

# Killing babies 'the same as abortion'

Moral rationale for terminations logically extends to newborns, academics claim

by Stephen Adams

Parents should be allowed to have their newborn babies killed because they are "morally irrelevant" and ending their lives is no different from abortion, a group of medical ethicists has theorised.

The article in the *Journal of Medical Ethics* says newborn babies are not "actual persons" and do not have a "moral right to life". The academics also argue that parents should be able to have their baby killed if it turns out

to be disabled when born.

The journal's editor, Professor Julian Savulescu, director of the Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics, said the authors had received death threats since the article appeared.

He said those who made abusive and threatening posts about the study were "fanatics opposed to the very values of a liberal society".

The article, *After-birth abortion: Why should the baby live?*, was written by two of Professor Savulescu's former

**The moral status of an infant is equivalent to a fetus — both lack those properties that justify the right to life.**

Academic paper

associates, Alberto Giubilini and Francesca Minerva, who work for the University of Melbourne.

They posited: "The moral status of an infant is equivalent to that of a fetus in the sense that both lack those properties that justify the attribution of a right to life to an individual."

The argument can be read one of two ways: the morals that allow us to abort fetuses can logically be applied to newborns given their status; or abortions are wrong as newborns share the same traits as fetuses.

Rather than being "actual persons", newborns were "potential persons".

"Both a fetus and a newborn certainly are human beings and potential persons, but neither is a 'person' in the sense of 'subject of a moral right to life'.

"We take 'person' to mean an individual who is capable of attributing to her own existence some (at least) basic value such that being deprived of this existence represents a loss to her."

As such they argued it was "not possible to damage a newborn by

preventing her from developing the potentiality to become a person in the morally relevant sense".

The authors concluded "after-birth abortion should be permissible in all the cases where abortion is, including where the newborn is not disabled".

They also argued that parents should be able to have the baby killed if it turned out to be disabled without their knowing before birth.

However, they did not argue some baby-killings were more justifiable than others — their fundamental point was that, morally, there was no difference from abortion as now practised.

Dr Minerva said she had received "hundreds and hundreds" of death threats. She says the report was writ-

ten for academic debate so she found the negative response surprising.

"If you take this paper out of the context it's really easy to misunderstand what's written in it and that, I think, is what's happening."

Defending the decision to publish, Professor Savulescu said: "The goal of the *Journal of Medical Ethics* is not to present the Truth or promote one moral view. It is to present well-reasoned argument based on widely accepted premises."

He said the journal would consider publishing an article positing that, if there was no moral difference between abortion and killing newborns, then abortion too should be illegal.

— additional reporting Herald online