



Thinking Clearly About Consciousness and Abortion

"Regardless of whether we might or might not be able to manifest consciousness at a particular moment (as when we are asleep, under anesthesia, in a coma, or growing at early timepoints in utero), our humanity is still present and deserving of unconditional respect."



Imagine a deadly scenario like this: a successful businessman is rendered unconscious by medical professionals to help him heal after a serious car accident, using powerful pharmaceutical agents to cause a medically-induced coma. A few days later, a business competitor, wanting him dead, enters the hospital and kills the comatose patient. During his trial, when questioned about the murder, the competitor tries to argue, with an unnecessarily detailed explanation, that, "the medically-induced coma rendered him quite incapable of feeling any pain, because those parts of his brain involved in sensory processing and pain perception were clearly decoupled from consciousness. So killing those who are unconscious, at least on the grounds that they might feel pain, should not be seen as problematic nor should it be restricted as a personal choice."

Anyone would appreciate the absurdity of such an argument, much as they ought to recognize the unreasonableness of a similar conclusion reached by neuroscientist Dr. Daniel Bor in a recent piece in *The Dallas Morning News*:

"Furthermore, the fetus is deliberately sedated by a series of chemicals produced by the placenta, so even if it had the

capacity for consciousness, there is almost no chance it could ever be conscious in the womb. Consequently, it can't consciously feel pain. ... There are therefore no scientific reasons for restricting abortion on the grounds that the fetus will experience pain, at least until very late in pregnancy. This evidence has heavily influenced my views here, and consequently I am very much pro-choice."

As a neuroscientist and an ethicist myself, it's clear how Dr. Bor's conclusion does not follow from his premises. He seeks forcibly to crown consciousness as king, turning it into the highest good, elevating it above life itself. Consequently, he misses the deeper truth that human consciousness (and particularly self-consciousness) is a feature of certain kinds of beings, namely human beings, *who are valuable in and of themselves*. Our humanity precedes our consciousness, and affords the necessary basis for it, with our value and inviolability flowing not from what we might be capable of doing (manifesting consciousness or awareness) but from who we intrinsically are

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(human beings and members of the human family).

Regardless of whether we might or might not be able to manifest consciousness at a particular moment (as when we are asleep, under anesthesia, in a coma, or growing at early time-points *in utero*), our humanity is still present and deserving of unconditional respect. Those who lack consciousness or awareness are still human, and should be cherished and protected as much as anyone else with limitations or disabilities.

Some might reply that a sleeping or comatose person's consciousness is merely dormant. If they wake up, they will have memories, awareness, etc. For a very early human embryo, on the other hand, no consciousness exists yet, since the brain has not developed, or may not have developed sufficiently. Until that development occurs, the argument continues, there is "nobody home," and therefore nothing important can be stripped away by abortion.

But it would be false to conclude that "nobody is home." As that embryonic human continues to grow up, she will develop a brain, as well as memories, awareness, and consciousness. Such carefully choreographed and remarkable embryonic develop-

ment will occur precisely in virtue of the kind of being she *already is*, namely, a very small human being. All of us, in fact, are embryos who have grown up. The human embryo is special because of her humanity, not because of her consciousness, which will invariably arise as long as she is afforded even the smallest chance at life. We actively deny her the right to manifest her future personality, her individuality, her consciousness and her genius by selecting her for termination.

Hence, we should appreciate an argument like Dr. Bor's for what it really is, namely, an attempt to carve out a subclass of human beings (those deemed weaker than the rest of us due to their diminished personal consciousness) so that they can be singled out for death by abortion. This move constitutes an unjust form of discrimination against a voiceless class of humans, cloaked in a specious intellectual construct that misconstrues both the essential character of being human, and the essential moral obligations we have towards each other.

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