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id AA25595; Sat, 27 Jun 92 13:20:13 EDT
Message-Id: <9206271720.AA25595@jl.rockefeller.edu>
To: mary@rockvax.rockefeller.edu
Subject: Please fax to Susan Rotermund. 212:725-2972 (SAM/50b)
Date: Sat, 27 Jun 92 13:20:13 -0400
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(X) → Harold
7/1/92 Morowitz
mg
JZ
↓

As you will surely be using (at most) a small extract, I ask that you secure my explicit permission for what you do decide to use.

Joshua Lederberg

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Comment to Oxford University Press, re Morowitz and Trefil,
Facts of Life. 1992 6/27/92

"The facts of life" makes two important contributions to the tendentious debate about abortion:

- 1) It translates the focus of argument to the judgment about what constitutes "humanness": in the evolution of the species, and in the development of the individual.
- 2) Then it outlines the current state of biological knowledge concerning those transitions. In providing a comprehensive resource about that knowledge, the book should be indispensable to that vast majority of citizens who are troubled by the simplistic polemics that have (mis)informed much of the debate.

The authors are quick to stress that humanness is subject to arbitrary personal and social definition. They then argue that the emergence of the cerebral cortex during the third trimester is the critical turning point -- as it certainly is for the neurobiological potential of sentient self-awareness, of the differentiation of personality, of any of the rational functions that distinguish the human from other species.

I would agree that this is a conservative and probably the most pragmatically useful focus of consensus. My own concept of humanness would however allow (following Vercors) greater emphasis on social engagement. A younger fetus becomes "human" to the extent that other humans can bond to it, will communicate with it, identify with it as another human. But it then becomes troublesome at the extreme to distinguish that bonding from deep felt love for a pet cat or dog -- which in fact can arouse passions as deepseated as those around abortion. On the other side, the developing human does not become fully engaged with human society until some time after birth, and the onset of explicit communication followed by speech, and the exchange of information and of the array of behavioral norms that constitute socialization into the human tradition. But what an interpersonal bonding there is long before the completion of that process, and how repugnant the thought of any interference with it! There is then an extended "gray zone", as the authors fully acknowledge, and attest to in their bilateral debate.

I do find myself wondering about the circularity of relying on "humanness": we will redefine it in accord with the operational consequences. At some point the bonding between mother and fetus is a purely private matter; at another it legitimately becomes a subject of social concern and sanctions -- these reflect back on grades of humanness, not a sharp dichotomy. When all is said and done, I find myself in agreement with the 3d trimester finding as a practical

yardstick, and in admiration for the integration of biological scientific knowledge that the authors have assembled.

One point I would be more reserved about: the so-called wall, close to the erstwhile "quick" criterion. It certainly will be a long while before we have effective devices for extracorporeal gestation, but not forever. Meanwhile, there likely will be procedures for various stages of fetal transplant (extending what already exists for embryos). So the potential viability of a fetus will depend on access to a foster uterus, or some analogue like cross-transfusion to a foster circulation. These will be baleful events, fraught with a high likelihood of developmental defect, but no more than the straining to rescue every potentially viable fetus, however damaged it may be -- a likelihood that is aggravated the earlier we set barriers against mothers' free choice.

N.B. in preface-acknowledgments, page xii.

Do you mean John or James D. Watson? And if the latter, of course he is no longer at NIH.