

personal opinion or a position deriving only from religion. It is a matter of biological fact. Politics should not be permitted to trump it.

In view of the established facts of human embryogenesis and early intrauterine development, the real question is not whether human beings in the embryonic and fetal stages *are* human beings. *Plainly they are.* The question is whether we will honor or abandon our civilizational and national commitment to the equal worth and dignity of all human beings -- even the smallest, youngest, weakest, and most vulnerable.

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When Life Begins

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Will politics trump science?

When does the life of a human individual begin? Although the question is of obvious importance for our public policy debates over abortion and embryonic-stem-cell research, politicians have avoided it like the plague. Of late, though, things seem to be changing. Recently some of our nation's most prominent political leaders, from the Speaker of the House to both contenders for the office of president, have weighed in on the question.

Faced with the complicated and not-very-widely-known facts of human embryology, most people are inclined to agree with the sentiment expressed by Speaker Pelosi, who has stated "I don't think anybody can tell you when... human life begins."

Yet is Speaker Pelosi correct? Is it actually the case that no one can tell you with any degree of authority when the life of a human being actually begins?

No, it is not. Treating the question as some sort of grand mystery, or expressing or feigning uncertainty about it, may be politically expedient, but it is intellectually indefensible. Modern science long ago resolved the question. We actually know when the life of a new human individual begins.

A recently published [white paper](#), "*When does human life begin? A scientific perspective*," offers a thorough discussion of the facts of human embryogenesis and early development, and its conclusion is inescapable: From a purely biological perspective, *scientists can identify the point at which a human life begins*. The relevant studies are legion. The biological facts are uncontested. The method of analysis applied to the data is universally accepted.

Your life began, as did the life of every other human being, when the fusion of egg and sperm produced a new, complete, living organism -- an embryonic human being. You were never an ovum or a sperm cell, those were both functionally and genetically parts of other human beings -- your parents. But you *were* once an embryo, just as you were once an adolescent, a child, an infant, and a fetus. By an internally directed process, you developed from the embryonic stage into and through the fetal, infant, child,

and adolescent stages of development and ultimately into adulthood with your determinateness, unity, and identity fully intact. You are the same being -- the same *human* being -- who once was an embryo.

It is true that each of us, in the embryonic and fetal stages of development, were dependent on our mothers, but we were not maternal body parts. Though dependent, we were distinct individual human beings. That is why physicians who treat pregnant women know that they are caring not for one patient, but for two. (Of course, in cases of twins and triplets physicians are caring for more than two!)

Why, then, do we seem so far from a consensus on questions of abortion and embryo-destructive research?

Perhaps because the debate over when human life begins has never been about the biological facts. It has been about the *value* we ascribe to human beings at the dawn of their lives. When we debate questions of abortion, assisted reproductive technologies, human embryonic stem cell research and human cloning, we are not really disagreeing about whether human embryos are human beings. The scientific evidence is simply too overwhelming for there to be any real debate on this point. What is at issue in these debates is the question of whether we ought to respect and defend human beings in the earliest stages of their lives. In other words, the question is not about scientific facts; it is about the nature of human dignity and the equality of human beings.

On one side are those who believe that human beings have dignity and rights *by virtue of their humanity*. They believe that all human beings, irrespective not only of race, ethnicity, and sex, but also irrespective of age, size, and stage of development, are equal in fundamental worth and dignity. The right to life is a human right -- therefore all human beings, from the point at which they come into being (conception) to the point at which they cease to be (death), possess it.

On the other side are those who believe that those human beings who have worth and dignity have them *in virtue of having achieved a certain level of development*. They deny that all human beings have worth and dignity and hold that a distinction should be drawn between those human beings who have achieved the status of "personhood" and those (such as embryos, fetuses, and, according to some, infants and severely retarded or demented individuals) whose status is that of human non-persons.

A common error these days is for people to convert the question of when a human life begins from a matter of biology to a matter of religious faith or personal belief. Senator Biden recently asserted that while he believes life begins at the moment of conception, this was a "personal and private" belief deriving from his religion that may not legitimately be imposed on others "in a pluralistic society."

Biden is perfectly correct about when a life begins -- at conception. But he is wrong to suppose that this is a mere matter of