

# Pseudo-embryology and Personhood: How embryological pseudoscience helps structure the American abortion debate

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## Abstract

There is a pseudo-embryology existing today, well nourished by popular science, religious ideologies, and the public media. Just as eugenics was a pseudoscience that influenced (and still influences) American popular culture and which was responsible for racist anti-immigration laws (such as the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924), pseudo-embryology is also influencing popular culture and legislation. This new pseudoscience promotes the belief that science supports current zygotic and fetal personhood movements and anti-abortion legislation. However, what often passes for science are actually ideological myths, often grounded in and supporting male superiority. Indeed, the first myth of pseudo-embryology is that fertilization is a masculine act that can be viewed as a classical hero narrative. The second myth is that fertilization is ensoulment, allowing it to displace the feminine act of birth as to when life begins. Here, DNA is seen to play the secular analogue of soul. The third myth is that the fetus in the womb is an independent autonomous entity and that birth merely moves the fetus from the womb to the outside world. This expresses the “seed-in-the-soil” myth that was also prevalent in ancient cultures. In this manner, masculine stories of fertilization are valorized while feminine narratives of birth are suppressed. So when public narratives discuss what “science” says about when human life begins, we are not really discussing science. Rather, we are allowing our discussions to fall back into tenacious ancient misogynist myths that have nothing to do with the conclusions of modern developmental biology.

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