



Written by [Jack Kerwick, Ph.D.](#) on March 19, 2013

Amateur Philosopher Syndrome (APS) and Abortion: Richard Dawkins' Tweet

Over the weekend, biologist Richard Dawkins made news when he tweeted that “any fetus is less human than an adult pig.”

Dawkins' latest remark on the abortion issue nicely illustrates what I will call the Amateur Philosopher Syndrome (APS). Though anyone can suffer from APS, scientists are especially vulnerable to it, for they think that their expertise in their craft renders them experts on all things, great and small.

The truth be told, though, a biologist like Dawkins is no more an expert on abortion or any other moral or theological question than is a janitor, a construction worker, or a school bus driver.

Scientists study bodies or material entities — inert, passive, objects whose behavior is determined by laws of cause and effect. Obviously, matters are entirely otherwise in the realms of morality and/or religion. Here there are persons or agents, purposes, reasons, virtues and vices, good and evil, rights and duties, and so forth.

Inasmuch as abortion is an issue, it is a moral, not a scientific, issue.

Note, when Dawkins says that a fetus is less human than an adult pig, he is not using the word “human” in a biological sense at all. If this was the sense in which he intended to employ the term, then it would become at once painfully obvious that not only is he unqualified, as a scientist, to comment on issues of morality, he is unqualified as well to speak as a *scientist!* Any fool knows that a human fetus has got to be, well, *human*. However sophisticated a pig may be, a pig is never more than a pig.

No, within the context of Dawkins' tweet, “human” is a moral concept. It has the same moral import here as it does when we say of a particularly cruel person that he is “inhuman.” There is nothing in the least bit scientific about this.

Presumably, Dawkins thinks that a fetus is less human than an adult pig because he thinks that the latter is more sentient than the former. Or maybe it is because, unlike fetuses, adult pigs are visible, capable of communicating their wants and needs, and able to elicit sentiments from humans. Whatever his reasons, and however good or bad these reasons may be, the main point bears repeating: There is *nothing* scientific about Dawkins' tweet.

Instead, what we find in his remark about fetuses and pigs is a classic instance of but another rather





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pitiful attempt of a scientist aspiring to speak as a philosopher.

If Dawkins was a philosopher, then he would know that even those philosophers who support abortion would recognize his tweet for the poor substitute for an argument that it is. Even if we concede that adult pigs are more capable of experiencing pleasure and pain (sentience), more communicative, more visible, etc. than young human fetuses, we are still left asking: And...?

If sentience, visibility, and the capacity to communicate endow beings with moral standing comparable to that of humans, then our duties to rats should be no different from those we have toward other humans. After all, rats are sentient, visible, and, in their own way, capable of communicating their wants and needs. And if these are the criteria that define a “real” human being, then this means that those humans who fail to meet, or barely meet, these criteria are inferior humans, or maybe not human at all.

The bottom line in the abortion debate lies elsewhere. Whether one is for or against abortion, everyone must come to terms with the blunt fact that a civilization that recognizes “a woman’s right to choose” is a civilization that recognizes the right of parents to kill their posterity. And it allows mothers to exercise this right to kill their offspring either directly or by way of a specialist who is trained in this particular art of killing those human beings who have not yet made it out of their mothers’ wombs.

Then we need to ask ourselves a question: Can any civilization that permits this practice maintain its professed respect for human dignity or “the sanctity of human life?”

Contrary to what Dawkins and other scientists suffering from APS might have us believe, no amount of science will answer this one for us.



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