

# Unborn babies perceive world consciously

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## Unborn babies perceive the world consciously

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### What does this mean for abortion?

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by [Jonathan Sarfati](#)

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A 2024 issue of *New Scientist magazine* had an intriguing article about babies before and after birth.<sup>1</sup> The author is Claudia Passos-Ferrera, professor of bioethics at New York University. She documented that they can react to some surprising stimuli similarly to conscious adults.

For example, if we hear a repetitive sound, e.g., “be-be-be...”, we would expect the next sound to be the same, “be”. But if it is instead different, e.g., “bo”, it is startling—a “local oddball” reaction. The brain reacts with an electrical signal called the *P300 wave*. In fact, sleeping, unconscious, and even comatose adults can produce such a local oddball reaction.

And if we hear a more complex pattern, e.g., “be-be-be-bo” several times, then we start expecting that whole pattern. So if it deviates to “be-be-be-be”, we are again startled—a “global oddball” reaction. The brain again reacts with a P300 wave. In adults, a global oddball reaction occurs only when they are conscious. It is used to test consciousness in patients who can’t respond orally.

In the research that Passos-Ferreria refers to,<sup>2</sup> neuroscientists discovered that newborn babies had both local and global oddball reactions. *So did unborn babies at 35 weeks.*

These results have implications for the care of babies. E.g., if they are conscious, they can feel pain, which means that they might need pain relief for some surgeries or difficult childbirths.

## Implications for abortion

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In adults, a global oddball P300 brain wave reaction occurs only when they are conscious. Newborn babies and unborn babies at 35 weeks had global oddball reactions.

While the article treated it as news, baby consciousness is hardly a new discovery. In fact, the same magazine back in 2010 proposed, “Unborn babies may ‘be planning their future’”.<sup>3</sup> *New Scientist* is known for its Christophobia in the last few decades, so it’s not surprising that both articles tried to dismiss the abortion connection.

Passos-Ferreria gave one wrong reason: the age of the baby. She is right that most abortions occur before 35 weeks, so she argues that this research is irrelevant to the abortion debate.

Not so. Actually, many politicians and activists demand abortion right up to birth for any reason, at taxpayer expense. One Virginia politician, Kathy Tran, proposed an abortion bill and was explicit about this. In response to a question:

“So where it’s obvious that a woman is about to give birth, she has physical signs that she’s about to give birth, would that still be a point at which she could still request an abortion if she was so certified? [pause] She’s dilating?”

Tran responded:

“... My bill would allow that, yes.”<sup>4</sup>

Even if babies were not conscious, it would be wrong to kill them. This is for the same reason it is wrong to kill an anesthetized adult patient. That’s because murder—

intentionally killing innocent human beings—is wrong.

Later, Tran claimed she ‘misspoke’. But her words were clear, and unfortunately, she is not alone in her views.

In truth, many *soi-disant* bioethicists support both late-term abortions and infanticide after birth. They reason from the true premise that the birth canal is not a magical device that transforms a clump of cells into a baby.<sup>5</sup> Pro-lifers make the correct deduction from this premise that unborn babies have as much right to life as those already born. Such reasoning has convinced even secular people to become pro-life, e.g., the group Secular Pro-Life and Nat Henthoﬀ (1925–2017).<sup>6</sup> However, many ‘bioethicists’ make the horrifying opposite deduction: since we allow unborn babies to be chopped up, why not newborns as well since there is no difference?

But Passos-Ferreria was also right, but not for the reasons she thinks. Rather, even if babies were not conscious, it would be wrong to kill them. This is for the same reason it is wrong to kill an anesthetized adult patient who lacked the global oddball reaction. That’s because murder—intentionally killing innocent human beings—is wrong. That’s true whether the human is an adult or unborn.

The same applies to arguments about unborn babies feeling pain: yes, they do, but even if not, it would be wrong to kill them. Once again, the same argument applies to anesthetized adults who can’t feel pain.

## Conclusion

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This new evidence reinforces the overwhelming scientific evidence for the humanity of the unborn. Such evidence can show some people that unborn babies really are human beings, so they should be protected from murder. But others admit that babies are human beings, but don’t care.

Published: 16 July 2024

## References and notes

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2. Strangely, she doesn’t cite the primary research. But it is probably Bayne, T. *et al.*, Consciousness in the cradle: on the emergence of infant experience, *Trends in Cognitive Science* **27**(12):1135–1149, Dec 2023 | DOI:10.1016/j.tics.2023.08.018 [Return to text](#).
3. Collins, N., Introspection brain networks fully formed at birth, *New Scientist* **208**(2785):14, 6 Nov 2010 | DOI:10.1016/S0262-4079(10)62729-7. [Return to text](#).
4. DeSanctis, A., Virginia bill would legalize abortion up to birth, *nationalreview.com*, 29 Jan 2019. [Return to text](#).

5. Choice42 ("Choice For Two", aka Laura Klassen), The magical birth canal, youtube.com, 2 Jun 2018. [Return to text](#).
6. Hentoff, N., The Indivisible Fight for Life, *AUL Forum*, groups.csail.mit.edu, 19 Oct 1986. [Return to text](#).