

FROM THE EDITORS

The first article in this tenth volume of *Bioethics* is an attempt to pinpoint the stage in the development of the human fetus at which it becomes reasonable to believe that there is a capacity for conscious experience. Given the widespread and often intense controversy that has raged around the issue of abortion, it is astonishing how little attention this question has received.

Granted, as John Burgess and S.A. Tawia are careful to point out, there is no immediate inference from an answer to the question of when fetal consciousness begins, to a conclusion on the rights or wrongs of terminating a pregnancy at any particular time. Arguments against abortion based on the potential of the fetus are untouched by information about the actual state of the fetal mind at the time of the abortion, and arguments in favour of abortion based on the absolute right of the pregnant woman to control her own body would remain equally unscathed by the knowledge that the fetus is conscious at the time of the abortion.

Nevertheless, there are views about abortion that are sensitive to information about what the fetus is like at the time of the abortion. And it is easy to imagine that a woman already feeling disquiet at the prospect of ending the life of the being that could develop into her next child, would feel that if in addition she was causing pain to an existing conscious being, that would simply be too much for bear.

In our view, the abortion issue cannot be dodged simply by using language that suggests that it is all a matter of being for or against a woman's right to choose. We think that abortion is usually justifiable because the fetus is not the kind of being that has a right to life. But many beings — at least some animals, for instance — may not have a right to life, and yet we still think it is normally wrong to inflict pain or suffering on them. The infliction of pain or suffering on any being capable of feeling pain is something to be avoided, other things being equal. (And only when other things were *very* unequal could it be defensible to inflict severe and protracted pain on a sentient being.)

Imagine, then, that it could be shown that the fetus is capable of

feeling pain at the stage of pregnancy when most terminations are carried out. That would raise well-grounded ethical concerns about the way in which terminations are carried out. It would be ethically obligatory to take all possible steps to eliminate any pain that the fetus may experience. Presumably there are techniques that, without causing additional risk to the pregnant woman, would eliminate pain. If not, then this would call into question abortions that are carried out for reasons of convenience (for example, if a couple had been planning to travel at the time when the baby would arrive) rather than on the grounds of a serious risk to the life or health of the pregnant woman or the welfare of her existing family. If, on the other hand, it could be shown that the fetus is not capable of feeling anything until quite late in pregnancy, beyond the point at which an abortion might be performed, then this ground for concern over current abortion practice could be put aside.

This is not the only practical implication of the outcome of the investigation into fetal consciousness. It is clearly also relevant to the issue of whether it could be justifiable to carry out scientific research using fetuses that have been aborted, but are still alive.

That is why we were pleased when the journal's blind referees supported publication of 'When did you first begin to feel it? — Locating the beginning of human consciousness'. We admit that this is not a totally independent judgment: as the closing footnote to the paper acknowledges, it had its origins in a research project of our own. But there is, to our knowledge, no comparable study of this question that is anywhere near so well informed both philosophically and physiologically. We hope that publication of the paper will contribute to greater recognition of the significance of the question raised.

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