Letter to the Editor

Terms of endearment: Reason and science speak for embryonic humans and fetal humans

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We are indebted to Dr. Stephen A. McCurdy for his analysis regarding abortion and public health, particularly for his profound section “Our shared values: We cherish truth and guard against the politicization of science”:

the inconvenient truth is ... The biological nature of the fetus is in the realm of verifiable scientific fact and admits but one answer: the fetus *is* a unique human life. To argue otherwise is irrational and deeply anti-scientific. The question—is the fetus a *person*?—is, in contrast, a much-debated philosophical matter. (McCurdy 2016, 22, 23)

I strongly agree, and applaud the author’s exposition. Truth, reason, and science must serve as our foundation. In college biology laboratory, our task was the dissection of an animal cadaver. We learned the precise terminology: *fetal pig*. There was no other term for this honorable neo-pig that never uttered an oink—yet whose internal organs revealed the three-dimensional marvels of heart, lungs, liver, and kidneys. Each specimen was not called “pig” as it was <1 percent the size of an adult pig. It was not called “fetus,” as that would be a far too generic term. Fetal

what? Fetal gerbil? Fetal monkey? Fetal bison?

Applied to humans, the non-specific term *fetus* conjures vague thoughts regarding the *in utero conceptus* as somehow pluripotent. The truth is quite different. The *fetal human* is not only species-specific, but also highly specified, and one of a kind. Such is an incubating human-being-in-development.

Stand-alone terms that are scientifically imprecise and misleading, in reference to human conceptus, are

- *Fetus*: Generic noun—a stage of any mammalian in-development: Canine, Porcine, Bovine, or Human. Fetus is Latin for “little one”—a much more descriptive, singular, and endearing concept than “fetus.”
- *Unborn*: Though true, this term is also demeaning and dismissive. It invites reductionist, even utilitarian thinking. After the *zygotic human* stage, is the *embryonic human* (up to gestational week 18 and organ development), *then fetal human* (beyond 18 weeks gestation)—each a proper stage and station of human development lacking no “born-ness.”

- *Baby*: Every healthy fetal human, God willing, will become a neonatal human, infant human, and a baby human—before becoming a preschool human, teenage human, adult human, etc. It is confusing and imprecise to refer to a fetal human as a baby (human)—as it implies the fetal human lacks something, like the crying, cute expressions, toddling, and interactions that are characteristic of a baby human. Embryonic humans and fetal humans are complete, and not devoid of any attributes or characteristics proper to their stage of development.
- *Person*—The rhetorical and unfair question of whether the fetal human is a person (under in the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution) was raised in the Supreme Court’s second hearing of oral arguments in *Roe v. Wade* on October 11, 1972, by Justice Byron White (Irons 2006). Justice White, who ultimately voted against the majority opinion, queried Roes’ attorney Sarah Weddington with an eye toward an admission that the state of Texas would have a “compelling interest” to protect a person. Such was the high bar presented by adult humans to justify State protection of a fetal human: show us your

personhood. Imagine the fetal human reply:

While I can hear you, I can’t yet sing until my lungs mature. ‘Tis unfair to query personhood of my current station. If you permit my life’s continuation, I’ll happily sing for you Louis Armstrong’s *What a Wonderful World*, verse 4, in C Major. “I hear babies cry, I watch them grow; They’ll learn much more than I’ll ever know, and I think to myself ... what a wonderful world.”

It is often said that the first victims of conflict are language and truth. If one loses the dispute of terms, the debate is half-lost. *Embryonic human* and *fetal human* are the proper terms. If, with humility, prudence, and fortitude, we promote these phrases, we may edify and give witness to truth.

REFERENCES

- Irons, P. 2006. “The raw edges of human existence”: The issue of abortion. In *The People’s History of the Supreme Court*, 436–49. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
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