

MAYBE VIABILITY IS THE WRONG QUESTION

An ethicist argues that we need new terminology in our moral debate.

For many, the abortion debate boils down to a choice between religion and reason. Religious people oppose abortion because they believe that the newone (my hopefully less ideologically loaded term for the fetus/unborn child) is a human being. Human beings are made in the image of God, and therefore deserve protection at any stage of the life cycle. Purportedly, secular people defend the right to abortion because their views are informed by science. And science tells us that the newone becomes independent at a certain stage in pregnancy.

The problem is that, when you accept those terms and conditions, you assume that adopting viability as the cut-off point for abortion is, in itself, at once scientific, obvious, and morally significant. Today, technological advancements may well make it more difficult to discern just where the viability standard lies, but there is a more basic question. Can viability bear the weight we place upon it? Does it track with the reality of pregnancy and birth as we typically experience it?

I don't think it does. Human beings enter the world in a state of radical dependency. We do not arrive in the world like the Greek gods—fully formed, instantly recognizable, immediately adult. Even after birth, let alone at 24 weeks, we are radically insufficient and cannot live unaided. The achievement of autonomy in the opening act of a human's life is chimerical.

We are faced with two options. Either we declare a cut-off point when human beings really become independent, autonomous, and able to fend for themselves—which I would put at seven or eight years old. Or, finding infanticide unpalatable, as I do, we commit to protecting the human rights of all human beings whose lives are radically dependent on us.

—James Mumford