

Reply to Prof. Reimers

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I THANK PROFESSOR REIMERS for his exploration of the ensoulment controversy. As he notes in his opening remarks, certain pro-choice intellectuals and activists have made a cottage industry out of the argument that earlier Catholic philosophers and theologians, notably Thomas Aquinas, did not believe that a rational soul existed in the human person in the early stages of gestation. The long existence of the theory of delayed animation or rational ensoulment has been used by such supporters of abortion to attempt to invalidate or least weaken the contemporary Catholic defense of human life from the moment of conception.

Among many strengths in this paper, permit me to note three. First, the author convincingly shows how Aquinas's theory of delayed rational ensoulment is tied to an archaic, erroneous biology of human gestation. Second, he rightly detects the weaknesses and ambiguities of using self-consciousness as the criterion for the existence of a rational soul and thus, presumably, of a barrier against homicide. Third, he makes a compelling case for substituting rationality for self-consciousness as the distinctive trait of humanity and for situating this rationality in a broad social and historical context.

I would like to pose several questions to further explore this discussion of ensoulment.

(1) Some contemporary Thomists, such as Joseph Donceel, S.J., still adhere to the theory of delayed rational ensoulment, despite their rejection of Thomas's faulty biology. Their argument rests on hylomorphic grounds. If the soul is the form of the body, they argue, a rational soul cannot be present in the human person until there is sufficient differentiation in the human embryo or fetus to say that we are in the presence of a human body. While they disagree among themselves as to which moment of gestation is the crucial one for declaring the presence of a rational soul, they agree that the early human embryo, with little or no physical differentiation of its cells and thus insufficient corporeal

development, cannot possess a rational soul. To strengthen the case for immediate rational animation, it seems to me crucial to address this retrieval of delayed animation along hylomorphic lines.

(2) A related problem emerges in contemporary biology and embryology. If we want to maintain the existence of the rational soul from the moment of conception, how do we interpret the phenomena of embryonic twinning or recombination, which can be witnessed in the first fourteen days of human gestation? Does the rational soul divide to form two new body/soul composite persons? Is one rational soul annihilated when two merge to become one human embryonic person? If we want to defend the immediate rational animation of the human being, it seems that we will need to repair or alter some of the traditional attributes of the rational soul, such as its simplicity and indivisibility.

(3) If one posits the existence of rationality from the moment of conception in a human being, isn't this rationality in a radically passive state in the first weeks of existence? There is no evidence of its activity, certainly not before the emergence of primitive brain material. While this human being may have the internal capacity to develop powers of rationality at a later stage of development, the lack of evidence of actual rational activity might indicate that we are in the presence of a potential rational agent (unlike other animals in early gestation), but not in the presence of an actual rational agent. This passivity of rational capacity in early gestation would seem to open the door to the argument of moderate pro-choicers such as Judith Jarvis Thomson who contend that this potential rational agent might merit some moral consideration but that this being's mute interests cannot equal or trump the interests of a clearly and actively rational agent, such as a pregnant woman who refuses to accept the burden which she believes pregnancy and childbirth would place upon her.