

Ensoulement Problems

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ABSTRACT: One of the most frequently disputed questions in the contemporary abortion controversy concerns the moment of ensoulment, the moment at which the fetus ceases to be simply a living organism and becomes a human person. Although some commentators allege that Thomas Aquinas, among others, held to a theory of delayed ensoulment, the real issue for modern thinkers is the moment (if there is such) of the onset of conscious personhood. Identifying personhood with self-consciousness, autonomy, and evident rationality, many contemporary thinkers maintain that the fetus—and indeed the newborn infant—although human, does not qualify as a person. This conception of person is ideally suited for a utilitarian ethics, whose premises are founded in consciousness. After showing how Aquinas's problem was quite different from the modern version, this article rejects the characterization of the person in terms of consciousness, arguing instead that transcendence toward the good in truth is the distinctively human. All human beings except the most immature and badly injured manifest this transcendence, if only to a limited extent. This transcendence cannot be attributed to any mechanical or physical system, but requires an immaterial seat in the human subject. An immaterial principle, or soul, is required to account for this transcendence. The paper concludes with a short ethical reflection on inappropriateness of the utilitarian response to the very immature and the physically or mentally compromised.

SOME OF CATHOLICISM'S most revered theologians held not all abortions to be homicides. Or so say some.¹ Catholics for Free Choice writes that for Thomas Aquinas "abortion was not homicide unless the fetus was

¹ See Stephen T. Asma, "Abortion and the Embarrassing Saint—The Catholic Church's Changing Position on Abortion," *The Humanist* (May–June 1994), downloaded 24 Feb. 2005 from http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1374/is_n3_v54/ai_15388145/pg_1, and Garry Wills, "Abortion Is Not an Issue for the Pope to Decide," *The New York Times* (July 27, 2004).

'ensouled,' and ensoulment, he was sure, occurred well after conception."² Besides scoring the rhetorical point of turning one of Catholicism's greatest theologians against the subsequent teachings of his church, this claim raises serious questions about the fundamental issue at stake. If the great Aquinas doubts that the fetus in its earlier stages is human, then so might we. Indeed, as we consider further that moral considerations and rights attach to *persons*, then might we not distinguish between "human being" and "person"? Perhaps what qualifies biologically as a human *organism* does not count as a human *person*. The question of ensoulment thus becomes also the question of the inception of personhood.³ At what point does a human organism (the fetus) become a human person, an autonomous subject and bearer of rights, most notably the right to life? We may say that the problem of ensoulment comes to this: What makes a physical organism into a moral entity, a bearer of rights endowed with dignity?

AQUINAS'S PROBLEM

² "Abortion and Catholic Thought: The Little-Told History," Catholics for Free Choice, <http://www.catholicsforchoice.org/lowbandwidth/abortionfr.htm>.

³ Indeed, this is precisely how the article by Catholics for Free Choice frames the issue.

In fact, the question that Aquinas was trying to answer was quite different from that which our contemporaries raise. The question that he was trying to answer was really one of biology. How does the human being come to being in the womb of his mother? To put Aquinas's problem simply, a father is not pregnant. His seed is a living thing, but not yet a human being. Only after being inserted into the woman's body does the father's seed begin to grow and develop into a human being. Clearly a transformation takes place when something of a vegetative nature (the semen) begins to grow and form into a human infant. Aquinas writes: "The embryo has first of all a soul which is merely sensitive, and when this is removed, it is supplanted by a more perfect soul, which is both sensitive and intellectual: as will be shown further on."⁴ In that "further on" he writes:

We must therefore say that since the generation of one thing is the corruption of another, it follows of necessity that both in men and in other animals, when a more perfect form supervenes the previous form is corrupted: yet so that the supervening form contains the perfection of the previous form, and something in addition. It is in this way that through many generations and corruptions we arrive at the ultimate substantial form, both in man and other animals.... We conclude therefore that the intellectual soul is created by God at the end of human generation, and this soul is at the same time sensitive and nutritive, the pre-existing forms being corrupted.⁵

What Aquinas proposes is that three separate kinds of being successively occupy the womb of the pregnant woman. First is a kind of plant, really the immediate growth from the husband's seed. At an appropriate point of development, a sensitive soul supervenes, which subsequently departs, to be replaced by a rational (and therefore specifically human) soul. Aquinas is not playing word games. Because the soul is the *form* of the substance, which makes it to be the kind of thing it is, then had not the sensitive soul supervened, the woman would simply have a kind of plant growing within her. The inner dynamism of the organism is such that only a non-sensitive living thing (a plant) could develop. Similarly,

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 76, 3 ad 3.

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia 118, 2, 2 ad 2.

if the rational soul does not supervene, then the fetus is and can only develop as an animal. Therefore these other souls are of beings that somehow prepare for the generation of the human being.

Clearly, this Aristotelian account has problems. Neither Aristotle nor Aquinas can adequately explain what it is that corrupts this animalian being and generates a human being at about six weeks of gestation. Their problem, however, is not metaphysical but biological. Aquinas lacked our contemporary biological understanding of conception and gestation, and therefore he could not easily account for how the male semen grows into a fetus to be born an infant. Had he known that the embryo, immediately upon successful fertilization, is a distinct organism that, in virtue of its inherent structure, will develop into an adult human, he could readily acknowledge that it has a human, rational soul, for the soul is nothing other than the substantial form of the living thing.⁶

In Aquinas's account, therefore, there is no question of there being a human being that lacks a human soul. He was not looking for the moment of the onset of consciousness or the first manifestation of reason. Rather, he was positing a biological transformation from one kind of living being to another, one that contemporary science does not require. Thomas's "ensoulment question" is not the same that we face today.

THE MODERN QUESTION

In modern discussions, the ensoulment question characteristically takes this form: When and how does human personhood, a distinctively human consciousness, appear? This turns out to be a rather difficult question, for it turns on two important points: (1) that to be a person is not the same as to be a human being and (2) that we can adequately characterize "human consciousness." Consciousness, however, which is the basis for most modern conceptions of personhood, is not like other

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Aristotle's De Anima in the Version of William of Moerbeke and the Commentary of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New Haven CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1951), §234.

properties. We can know an organism to be strong or warm-blooded or intelligent; but, save in the case of one's own self, consciousness is known only indirectly. Consciousness is uniquely private. It is argued that you cannot know my consciousness; you can only project from your own experience. What is accessible to knowledge are only the structure and behavior of other entities.

The "ensoulment problem" is now transformed. What is the relationship between a physical organism and its consciousness? How does consciousness make a human organism deserving of moral consideration? Are our moral claims simply the fruit of *speciesism*, justified only by our current dominance over other living kinds? Peter Singer faces precisely this question head on and concludes that the "sanctity of life ethic" is untenable. To be a particular kind of organism,⁷ argues Singer, does not of itself constitute one as deserving of respect or rights. What is important, rather, is the state of one's consciousness. Membership in the human species alone does not confer moral significance on an organism; this significance derives only from autonomy, (evident) rationality, and consciousness of self as existing through time.⁸ Whatever does not manifest these three characteristics does not qualify as a person, that is, as a being that is morally significant, such that one is wrong to deprive it of life. Indeed, Singer already grants a greater degree of personhood to the higher primates than to a human infant.⁹ Such value does not attach to an organism, therefore, because of what it *is* but

⁷ Such as human being.

⁸ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (New York NY: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), pp. 86-87.

⁹ Peter Singer, "Ethical Issues in Treating ELBW Babies" (Washington, D.C.: Vermont Oxford Network, Dec. 2000).

rather because of how it *feels* and *what it is aware of*. Decency dictates that, so far as possible, we should allow a being that is capable of enjoying life and fearing pain, to enjoy that life and to be free of pain. If, however, such a being is incapable of hopes and fears and experiences, then decency makes no such demands on us. The great evil is to cause suffering. To kill an infant or a comatose adult causes neither fear nor suffering.

UTILITARIANISM AND RIGHTS

Utilitarianism is the ethics of consciousness. In his *Utilitarianism* John Stuart Mill wrote: "Pleasure and freedom from pain are the only things desirable as ends, and...all desirable things...are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves, or as a means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain."¹⁰ To be sure, Mill and his successors carefully qualify this ethic by arguing that pleasure encompasses more than the pleasures of the sense and that the happiness one must promote cannot be simply one's own. What I want to note here, however, are not the consequences, developments, and difficulties of utilitarianism, but rather its premises. Let us note these premises. Pleasure and pain are subjective states of consciousness. The doctor can poke and measure, but only the patient can say: "It hurts." The bases of utilitarianism are subjective. This does not mean that a utilitarian ethic is completely relative. Because a cigarette burn is painful to almost everyone, utilitarianism forbids (at least in most cases) deliberately inflicting burns. Because the basis of utilitarian good and evil is not in the organism's ontological constitution but in its consciousness, it follows that a being is an object of moral consideration only in respect to its capacity to experience pleasure and pain. Precisely on this foundation Singer calls for a "quality of life" ethic that demands maximizing happiness and minimizing suffering to replace the "sanctity of life" ethic. Without consciousness, moral rights are simply not an issue. He asserts

¹⁰ J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. with intro. George Sher, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis IN: Hackett, 2001), p. 7.

that “life without consciousness is of no worth at all.”¹¹ What is ethically relevant is not the kind of being one is, but instead “the capacity for enjoyable experiences, for interacting with others, or for having preferences about continued life.”¹² Therefore neither right to life nor dignity attaches to the fetus or even the newborn, nor to anyone incapable of conscious experience.

If only pleasure and pain are at stake, then Singer’s radical utilitarianism is essentially right. We may call this an “ethics of closed consciousness.” If the ultimate standard of right and wrong is one’s state of consciousness, the condition of his feeling, then ethics is radically and necessarily subjective. If consciousness is the ultimate standard, then only *I* know what is right for *me*. If *personhood* is constituted by consciousness, then what is right for me as a person can be determined only by criteria that arise from within consciousness. The individual’s factual existence and condition are just accidents, more or less relevant to his realization of a subjectively determined project. One would like to wax existential and cite the more eloquent philosophical pages of Sartre, but the idea has now permeated a narcissistic pop culture and even educational philosophies that the “real me” is the “inner me” independent of my physical traits and historical achievements. And this is where we find the contemporary version of the ensoulment problem, for ensoulment is now conceived in terms of consciousness. Only that which is self-conscious is ethically important.

¹¹ Peter Singer, *Rethinking Life and Death: The Challenge of Our Traditional Ethics* (New York NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), p. 190.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 192.

The remarkable thing about the discussion of consciousness is that no one seems to know what consciousness is. Contemporary philosophers invariably have to observe that although we all know what it means to be conscious, consciousness itself is very hard to define.¹³ Francis Crick, who devoted his final years to the problem of consciousness, wrote: "I believe that the correct way to conceptualize consciousness has not yet been discovered and that we are merely groping our way toward it,"¹⁴ and he proposed that we simply pass over the matter of

¹³ See, for instance, Owen Flanagan, "Consciousness" in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich (New York NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), p. 152; see also Daniel Dennett, "Consciousness" in *The Oxford Companion to the Mind*, ed. Richard L. Gregory (New York NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), p. 160.

¹⁴ Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul* (New York NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994), p. 255.

defining consciousness in favor of investigating the experimental data.¹⁵ This is curious. Consciousness is to play a fundamental role in our conception of human nature, so fundamental that our morality is to be founded on the kinds of conscious states that our acts bring about, and yet the best minds cannot define it.

TRUTH, GOOD AND HUMAN DIGNITY

¹⁵ Francis Crick and Christof Koch, "The Problem of Consciousness," *Scientific American* (September 1992): 152-59.

Let us now return to Aquinas, for whom to be biologically a human being is to have a human—and therefore rational—soul.¹⁶ We must explore the implications of rationality. First, consciousness is not fundamental.¹⁷ By misunderstanding the nature and function of consciousness we misconstrue our own nature and the foundations of our own dignity. I take it to be vitally important that we not identify our human nature, the human self, the core of a person's being, or the source of our dignity with this mysterious quality called "consciousness." Rather, consciousness is simply a consequence of rationality, which truly gives us our dignity. Every human being, of whatever age or condition, stands in relation to the true and the good. Human dignity is founded on rationality, which is the human person's capacity for a relationship with the truth, especially the truth about the good. In virtue

¹⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia q. 76, aa. 1, 3, and 4.

¹⁷ On this see Karol Wojtyła, *Persona e atto (Person and Act)*, trans. Giuseppe Girgenti and Patrycja Mikulska, in Karol Wojtyła, *Metafisica della persona: Tutti le opera filosofiche e saggi integrative* (Milan: Bompiani, 2003), pp. 868-74, especially the following quotation from p. 873: "Consciousness does not exist as, so to speak, substantial subject of its own acts; nor does it exist either as distinct ontic foundation of lived experience or as a faculty" [my translation].

of this relation the person has a dignity that transcends the material order and establishes his right to life. We will consider this first in more abstract terms and then reflect on some empirical situations.

NATURALISM AND NATURAL GOODS

Within the material order considered only as such, that is, considered naturalistically, things are governed by invariant natural laws with (possibly) an admixture of chance. Knowing the state of a thing, its physical constitution, and its environmental conditions, one can account for its behavior. The characteristic of materialist naturalism is that the behavior of things is determined by mechanisms that admit of mathematical description.¹⁸ Therefore, naturalism admits no genuine operation of free will and has no need of consciousness or awareness. Within the naturalistic context, the notions of *finality*, *purpose*, and *good* are adequately interpreted in terms of the mechanisms of the natural order. More simply, in a mechanical system, things do as they do because they can do no other. In such a context, we may speak of finality or purpose. Spark plugs ignite fuel, and the eagle's talons are for hunting. Without talons the eagle will die, and without the spark plug the engine will not run. Both are bad things. But for a completely scientific—that is to say, naturalistic—account, we need not refer to good or purpose. Deprived of talons, eagles will cease to exist, for they have lost a survival adaptation. The extinction of eagles is bad only if someone thinks the existence of eagles is a good. But the existence of eagles is itself an outworking of the evolutionary mechanism, one aspect of which was the survival advantage conferred by talons. Similarly, the good of the engine is not inherent but lies in the intentions and wishes of its designer, builder, and owner. We do not speak so much, therefore, of dignity as of a thing's place in the cycle of nature. The lion is really no more noble than the zebra. He simply sits higher in the food chain.

TRANSCENDENCE TOWARD TRUTH

¹⁸ This need not be algebraic, but can be of any kind of mathematics. A diagram is a geometric description.

It follows as a kind of corollary that a natural process cannot result in truth. By truth we mean, at minimum, the adequacy of a representation with that which it represents, that the representation represents that thing as it is according to some idea. Of course, in one sense natural processes can be taken to represent things. The passing animal leaves tracks that represent its path through the snow, and the bending grass represents the direction of the wind. In the natural order, however, these things do not represent nor are they interpreted (except sometimes by human beings) as signs indicating truth. The moose does not respond to the mating call intelligently but instinctively. This is why the hunter can deceive him. Natural processes produce their effects as a result of the laws governing them. The human being can interpret them, but he does so with ideas, by comparing what he discovers with his knowledge of those laws of nature. The animal that covers its tracks from its prey is not seeking to deceive, but rather behaves according to the laws of its nature.

In virtue of rationality, the human being can represent the truth and by it conform his behavior to his understanding of good. Because no natural process can result in truth, the process of reasoning—which is a bodily process involving talking to oneself, jotting down notes, and the firing of neurons in the brain—cannot be simply a natural or mechanical process. There are two related signs of this.

First of all, judgments of truth are *evaluated* by the laws of thought, that is, by logic. A proposition is not true simply because it results from some mechanical process. It must be rationally defensible, cohering logically with other beliefs known to be true. Although a machine (such as a computer) may generate true statements, it does so by responding to the physical properties of symbols that are fed into it. The mechanisms by which the machine functions may result in a stream of symbols that will be true if the input stream represents something true. However, the machine cannot check the truth of its own system. It cannot question and evaluate its axioms, its fundamental presuppositions. A human being—let's say Einstein—can consider such an axiom; one can question whether in physics mass and energy must be conserved and propose that instead the velocity of light be invariant. Logical evaluation consists not simply in the analysis of deductive steps, but also that of presuppositions, of the fundamental concepts underlying a particular

realm of inquiry. Logic itself demands this, for Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem implies that there are true propositions that no machine, no matter how perfectly programmed, can formulate on the basis of its inputs.¹⁹ To evaluate the truth of a proposition, one must eventually step outside the mechanical system. More simply, the requirement of truth places one above and outside of any truth-generating system because truth transcends the operation of the system. By the criteria of truth is the system's effectiveness judged.

The second reason truth cannot reduce to the outcome of a mechanical process is that human reason is infinite in scope. The human mind can question the truth of any input from sensation, any experience of interaction with the environment. Not only can it ask questions, but it

¹⁹ Strictly speaking, Gödel proved that a deductive system is incomplete. Turing then showed that a machine can mechanically replicate such an axiomatic system. See John Lucas, "Minds, Machines and Gödel" in K. Sayre & F. Crosson, *The Modeling of Mind: Computers and Intelligence* (New York NY: Simon & Schuster, 1963), pp. 255-61, and my "Truth and the Open-Endedness of the Natural Order" in *The Concept of Nature in Science and Theology, Part I*, ed. N.H. Gregersen and W. Parsons (Geneva, Switzerland: Labor et Fides, 1995).

can propose accounts of the seen in terms of the unseen. Whatever is—or could be—real can be known and named, whether from its effects or its possible effects or its relationship with something whose effects can be known. The human mind can even conceive something of God. This capacity lies at the root of our ability to form hypotheses, to propose theoretical explanations of things not directly experienced. The rational mind discovers general laws that extend beyond experience itself.

Thanks to this ability to reason and know the truth, human beings act on the basis of ideas and not just on what they perceive. In particular, the human being can choose a course of action other than that urged by naturalistic finality. Hungry, the human being can pass up food for religious, health, political, or social reasons. The very structure of human sexual interaction is predicated on rational choice and selection. The rituals of courting and symbols of love—even the techniques of seduction—presuppose rational choice and not simply the operation of instinct. Although this capacity to know and understand is most deeply and meaningfully manifest in the choice of ultimate ends and perhaps in the practice of science, it is also decisive in everyday experiences. Consider humor: “What’s the last thing that goes through a bug’s head when it hits the windshield?” The answer: “Its butt!” An eight-year-old boy will find this hilarious. Besides the juvenile delight in the mildly crude punch line, the joke turns on what philosophers call a “category mistake,” a deliberate confusion of general concepts. This joke works only because the mind works according to general ideas, which the riddle’s poser deliberately confuses. But let us take a more primitive example. If Mommy hides her face and then suddenly reappears, baby is delighted. For a few weeks, until the child has sorted out continuity and spatial relationships, peek-a-boo is great fun. Puppies do not play peek-a-boo, for they are not trying to make sense of spatiotemporal relationships. Babies and even the profoundly retarded respond to jokes and make tricks. Jokes, as the medieval philosophers knew well, evidence human rationality.²⁰ They attain ideal ends that are not demanded by the body’s organic systems. We could go on to discuss

²⁰ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 2, a. 3.

game-playing, responsiveness to music and rhyme, the universality of baby-talk, and so on—all of which depend on ideas, on using general notions meaningfully.

TRANSCENDENCE TOWARD THE GOOD

Because of the infinite range of reason and its capacity to know truth, the human person can desire to know about the good as such. He can represent the truth and conform his behavior to the truth about the good. In particular, he can choose a course of action other than that urged by naturalistic finality. Concerning anything that sensation may propose as a good, reason can ask: “But is it really good?” or “Is this the highest good?” Reason can further ask what it is that makes it good by asking what characteristic makes this good to be good. This implies, however, that the rational being can also desire the good as such. To have recognized something as a good is *eo ipso* to posit it as an object of possible desire. Some desires may even be presented by reason alone. (Having discovered the record for stacking dominoes, one might set out to break it.) This ability to inquire into the truth about the good confers upon the person a real transcendence with respect to nature. The rational subject can judge concerning the finality of nature and can govern himself in relationship to it. This transcendence is evident in common human experience. This capacity for self-determination is not a quasi-Cartesian self-control, as though we had posited a separate non-material power of consciousness with occult powers to govern matter. Rather, we need simply to point to common human experience. By lessons and regular practice at the piano, one can make himself into a musician. Nature may, to be sure, dictate that his skill never surpass mediocrity, but his creation of art nonetheless surpasses nature’s finality. And more to the point, by practicing virtuous acts and resisting vicious ones, he can form his own character as good or bad.

The rational person transcends nature insofar as he may accept or reject its dictates about what is good, and this transcendence confers dignity on its possessor. The very conception of dignity presupposes an order of values, for “dignity” means “worth” or “worthiness of respect.” When we affirm, therefore, that the human person has dignity, we affirm

that he deserves a level of respect that surpasses that which we give to things of the natural order. Dignity is a value. It has been argued, however, that the order of values is distinct from that of facts and consequently that values can therefore arise only from human subjectivity. Here then is the nub of the discussion, for it can be—and famously has been—argued that the order of values is distinct from that of facts and further that values can therefore arise only from human subjectivity. For something to be of value or worth it is requisite that someone actually values it. This was certainly Hume's point in his *Treatise of Human Nature*.²¹ Hume's subjectivism, however, is a direct consequence of his isolation of the self, which can know only its own sensations and the preserved memories of them. Aquinas's point, on the other hand, is that the ontological structure of the human being is necessarily different from that of other natural entities precisely because the human being is capable of relating with other persons and of transcendence toward the good in truth. As a reasoning being, he calls into question the order of goods presented by nature and conforms himself to a higher good, one that explains and orders his understanding of reality. He can even be a hero by sacrificing his own life for the sake of a distant or difficult good.

INTERLUDE: AN "ALTRUISM GENE"

²¹ In Book III ("Of Morals"), Part I, Section I ("Moral Distinctions Not Deriv'd from Reason") in *Hume's Ethical Writings*, ed. Alasdair MacIntyre (London: Collier Books, 1965), esp. p. 196.

It may be argued that selfless behavior—acts requiring self-sacrifice or even destruction for another's sake—are nothing more than the result of a sophisticated natural mechanism for balancing the interests of the individual with those of the species. Already in Darwin we find suggestions of this: "The foundation [of moral qualities] lies in the social instincts, including under this term the family ties.... As [these instincts] are highly beneficial to the species, they have in all probability been acquired through natural selection."²² Recently, Israeli researchers even claimed to have isolated such a gene.²³ However, even if there is some genetic basis for an inclination to selflessness, sympathy, or generosity, such a phenomenon is beside the point for our present discussion. The transcendence toward the good as such is not characterized simply by selflessness. Indeed it may not necessarily require denial of self in the strictest sense. What characterizes this transcendence is that it is toward good as such, toward good under its most general conception and universal scope. If there is an altruism gene or fundamental inclination to sympathy, this, like other organic impulses, is oriented toward physical survival, if not of the individual, then of the family, community, or species. The present discussion, however, is about something different, the most perfect example of which is the martyr for truth—and characteristically the truth about God. At issue there is not the predetermined inclination toward group survival, but a recognition of and a consequent commitment to a truth that governs reality. It is therefore something that transcends the mechanisms of nature. The altruism gene, if it turns out to be something real, is only tangentially relevant to our present discussion.

THE METAPHYSICAL ANIMAL

The human being is a metaphysical animal. Every other inhabitant of this planet moves about and interacts with its environment according

²² Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (Princeton NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1981), Ch. 21.

²³ Judy Siegel, "Israeli Researchers Find 'Altruism Gene'," *Jerusalem Post* (January 20, 2005).

only to the physical structure of the environment. The human person, however, moves about in a *world*, in a *cosmos*. This world has to make sense as a whole. And this whole is one formed and interpreted by intelligence. This transcendence requires community in truth, especially the truth about the good.

OTHER MINDS AND DIALOGUE

Because the transcendence toward truth is ideal, one's personhood forms in dialogue with others. Important as environmental factors may be on the human being's development, much more so are interpretive interactions with others. Nature's interaction with the human body is never univocal, but may always admit of different interpretations that are developed ordinarily in dialogue, whether with parents, friends, colleagues, or even the cultural tradition. The bee's sting may teach a lesson, but not nearly so decisively as daddy's exhortation to be brave and strong. Candy is sweet, but mommy teaches that peas have important vitamins. The kitten looks to its mother for nutrition and relies on her for protection. The child, however, looks to his parents to explain the world. The brute reality of nature's interactions with the human body is never univocal in its meaning, but may always admit of different understandings that are developed ordinarily in dialogue, either with parents, friends, colleagues, or even the cultural tradition ("When the going gets tough, the tough get going"). Self-determination develops in dialogue, in the integration of the ideas of others into one's own self, that is, in the partial reception of another's self into one's own being. The toddler's persistent "Why?" indicates the power of word and thought. By asking "Why?" one learns the connections among things, the structure of the world, how it all hangs together. Furthermore, there is that human authority—another mind—who comprehends this structure and can explain it. Humans interpret evil and suffering to each other. Animals cope in stride with nature and her vagaries. When the storm is past, the tigers resumes their hunt and the wild hogs forage. The human beings, however, reflect in shock on what has been lost. Life is again revealed as fragile, and kin and culture are clasped the more tightly. Understanding develops in dialogue, in the integration of others' ideas into one's own

self. "The friend is another self" argues Aristotle,²⁴ and "as a man is to himself, so is he to his friend."²⁵ To be a rational being is to stand in relation to others, as self to self. It follows, therefore, that human transcendence is evidenced most clearly by the human need for and responsiveness to love, understood as gift of self.

²⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.9.

²⁵ *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.12.

Furthermore, humans are intrinsically social because reason itself is communal. Rational beings need to communicate with others. Space does not permit the development of this point in detail, but the very structure of thought, which is formed by ideas, demands the interaction of minds, whether they be those of two human beings talking with each other or the mind of a thinker engaged with the mind that ordered the universe. Plato's great insight is that the mind cannot arrive at the ideas without dialogue. Only in conversation and disputation does understanding enlighten the mind as it attains to the ideas.²⁶ And indeed, what is thinking but speaking to oneself as though he were two— speaker and listener?

Another way to say this is that we are spiritual beings. Our material interactions manifest our spirits, which is to say, our orientation to the good in truth. Because we are metaphysical animals, we live in a world governed by general truths and ordered according to universal standards of good and evil.

THE ONTOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

²⁶ See Plato, *Republic* VII, 531d ff, and Seventh Letter, 344b.

The human being is not ordered to the truth about the good as such simply in virtue of his state of consciousness. Every human being is so ordered simply in virtue of being human. We know in two complementary ways that human beings are rational: First, each of us experiences from within, as it were, his own rationality, and second, we experience the rationality of others as they speak, make plans, laugh at jokes, and so on. Even with those whose capacity for thought is immature or badly compromised, to treat them as human evokes recognizably human responses. However, it is not the case that such experiences constitute our rationality. This characteristic of rationality is fundamental and intrinsic to the human being, such that human behavior flows from it. The rational behavior that we see from most members of our species is the realization of a potentiality already there. Karol Wojtyła (John Paul II) points to the metaphysical reality of the *suppositum*, the basis that underlies and unifies the objective and subjective manifestations of the human being.²⁷ *Operari sequitur esse*.²⁸ If, as scientific materialism proposes, we restrict reality only to what is observable or empirically measurable, then this unity becomes unintelligible, and the organism acquires personal consciousness and selfhood in a way that is essentially mysterious. But this restriction is not reasonable, for it closes off the possibility of understanding our own nature. This *suppositum* is not merely a physical entity subject only to physical laws. It is also a rational being, capable of governing its own behavior rationally. The human being is the *kind of being* that is ordered to and destined for truth. It follows therefore that the capacity of transcendence toward the truth and the good as such must belong to the structure of the human being as such. Every human being is *by virtue of his nature* governed by these

²⁷ Karol Wojtyła, *Persona e atto*, pp. 924-29.

²⁸ "Activity follows upon being." Karol Wojtyła, whose argument we follow closely here, bases his analysis of the acting person on this principle: "If *operari* results from *esse*, then *operari* is also...the most proper avenue to knowledge of that *esse*" in Karol Wojtyła, "Person: Subject and Community," *Person and Community: Selected Essays* (New York NY: Peter Lang, 1993), p. 223. See also his *Persona e atto*, Ch.2, §3 ("Synthesis of Operativity and Subjectivity: The Human Being as 'Suppositum'"), pp. 926 ff.

laws and ordered to their objects.

Here we may return to Aquinas's ensoulment problem, albeit from a different angle. We know, as Aquinas did not, that from the moment of conception, the embryo is the same organism as it will be when fully mature. What happens between conception and maturity, in other words, is a process governed by the laws of biology. As pro-lifers and Peter Singer both acknowledge, there is no hard line, no fundamental change at any particular point between conception and maturity. One may still raise the question, however, whether this entity so fresh in the womb is truly a rational being. For its first few weeks it has no brain, which seems to be necessary for rational activity, and its development has not reached the point at which its limbs and organs are sufficiently articulated for rational activity. In other words, is it not too simple an entity for rationality?

The apparent simplicity of the embryo is in itself no objection. We have now all become familiar with the "gee-whiz" facts about the information-potential of DNA, that this single molecule is a highly articulated library containing the instructions for the future development of the organism. That the human being has opposable thumbs, erect stature, developed vocal cords, an agile tongue, and a highly articulated brain with a developed frontal cortex is all determined by its genetic code as spelled out in the DNA. So, the simplicity objection does not really work. The human organism, even at its earliest stages, is not nearly as simple as it looks, and in virtue of its genetic code it is already more complex than a frog or a dog. Already present, in seminal form at least, are the brain, tongue, hands, and skeleton that so decisively distinguish it from the higher primates.

Nor does the objection hold that because the embryo's potentialities do not give it the capacity to express rationality, we have no warrant for ascribing rationality to it. Certainly, the mere possession of human DNA does not suffice to make a being rational. DNA is not of itself ordered to the true and the good. However—and this point is crucial—neither are the erect skeleton, vocal apparatus, flexible hand, and human brain and nervous system *of themselves considered as biological systems* sufficient to account for rationality. The human brain is designed to process signals in a more complex and sophisticated manner than is the simian

brain, but this of itself does not enable it to abstract general concepts from particular perceptions and experiences, to form hypotheses to explain apparently unrelated facts. The point of Aquinas's account is that to explain the functioning of human reason and understanding there is required an immaterial principle, an intellect that uses material instruments (the brain and nervous system, perhaps) but transcends them. The distinctively human characteristics that we have mentioned, from the construction of our DNA to the manifest physical characteristics of an adult human being, serve the purposes of the intellectual soul. These bodily characteristics are already present in the youngest embryo, albeit inchoately, and as that embryo develops it increasingly manifests evidence of rationality. No doubt, it is not until some time after birth that this rationality becomes unmistakable (e.g., the baby starts to speak), but this does not and cannot prove that prior activity is not rationally governed—albeit in a primitive, immature manner. The human being is ordered to truth and destined for the good, and his body is designed to serve that order.

Of course, this order and destiny are more or less perfectly realized in different human beings according to their own choices, their environments, and their physical state. That is to say, there are indeed those who forsake their destiny to drift through life by following the impulses of their passions and the influence of others. There are others whose lives are so deprived that virtually all their energies are devoted to survival; think of the prisoners in Auschwitz or of the slaves in ancient salt mines.²⁹ And finally there are those who, because of their extreme immaturity or bodily injury, cannot make effective use of their rationality. Nonetheless, even in such cases we see rationality breaking through. With infants it is not hard to pick up the glimmers of rationality, from their first signs of laughter to their responsiveness to language to the two-year-old's discovery of his own will: "No!" Even severely retarded persons are capable of simple humor and can respond to meaning. What is critical is not the degree to which such evidence of rationality is present, but rather that rationality is present *at all*. The

²⁹ And yet even those in the direst circumstances find ways to pray, tell stories, make and give gifts and otherwise manifest their humanity.

capacity for reason is an absolute difference, because in virtue of it the human person is oriented and destined beyond the material realm toward the true and the good as such. We may well measure intelligence and note how rarely a certain person may show a glimmer of comprehension or consciousness, but this is not the same as to determine one's rationality as such. Peter Singer notes that a higher mammal may show more consciousness of the world than do many human beings (such as infants).³⁰ Nevertheless even the chimpanzees, for all their cleverness, do not manifest any concern for logical coherence, conceptual development, or non-empirical standards of good—all of which may be glimpsed in any but the youngest or most severely harmed human beings.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that every human being—every organism that belongs to the species *homo sapiens*—is a rational being, which is to say it has a soul. It is frequently the case, however, that the exercise of rationality is hindered or prevented by the state of the body. However, even where the means to express rationality are (apparently) completely absent, the inherent rationality of the *suppositum* must be respected. Rationality is by its very nature social. The human mind develops as it is formed by ideas, and ideas are formed by interaction with other minds. To know is always to know another mind, be it the mind of one's mother or the mind of the Maker. Every human interaction communicates one's conception of the truth about the good, including the good about the other person. It is well known that even the most severely retarded or badly demented thrive better when loved. Like infants, the severely disabled coo or grunt to express pleasure at being cared for. They know those who love them.

³⁰ Peter Singer, "Ethical Issues in Treating ELBW Babies" (Washington, D.C.: Vermont Oxford Network, Dec. 2000).

When we affirm the dignity of those badly damaged in body, we communicate and engage their rational character. The badly disabled person can respond to the truth about the good that he himself cannot articulate, if that truth is presented in love. This is why the only appropriate way to relate to another human being is by sharing oneself, by love.

In its contemporary form the ensoulment problem arises from a false conception—that what makes us human persons deserving of rights and respect is a mysterious property of self-consciousness. This foundation for human rights, however, proves to be unstable, for it is necessarily subjective, founded only on the capacity of the human being to feel and think. The value of a person's life becomes contingent upon that person's valuing it. As the recent debates and controversy over the fate of Terry Schiavo show so clearly, it can be a very tricky and difficult task to determine a person's level of personal self-consciousness. If she cannot indicate her self-awareness and consequently her own wishes, then presumably we may conclude that there is no conscious interest in life and that it is therefore of no value. For a life could be of value only to the one who can experience that life. More significant and more devastating to our humanity, the ethics arising from this notion isolates each of us from the other. Absolutely autonomous, each of us becomes a law unto himself, answerable to no one, but also untouched by anyone. If no one can know me, then no one can really understand me or desire my true good.

What makes us human and gives rise to our personhood is our natural and insistent orientation toward truth and the good, an orientation that is rooted in our human nature itself. Our rationality is not something that comes and goes, a property of which there can be more or less. Rather, we are rational to the tips of our fingers, and therefore the person's entire being yearns for a higher good. Further, this yearning is necessarily social and communal. My ideas are not simply mine, but ours. The good that I seek is one of the goods that we seek, and indeed our community is a part of that good. Such a being transcends the natural order with its physical relationships, for even if the subject should not realize it, it is related to the perfect good and the totality of truth.

ETHICAL EPILOGUE

When we raise the question of ensoulment, we invariably do so to answer the further question “How must we treat this being?” What has no soul is a thing that one can dispose of as he wills. And if only one capable of consciousness has a soul, then those whose conscious life is lost have no moral claim on us. However, if every biologically human organism has a rational soul, as Aquinas held, then every such being is destined for a transcendent good. Further, because rationality is inherently social, none of us can know or approach that good alone. The fact that my neighbor has a soul (which is to say, that my neighbor is human) demands of me that I serve him in relation to his highest good, a good that transcends health or comfort or limited earthly desire. It demands that I love him.³¹ The world that normal people (as opposed to ethicists and other philosophers) inhabit is of this sort. We naturally and normally talk to babies and the seriously ill, including those in comas. Pregnant mothers stroke their bellies and talk to their unborn children. The normal way for humans to relate is as interconnected rational beings capable of genuine communication and communion. The world of isolated Cartesian egos, *cogitans* but not knowing each other, is a fiction. To “turn off” one’s attention is universally acknowledged to be an act of disdain or contempt. And this brings us to the conclusion. The evident rationality of the other depends, to a greater or lesser extent, on my addressing him. The other is discovered to be human precisely in our humane treatment of him. The test for the soul is not one that a machine can perform (as a scale tests for weight). It is, rather, discovered in conversation, in the common striving for truth and the good.

³¹ Karol Wojtyla (Pope John Paul II), *Love and Responsibility* (New York NY: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981), p. 41.