

The moral status of the human fetus: 'the pro-choice position'

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What is the important question to ask?

- **When** does life **begin**?

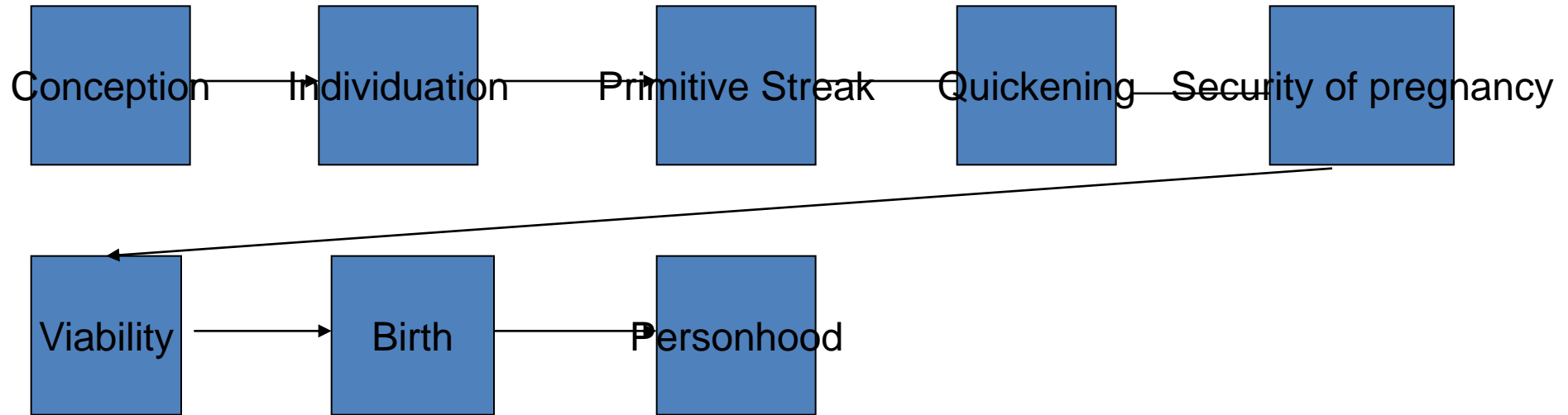
or

- **When** does life **become** morally significant?

or

- **What** makes a life morally significant?

Points on the continuum

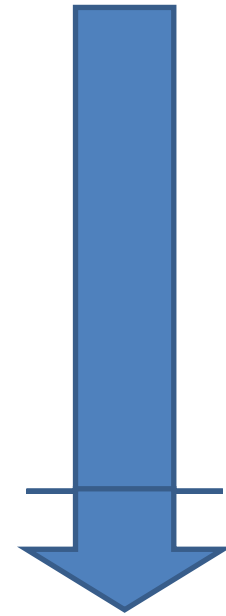


What moral significance should we ascribe to points on this continuum?

Gradualist approach

- Conception
- Sentience
- Viability
- Birth
- Personhood

Potentiality



So how do we proceed

- We may never agree on its moral status, HOWEVER we need to find a way of deciding how to treat the fetus, especially given the fact that how we treat the fetus or allow it to be treated by others has an unavoidable impact on how we treat the woman carrying it.
- We therefore need to find a LEGAL status that is 'alright' for sufficient people to work with, rather than necessarily being the 'right' status in everyone's eyes.

Need for change

- Currently the legal status reflects the most morally conservative position on the status of the human fetus, one which many people would dispute or fail to see as a decisive factor in the debate about abortion
- Those who hold to the position of equal status as an article of faith or moral belief will always be free to base their own deliberations and choices upon that view
- Until the law changes women who hold a different view will have no such freedom

Moral status cannot be seen in abstract

- The issue is in essence one of moral conservatism against moral liberalism or maybe more properly for some people moral tolerance
- If we respect women as moral agents we should provide a moral and legal system that allows them to exercise some choice in what remains a morally contested area. We may not like or respect the way in which some people characterise the fetus, we may not approve of all the choices people make, but we can still think it important to protect their right to make them. Just as we think it is important to protect the right of autonomous individuals to make choices on other matters that have a profound effect on their life.

- A pre-occupation with the moral status of the fetus may well blind us to other morally significant features of a case which fall outside our discussion today.
- It is possible to set standards in term of how to act towards the fetus without agreeing on its status and right to life, hence the careful regulation of abortion and the scrupulous monitoring of abortion services.

The pro-choice position

- Let us try to agree to disagree
- Let us work to find a way in which women can make choices that are important and morally defensible in their eyes
- But let us also acknowledge that irrespective of its specific moral status we can agree to see the fetus as 'special' and therefore accept that its treatment needs to be subject to both ethical and legal scrutiny