

Quickening

Quickening, the point at which a pregnant woman can first feel the movements of the growing embryo or fetus, has long been considered a pivotal moment in pregnancy. Over time, this experience has been used in a variety of contexts, ranging from representing the point of ensoulment to determining whether an abortion was legal to indicating the gender of the unborn baby; philosophy, theology, and law all address the idea of quickening in detail. Beginning with Aristotle, quickening divided the developmental stages of embryo and fetus. Indeed, this concept influenced the way embryology, human development, and hominization have been understood for over two thousand years.

In the Old Testament of the Bible, the point of “formation” (when the fetus took on a human shape), not quickening, was used to determine whether the life in the womb was human or not. Contrary to popular belief, abortion and miscarriages are rarely mentioned in the Bible, and quickening is never cited as a standard for determining the onset of human life, or hominization. Instead, Aristotle’s “Experienced Midwife” is credited with the first discussion of quickening. The point of quickening, as described by Aristotle, was the moment at which the life in the womb became human, as opposed to its previous vegetable and animal states. Aristotle believed that quickening took place at forty days for males and eighty days for females. Though he wrote that this stage separated the embryo from the fetus, his drawings indicate very little difference between the two. Abortion at any stage, as well as infanticide, was widely accepted in Greek culture during and after Aristotle’s time, and quickening was primarily used simply to indicate the stage of development of the fetus.

Aristotle’s belief about the beginning of life, like many of his other opinions, greatly influenced philosophers and theologians for centuries to come. Indeed, St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas both cite a point after conception, generally the point of quickening, as the moment at which the life in the womb becomes human or ensouled. Theologians often took the distinction between unquickened and quickened fetuses one step further, however, and declared that abortion after quickening was a highly immoral action, worthy of immediate excommunication and/or the legal penalty for homicide.

Because of the influence of these famous theologians and philosophers, Christian churches throughout history have taken a variety of stances regarding abortion. This debate over delayed or immediate hominization or ensoulment is evident in many papal documents, but presently the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church (see Roman Catholic Church Quickening) confirms the idea of immediate hominization and disregards quickening as a point of legal or moral significance. Other modern-day churches have varying beliefs; many Christian denominations still officially reject abortion, particularly in later stages of development, though there are several that have liberalized their views on the issue. The Jewish, Tao, and Confucian faiths generally permit abortions (early, or pre-quickening, with later abortions requiring serious reasons); and Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Sikhism generally condemn abortion, especially after quickening.

Throughout Western legal history it is apparent that the deciding factor in how or whether to punish a woman for procuring an abortion was often whether quickening had taken place. Most scientific standards considered quickening the first dependable indication of life in the womb. Henry de Bracton in the thirteenth century, Sir Edward Coke in the sixteenth to seventeenth century, and Sir William Blackstone in the eighteenth century, all indicated that in English law a procured abortion after the point of quickening was considered a worse crime than any abortion procured prior to this point. These legal authorities indicated that quickening was the point at which the fetus was granted legal protection as a living human being, and thus the death would be punished accordingly.

As science improved and the perception of movement was confirmed at earlier and earlier stages of the pregnancy (with René-Théophile-Hyacinthe Laennec's stethoscope in 1816 and the use of ultrasound technology for prenatal care in 1956), quickening was gradually replaced by conception, viability, or birth as the moment of hominization, and therefore the beginning of legal protection. Indeed, quickening has been so influential in the study of life in the womb that research continues to examine the connection between a mother and her pre- vs. post-quickening fetus. Quickening is also the title of a bi-monthly international publication of the American College of Nurse-Midwives. Thus, this concept continues to be far-reaching, even in modern society.

Sources

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