

# Peter Singer: Personhood

- Being a person is linked with being *aware of oneself*

**'It is doubtful if a foetus becomes conscious until quite late in pregnancy ... even the presence of consciousness would only put a foetus at a level comparable to a rather simple non-human animal - not that of a dog, let alone a chimpanzee ...'**  
(Singer, 1995, writing in *The Spectator*)

- He uses two difficult cases to help make his point (at first sight, these cases seem unconnected with the main argument)

- *cortically dead infants*: usually suffered massive bleeding in the brain; with good medical care they can survive for many years, even to a 'natural' life-span

- *anencephalics*: babies without a brain; there would normally be brainstem function; the babies can survive perhaps for a few months with medical care

## His argument runs like this:

- at present, a working brainstem means that a baby is not legally dead ...
- most people would say that such babies ought to be allowed to die ...
- yet they would say that active measures to bring about the death would be wrong; but is there really a moral difference between letting die and actively bringing that death about? ...
- why not make death = cortex death? then it would be easier to obtain organs for transplant; it would also free up hospital beds ...
- anyway, if we allow the anencephalics, cortically dead infants (and those caught in a persistent vegetative state) are living human beings whose lives may be terminated, then we should be able to do the same with the human foetus ...

**'Yes, we can say, the foetus is a living human being, but that alone is not sufficient to show that it is wrong to end its life. After all, why - in the absence of religious beliefs about being made in the image of God, or having an immortal soul - should mere membership of the species *Homo Sapiens* be crucial to whether the life of a being may or may not be taken? (*ibid*)**

### **Singers deal with two objections to this view**

- objection 1 the argument that **'while admitting that the actual capacities of a foetus are inferior to those of a dog, they can say that the foetus has the potential to far surpass a dog' (*ibid*)**

answer true - **'but in a world that is already overpopulated ... the argument that we should bring all potential people into existence is not persuasive' (*ibid*)**

- objection 2 the argument that says **'those who believe a living human foetus can be killed should say at what point, and why, in the development from foetus to child killing becomes wrong. Why, for example, should the life of a premature baby born at 23 weeks' gestation be more worthy of protection than the life of a foetus at 24 weeks?' (*ibid*)**

answer a good point, difficult to answer ... there is no sudden change to fix on ... why not, then, **'like the ancient Greeks ... have a ceremony a month after birth, at which the infant is admitted to the community. Before that time, infants would not be recognised as having the same right to life as older people. Such a date would still be early enough to ensure that the rights of all those who are self-aware are fully protected, but it would be late enough to detect most cases of severe and irreparable disability ...' (*ibid*)**