans, often use this language. Alabama’s Supreme Court (<https://publichealth.jhu.edu/2024/the-alabama-supreme-courts-ruling-on-frozen-embryos>) even ruled that *frozen* embryos are children.

While philosophers have much discussed how “persons” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Person>) and “human beings” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human>)” are best defined, there is little comparable discussion (<https://www.abortionarguments.com/p/full-text.html#defining>) about defining “babies” and “children.”

Here I argue that embryos and *beginning* fetuses are not “babies” or “children”: at least, nobody must agree that they are.

1.

First, let’s acknowledge that it’s perfectly fine for anyone to *call* their own embryo or fetus their “baby” or “child.” Nicknames (<https://www.parents.com/baby-nicknames-8663768>) are common for fetuses: “bean,” “bun,” and “bunny” are popular.

We use terms of endearment like these to express emotions, which is entirely appropriate, *not* to state literal truths: a fetus is not a “bean,” of course!

So, it *might be* that when expectant parents or their healthcare providers call an embryo or beginning fetus a “baby” or “child,” they are using that language to express excitement, hope, and expectation, but not say anything that’s literally true.

When anti-abortion activists call an embryo or a fetus a “baby” or “child,” they claim to mean that literally. Must everyone agree? No.

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Anti-abortion activists say that embryos and fetuses are children because if they *are* children, that would support the anti-abortion position—everyone agrees that babies and children are generally wrong to kill. So when anti-abortion activists call embryos and beginning fetuses “babies” and “children,” they are typically just *assuming* that embryos and beginning fetuses are wrong to kill, apparently expecting that people should agree.

But they can't assume that. This is the fallacy called “begging the question ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Begging\\_the\\_question](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Begging_the_question)),” which involves *assuming* what needs to be argued for. The suggested reasoning, “Abortion—that is, killing fetuses to end pregnancies—is wrong *because* fetuses are wrong to kill” is circular reasoning ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Circular\\_reasoning](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Circular_reasoning)), which is always bad.

## 2.

When anti-abortion advocates give reasons to support thinking that killing embryos and early fetuses is wrong, their arguments tend to be poor (<https://bioethicstoday.org/blog/following-all-the-facts-about-abortion-scientific-ethical-and-logical-wherever-they-lead/>): e.g., “Human fetuses are *biologically human organisms*, so they are *persons*, which makes them wrong to kill!”

Yes, we know their species: they aren't canine or bovine. But saying “*biologically human organisms* are persons *because* they are biologically human organisms” is again circular and doesn't tell us what *makes* biologically human organisms persons (<https://www.salon.com/2022/04/02/when-does-life-begin-when-it-comes-to-abortion-it-depends-on-what-you-mean-by-life/>) when they are.

Likewise, asserting that embryos and early fetuses are “human beings”—meaning *biologically human persons*—doesn't justify thinking they are persons. Yes, *human persons are persons*, but that doesn't mean that embryos and early fetuses are persons.

Current concerns about artificial intelligence (<https://1000wordphilosophy.com/2024/02/13/artificial-intelligence/>) can be helpfully applied here. In wondering whether any AI will ever be a person, most people are asking whether it will be *conscious, aware, thinking, and feeling* like us. According to many, that's roughly what a person is and what makes *something* a *someone* who is wrong to kill.

But embryos and beginning fetuses don't have *any* of these characteristics ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary\\_Anne\\_Warren#Criteria\\_of\\_personhood](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Anne_Warren#Criteria_of_personhood)): so they aren't persons. Since

Search babies and children *are* persons, we shouldn't think that embryos and beginning fetuses are babies or



children. Likewise, even though embryos and beginning fetuses are "offspring (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/offspring>)" in a biological sense, that doesn't mean they have the moral status of offspring who are persons or person-like.

There are alternative theories of personhood—e.g., that *persons are "individual substances of a rational nature"* (<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/philosophy/article/abs/definition-of-person/FC5303FED961CDC1B254BD1923A5B940>) or "*members of a rational species*"—but nobody *must* accept these more abstract proposals and attempts to apply them (<https://academic.oup.com/jmp/article/36/3/261/895026>) to embryos and early fetuses. Furthermore, these theories are offensive to people with severe mental disabilities who are valuable persons for what they are actually like, not because of what *other* human beings are like or because they *could have* been more sophisticated "rational" thinkers had things been different for them.

So, in sum, nobody is rationally compelled to agree that embryos and beginning fetuses are "babies" or "children" or that we all must call them that.

### 3.

Nevertheless, let's examine some other considerations given in defense of the claim that embryos and early fetuses are babies or children.

Anti-abortion advocates sometimes claim that we should think this because of the (alleged) origin of the word "fetus (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5499215/>)," as "little one." But original meanings of words don't determine current meanings: e.g., 'bully' used to mean 'sweetheart' or 'darling' (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/wordplay/words-that-used-to-mean-something-different>), but current school rules against bullying don't rule out celebrating Valentine's Day.

So, claims about *what is what* (and *who is what*) are not settled by word origins and past usage. And how some people talk and conceptualize things need not dictate how everyone talks and understands.

Another set of concerns comes from people who experience miscarriages.



Some anti-abortion advocates claim (<https://www.dailysignal.com/2022/08/11/new-york-times-essay-likening-miscarriage-to-abortion-is-despicable-and-denigrates-women-like-me>) that some pro-choice people are callous towards people who experience miscarriages as the loss of their *baby* or *child*: “It’s not a baby, so you shouldn’t be grieving like that!!” (Anti-abortion advocates can also be callous when pro-choice women have miscarriages: “Why are you bothered since you don’t think you lost a baby??!”).

Now, grieving people first need sympathy and support: they don’t need to be “argued” with, at least initially, if at all. But some people who suffer miscarriages grieve the loss of an expected future that *depended* on that fetus surviving: they can’t have a *valuable-for-their-own-sake* baby or child without an embryo and fetus, and so that makes them at least *valuable-as-a-means* towards that end. (This helps explain why murdering pregnant women is especially bad and why we’d have special laws against that, *even if* we don’t think that beginning fetuses are persons).

But this doesn’t mean that embryos and early fetuses *really are* babies or children. In this way of thinking, a miscarriage is a profound loss, but a loss of a potential future with a potential someone, not a loss of someone who currently exists. Seeing it this way is helpful for some people, and it might be true, too.

Others, however, see an early miscarriage as a loss of a *person*, a *someone*, a real *baby* or *child*: they were a *mother* then, not a mother-to-be, and now they, tragically, are not. For *some* of these people, it could be worthwhile to help them think through whether that’s the best way to understand their loss (<https://www.apa.org/ptsd-guideline/patients-and-families/cognitive-behavioral>). If their views change, that could benefit them emotionally.

For people who are convinced that they lost a genuine baby or child, there is little value in “arguing” with them. But, the quality of evidence for their views will not be so strong that *everyone else* must agree and think that *all* embryos and beginning fetuses are babies or children.

## 5.

Finally, some common anti-abortion reasoning begins by observing that if a born baby is a *baby*, then so is a 9-

month-old fetus, and if an 8-month-old fetus is a baby, and if . . . which often leads to this bad argument:  
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“There’s no clear point to say when a fetus no longer ‘looks like a baby,’ so you should conclude that embryos ‘look like babies’ or treat them as if they are.”



This is bad reasoning (<https://1000wordphilosophy.com/2019/03/11/vagueness/>) since we often don’t have to “draw lines” to see clear cases: there’s no clear line when “babyhood” and childhood end, yet we know a 50-year-old isn’t some kid anymore.

A simpler response to this line of reasoning, though, is this: we should agree that *later, more developed* fetuses *do* look like babies but recognize that babies aren’t valuable because they *look* like babies: they are valuable for their own sakes because of the psychological—emotional and cognitive—presences they bring to the world. Anyone concerned with fetal pain (<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/201429>) recognizes this point.

But embryos and *beginning* fetuses completely lack consciousness (<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-edge-of-sentience-9780192870421>), so they lack value in their own right. And most abortions (<https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/induced-abortion-united-states>) occur early in pregnancy before, consciousness arises and even before the fetus “looks like a baby.” So most abortions—early abortions—decidedly do not involve killing “babies” or “children.”

6.

Again, people are free to call embryos and beginning fetuses pretty much whatever they want, especially *their own* embryos and beginning fetuses. So whenever anyone expresses excitement about what they describe as their new “baby” or “child” *in utero*, that’s great! We should be happy for them and with them!

We can be happy for them, however, and deny that this type of language is literally true, always required, and—especially—an appropriate basis for laws and policies against abortion. So, nobody must accept a mere assumption that *all* embryos and beginning fetuses are babies and children, or any circular, question-begging reasoning given to think that, or any dubious philosophical arguments given to think that *all embryos and beginning fetuses are young people who, like all people, are generally wrong to kill*.

In sum, there’s no good reason to accept the anti-abortion claim that embryos and beginning fetuses are babies and children—and that we all must call them that—and ample reason to deny it. These insights should

inform and guide both personal thinking and action and our collective laws and policies.  
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