What Is A Person?

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Different Understandings

There is a huge gap in understanding between those who see the very beginnings of human life as worthy of the same respect and protection as human life at any other stage of its existence, and those who cannot understand how people can get so worked up about what they see as 'a microscopic collection of cells', without sensations or feelings or self-awareness of any kind. The root of the problem lies in two different understandings of a human being or a human person. We tend to think of those concepts very much in psychological terms: a human person is a being who can think and love and laugh and cry and interact with other human beings. When we think of a person we think in terms of someone who does, or at least is capable of doing, the things that we see as personal activity. The idea that a human being is one who has certain kinds of awareness, abilities and characteristic activities seems obvious nowadays. We pick it up from the air we breathe. But it is an idea which is not as self-evident as it might seem.

One obvious problem arises from this approach: How can we determine which beings should be recognised as persons? The question arises at the very early stages of life when the foetus cannot perform any of these activities, has no nervous system and cannot even feel pain. It also occurs when life is very substantially diminished, as when someone is in a deep coma from which he or she is unlikely ever to emerge. And the question may arise in other circumstances too – what about someone with advanced Alzheimer's? What about the patient whose loving relatives say, 'That's no longer my mother/father, brother/sister; the person I knew as my mother has not been with us for years.' What about someone, severely injured, whose relatives tell us, or perhaps he or she is able to tell us, that what they are experiencing is not human life and they do not believe it is a life worth living?

If one starts from the notion that human life in the full sense is only present in someone who is capable of performing recognisably human actions and responses, there will always be difficulties in determining at what point 'real' humanity, and therefore full human dignity, begins. One would also have to ask at what point 'real' humanity ends, because in this way of looking at things, that might occur well before physical death.

People talk about trying to ascertain the moment that the soul is infused. They will point out that St Thomas Aquinas – one of the greatest theologians in the history of the Church – and others thought that the soul was not present for forty days, or for eighty days, after conception. This is one of several myths about Aquinas which it seems impossible to correct:

> Aquinas is supposed to follow Aristotle, and to hold too that 'a woman is a defective male'. On the contrary, Aquinas rejects the suggestion no fewer than six times … Nor does Aquinas say that the male human embryo is ensouled earlier than the female.[1]

Aquinas thought that, while life begins at conception, it might pass through stages – vegetative, animal and then human. He did not, however, draw the conclusion that this life could ever be treated as if it were merely the life of a plant or of an animal. But in the light of our present knowledge that view appears much less credible. There is no doubt that the foetus[2] is a living being. There is no doubt that the organic life of this being begins at conception and that it ends only at death. Our present knowledge points very strongly towards the conclusion that the life is human from the beginning. There was no stage at which this was just vegetative life; it was always human life. How could life which was merely vegetative – that is, merely a plant – develop, through its own inner self-direction, into human life?[3]

Many people, including theologians and philosophers, misunderstand the relationship of body and soul as if they were two 'things' joined together to make a human being. This leads to the idea that the 'body' must first be formed into something recognisably human before it is ready to receive the soul. In fact there is only one reality, an embodied soul. The body is a human body because it is formed or informed by the

1. Nolan, J.R.M., http://www.talesuntold.com.
2. Terms like 'fertilised ovum', 'blastocyst', 'embryo' and 'foetus' have technical definitions referring to particular stages of development. Since the stage of development is not relevant to the argument of this booklet, the terms embryo and foetus are used interchangeably.
3. Cf. Haldane, J. and Lee, P., 'Aquinas on Human Ensoulment, Abortion and the Beginning of Life', *Philosophy* 78 (2003), pp. 255–278; the text is also available at http://www2.franciscan.edu/plee/aquinas_on_human_ensoulment.htm.

soul. Without the soul there is no human body. After death there is no longer a human body but a corpse, which lacks organic unity; it begins to disintegrate. In the light of what we now know, the approach of Aquinas, who well understood the unity of the human being, seems odd. He thought that the soul could not be present until a suitable raw material was present. The truth is, however, that it is the soul which forms the body and which, therefore, is present and active at every part of the process of the body's development and growth. Even on the level of DNA it is clear that this being, from the moment it begins to be an organic unity, is human and possesses its own genome. Many of the characteristics that will mark the life of this person as an adult are already in the process of developing. The dynamic which drives that development – the formation of nervous system and organs and so on – is a human dynamic, designed to produce a human infant, and ultimately a human adult. This is true even if injury or genetic defects will prevent the emergence of some of the characteristic activities and qualities of the person.

The question, 'Are there different souls which succeed one another in the development of the human person?' might be put in different words: 'Are there different lives at different stages, or is it one life from the beginning?' Formulated in these terms, the answer seems clear – this is the same life that has been present and developing from the beginning. That dynamic *human* life is within the foetus; it does not come from outside. He or she lives a human life from the beginning. But another word for human *life* is the human *soul*. This would suggest that the beginning of the soul cannot be separated from the beginning of human life. Thus the very principles applied by Aquinas now require a different conclusion:

> On Aquinas's principles, the formation of a *human* body requires a *human* soul as agent (efficient) cause. Aquinas thought that the agent cause was the father's soul mediated via the vital spirit in the semen. We now know that the human embryo herself, from the zygote stage on, is the agent cause. We know that she *forms herself* into a mature human body. So it is that the metaphysical principle, plus the new embryological data, lead to the conclusion that human ensoulment occurs at conception. To those who regard human life as enjoying a

special kind of intrinsic value this conclusion should be of great significance.[4]

Perhaps Michelangelo has something to answer for here! The familiar image on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel where the finger of God turns a pre-existing adult body into a living human being gets things upside down. God touches the first instant of human life and that life (or soul) guides the development of a body for itself. There are further depths in this question about the beginning of the soul that we will return to later.

A concept of personhood based on what an individual actually does or is actually capable of doing would lead to the idea that there are degrees of humanity. These abilities gradually emerge, and they can gradually diminish. So one would be left with the uncomfortably dangerous idea that some individuals are more human than others.

There is another way of approaching the question of personhood. That is to say that a person is any living human individual at whatever stage of life – any 'individual being of rational nature'.[5] In other words, any living human being is a person. This means not that he or she is actually capable of walking, talking, relating or even being aware, but that he or she is entitled to the fundamental recognition of dignity which belongs to every individual who is human.

Whose Human Rights?

Pope John Paul II pointed to the contradiction of a world which constantly proclaims the importance and the inviolability of human rights but, in practice, violates them on a massive scale. He saw the roots of this contradiction in a number of factors which deny human rights to the weak. In other words, *a fundamental undermining of universal human rights follows from a claim that they do not apply equally to everybody.* This has its roots in the concept of personhood that we have been considering, the concept which links being a person to the actual possession of various abilities.

4. Haldane, J. and Lee, P., 'Rational Souls and the Beginning of Life' available at http://www2.franciscan.edu/plee/rational_souls_and_the_beginning.htm.
5. The classic definition of Boetius.

He referred to:

> … the mentality which *carries the concept of subjectivity to an extreme* and even distorts it, and recognises as a subject of rights only the person who enjoys full or at least incipient autonomy and who emerges from a state of total dependence on others. But how can we reconcile this approach with *the exaltation of man as a being who is 'not to be used'? The theory of human rights is based precisely on the affirmation that the human person, unlike animals and things, cannot be subjected to domination by others*. We must also mention the mentality which tends to *equate personal dignity with the capacity for verbal and explicit*, or at least perceptible, *communication*.[6]

An attempt to see personhood as fundamentally a psychological concept will inevitably lead to the conclusion that some human beings are less fully persons than others, and would reject the basic truth that all persons are equal and that fundamental human rights apply equally to every human being. Basic human rights do not come in degrees. Either one possesses these fundamental rights or one does not. It makes no sense to say that another human being is 'nearly our equal' or 'partially our equal', or 'not far from being a member of the human family'. In other words, basic human rights belong to an individual simply because of the fact that he or she is a human being, not on the basis of any characteristic or quality or achievement or position.

Frank Sheed, the Australian Catholic author and publisher, reflected that the values that we see in our race or our cultural heritage or our achievement, even if they are as great as we imagine, 'are almost comically insignificant compared with the immeasurable values that go simply with being human'.[7]

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6. John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, 19.
7. Sheed, F., *Society and Sanity*, Sheed and Ward, London, 1953, p. 39.

If we do not see 'simply being human' as the foundation, we undermine the very concepts of human dignity, human equality and human rights and we provide the basis for unjust discrimination:

> *When it is a matter of the moral norms prohibiting intrinsic evil, there are no privileges or exceptions for anyone*. It makes no difference whether one is master of the world or the 'poorest of the poor' on the face of the earth. Before the demands of morality, we are all absolutely equal.[8]

The failure to accept that principle accounts for the paradoxical fact that in our time we speak a great deal about human rights and yet those rights are widely disregarded, often by individuals and countries that speak loudly about them! This strange situation is made possible by refusing to accept that certain kinds of people are really equal to us and by believing in consequence that our interests can override their rights. This is particularly likely when 'we' find ourselves under real or imagined threat from 'them': for instance, during war or heightened concern about terrorism. In such situations it is easy to begin to think that those who are or who are thought to be linked to 'the enemy' are not really to be respected as we would 'our own people'. I remember seeing a slogan on a Roman street: 'When the State wants to commit murder, it calls itself the Fatherland.' No matter what the intention, even if it is admirable and even if the circumstances are extraordinarily difficult, neither the state nor any individual may violate the fundamental and inalienable rights of any human person:

> In the end, only a morality which acknowledges certain norms as valid always and for everyone with no exception can guarantee the ethical foundation of social coexistence, both on the national and international levels.[9]

Relationships

But does it not still seem that it is fundamental to the idea of the person that there must be some ability to relate to others? If a being has not, and will

8. John Paul II, *Veritatis splendor*, 96.
9. *Veritatis splendor*, 97.

never (again) have, the ability to respond and to relate consciously, does it not seem that the essential human quality is absent?

But is that necessarily so? Might relationships exist without an actual ability to respond? The truth is that as human consciousness awakens it finds itself already within a relationship. Long before the human individual becomes self-aware, he or she has been recognised, and, one hopes, welcomed, as a son or daughter, a grandchild, a brother or sister, etc. Relationships precede a person's ability to express them – and continue to exist when the person can no longer express them in any recognisable way. When parents or others become aware of the new son or daughter in the womb, they do not imagine that it is their awareness that has given the tiny human being this status. They are recognising a reality that is already there. In recognising their son or daughter they are also recognising that this little being is a member of the larger human family. This is a being who is 'one of us'. He or she belongs in the solidarity which is both our duty and our home. He or she is part of the solidarity which, in the Christian vision, 'must be constantly increased until that day when it will be brought to fulfilment'.[10]

It is sometimes suggested that any dignity and rights that the human embryo has derive from being the fruit of a 'parental project'. This is false for two reasons. Firstly, this is a human life no matter what his or her parents may think. Secondly, it is impossible to be anybody's son or daughter, brother or sister, without at the same time belonging to the whole human family. The tiny embryo makes that claim on all of us, not just the parents, long before he or she emerges into self-awareness. In fact, none of us would be able to relate or to respond *unless we had been in a relationship before we became aware of it*. In order to relate we need to recognise already existing persons outside ourselves. We find them already relating to us – smiling, making funny noises, holding us and rocking us and behaving in ways that would be regarded as very foolish unless done in the presence of a baby! In order to communicate, human beings need to learn a language which others will understand – in other words, a language which the others already speak and which the infant learns from them.

How far does the very sense of 'self', of 'I', depend on relating to 'you'? Our sense of ourselves begins and grows in and through our relationship with others. We would never even learn to speak unless others spoke to us first. We

10. Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes*, 32.

would have no use for the gift of speech unless there were others with whom we could converse. There would be no sense of 'I' unless there were a 'you'. Trying to pass from recognisable qualities to the existence of the person is turning things upside down. Human qualities and characteristics belong to the person, not the other way around. They reveal a person who already exists, who is being drawn into awareness or deeper awareness of him/herself and others by the relationships which are already there. That means that while human qualities are a sign that one is dealing with a person, their absence does not show that this is not a person.

The Soul

In the theological context there is an interesting question here about the creation of the soul. The belief that each individual human soul is specially created by God was part of what led St Thomas Aquinas and others to wonder at what point this happened. (The majority of theologians always thought it happened at conception.) Aquinas' difficulties about the soul being present from conception were based on faulty mediaeval biology and problems of scriptural interpretation of a passage which was taken to suggest that causing a miscarriage was not homicide (Ex 21:22ff). In fact the teaching that each soul is directly created by God[11] expresses a very important insight on the question of relationship and personhood. It is saying that from the very moment life begins the human being is 'addressed' by God, called into a relationship with God. As human consciousness and the ability to relate actively emerge, they do so into the context in which the young human being is already 'you' for the absolute 'Thou' of God.

The act in which God brings a new human being into existence is the same act by which he addresses that being as 'you'. Thus the act of creation of this being *is* the creation of him or her *as a person*. As Pope Benedict said in his homily on the day of his inauguration: 'We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution: Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary.'[12] Human beings live by and for relationships. We are directed towards others; we long to love and be loved. In fact the knowledge that one is loved is at

11. Pius XII, *Humani generis*, 36.
12. 24 April 2005.

the foundation of a healthy maturing, of the ability to trust others, of the ability to think not just in terms of 'I' but of 'we'.

But in our longing to be loved, our ability to trust, in our readiness to share and to belong, there is an inescapable incompleteness. It was well expressed by the Irish Bishops nearly forty years ago:

> … whether we realise it or not, all human love is finally a longing for God. Only God can give that timeless happiness, that perfect satisfaction, that unchanging lovableness, that unfailing faithfulness, which men and women are seeking in one another's love, but cannot fully find there. Both the joys and sorrows of human love show that we are made for divine love.[13]

The relationship with God, which is the beginning of human life and the culmination towards which it leads, lies at the heart of every human relationship. This is the goal of human life and it expresses itself in all our longings and our hopes and our searching.[14] That sense of being in a relationship with God, a relationship which calls us to the fulfilment of every human hope, is the only thing that can enable us to find meaning in situations where life would otherwise be absurd. That sense of the presence of God, who takes us individually by the hand in every situation, runs through the Psalms:

> My times are in your hand. (Ps 31:15)
>
> Though we stumble, we shall not fall headlong,
> for the Lord holds us by the hand. (Ps 37:24)
>
> Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies; you stretch out your hand and your right hand delivers me.
> The LORD will fulfil his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. (Ps 138:7, 8)

13. Irish Bishops, *Christian Marriage*, 1969, 1.
14. Cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II q.1, a.6c.

> If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me fast. (Ps 139:9, 10)

It seems clear that this relationship, this source of all purpose and meaning, has to be seen as beginning at the same time as our life begins, when each of us begins to live as a human being. This is the purpose and meaning which makes sense of every life at every moment. Human life surely never exists without its meaning.

The Unity of a Human Life

One of our difficulties in a world where science has achieved so much is that we can adopt a scientific perspective without realising that it is not the only, perhaps not even the most appropriate, way of speaking about particular matters. It is very easy to slip into thinking in scientific terms about the embryo, almost as if the proper context for a human being at the beginning of life is a laboratory dish. This little being is not a thing, but rather a 'him' or a 'her'. (The sex of the human individual, like many other characteristics, is already decided, even from a purely scientific perspective, when the genome is established at conception.) There is a fundamental difference between an 'it' and a 'you', even if the two perspectives can sometimes be applied to the one reality.

The cardiologist will study 'the heart' and will look at hearts in text books and in models; he or she will study how hearts react to various treatments and how hearts malfunction, will subject hearts to surgery and will dissect them in anatomy labs. How does that relate to the idea of 'my heart'? 'My heart' is part of what I mean by 'me'. If my heart malfunctions it is 'I' who am sick, who feel vulnerable and anxious. Human hearts in this second perspective are the stuff of love poetry and of heroic tales. People are warm hearted and stout hearted and lion hearted and tender hearted and broken hearted – all ideas which have little or nothing to do with the expertise of the cardiologist. If I learn that there is something wrong with 'my heart', it is an intensely important truth about 'me', a hugely significant personal experience, which is completely different from viewing a faulty heart in a text book. Then I appreciate the skill and knowledge of the cardiologist more than ever, but I am acutely aware that he or she is dealing with *my* heart, not with a textbook illustration!

The scientific perspective might tempt us to look on human beings, not just human bodies or human functions, simply as *objects* like other 'things'. This temptation is greatly intensified by the vast range of instruments and procedures and research which allow us to observe, measure, analyse and test almost every facet of the human body and every event that occurs in any part of it. When my body is viewed as other than or apart from 'me', it is seen not as 'my body' but simply as 'a thing'. The human body, of course, *is* a thing, a physical object in a physical world. That's why it is possible to study it from the point of view of anatomy and biology and chemistry. That is why it falls when the law of gravity dictates that it should. But the danger is that we might assume that the human being, as opposed to the human body, is an object, a thing, rather than a subject, an 'I' or a 'you'. My human body is not a reality I possess; it is the reality I am. Somewhere in the background of the search for artificial intelligence is the idea that a human being is, in the end, nothing more than a very complex machine. So we have science fiction stories which show a new generation of robot-computers outstripping us and taking over the world.

This is one of the great tensions in our attempt to understand ourselves in this scientific world. What is the connection between the body, which functions according to the rules of physics, chemistry and biology on the one hand, and my experience of myself as a free, reasoning being? Where does one begin and the other end? The only possible answer here is that this is the wrong way to pose the question. If one perspective begins where the other ends, that would leave us talking about two beings occupying the same space – one to be studied by science and one to be understood by philosophy and theology.

Are Embryos Things?

The Anglican theologian Oliver O'Donovan has some interesting reflections on this issue. First of all he says that the attempt to define personhood in terms of qualities 'encourages us to bring personality under the observation of experimental knowledge; secondly, it will encourage the differentiation between personal and pre-personal human existence'.[15] He

15. O'Donovan, O., *Begotten or Made?*, Clarendon Press, 1984, p. 59.

goes on to argue that experimentation on embryos is a natural and perhaps inevitable outcome of this way of thinking. To establish this claim he reflects on two different lines of approach.

In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus sets out to answer the question: 'Who is my neighbour?' He answers by overturning the frame of reference. After telling the story, he then asks quite a different question: 'Which of these three do you think proved a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?' (Lk 10:36). In other words, 'To discern my neighbour, I have first to prove neighbour to him … To know a person, I have first to accept him as such in personal interaction':[16]

> This means – and there is nothing more important to keep in view – that the knowledge of an individual being can not be separated from the act of love or charity by which this being is accepted in all which makes him a unique creature or, if you like, the image of God.[17]

Science measures appearances – even if these appear only in powerful microscopes or exist only in as yet unverified hypotheses. The hypothesis will be proved or disproved by some kind of experiment or test. Science measures what can be measured. Thus it can measure what we have called human qualities or characteristics – speech, genetic programmes, the activity of the nervous system and brain patterns. It cannot measure what is un-measurable – the idea of 'personhood' which expresses itself through these qualities.

If scientific knowledge is seen as the only real knowledge, this will lead to the assumption that not only can human qualities and activities be measured, but also that humanity as such can be dealt with as an object of scientific research. The scientific frame of mind will also conclude that there are pre-personal human beings, that is, human beings who are not yet capable of recognisably human activity and who, therefore, do not yet possess human rights in the full, or perhaps in any, sense. So the embryo viewed in this light leads us into 'the new and subtle crime of making babies to be ambiguously human, of presenting to us members of our own species who are doubtfully proper objects of compassion and love'.[18] This will seem to apply with

16. *Begotten or Made?*, p. 60.
17. Marcel, G., *Homo Viator*, tr. Craufurd, E., Harper, New York, 1962, pp. 23, 24.
18. *Begotten or Made?*, p. 65.

particular force to the embryo 'created' by science, through cloning or IVF, perhaps precisely for the purpose of being an object of experimentation.

While those who advocate such practices tell themselves that they are not dealing with a person, the fact is that this being is of such interest to scientific research precisely because he or she is a *human* being.

Some scientific arguments suggest that the embryo in the proper sense exists only after the appearance of the primitive streak, the first signs of the developing spinal column and after the possibility of twinning has passed. This occurs about fourteen days after conception. This view was first expressed in the Warnock Report[19] in the context of establishing a time up to which it would be legitimate to experiment on human embryos. Immediately after this proposal was made, the term 'pre-embryo' began to be used, to suggest that some enormously significant difference exists between the fifteen day old embryo and the thirteen day old.[20]

It does not seem reasonable to give such huge importance to the appearance of the 'primitive streak' since the reality clearly is that the being in the womb has been developing towards this moment. Nor does it seem sensible to declare that the possibility of twinning demonstrates that individuality has not been established. Twinning is a kind of natural cloning. Nobody would suggest that if the clone of an animal – or a human being – is produced that this demonstrates that the original person or animal never existed.

It is, of course, true that this tiny creature does not look like a human being:

> The question, however, is not what the organism 'looks' like, but what it is. The embryo may not look like the average undergraduate – some people may even think that it looks like a tadpole – but it is never the equivalent of a tadpole even when it 'looks' like one. That apparently formless mass is already 'programmed' with the instructions that will make its tissues the source of specialised functions and aptitudes discriminately different from the organs and talents of tadpoles. This 'tadpole' is likely to come out with hands and feet and with a capacity to conjugate verbs.[21]

19. Commission on Human Fertility and Embryology, chaired by Dame Mary Warnock; Report published in the UK in 1984.
20. Irving, D., 'When do Human Beings Begin? "Scientific" Myths and Scientific Facts' in the *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 1999, 19:3/4:22–47.
21. Arkes, H., *First Things*, Princeton University Press, 1986, p. 364

Treating a human being as an object actually blocks the path towards recognising him or her as a person. In countries which allow the practice, embryos that have been experimented on must be destroyed and not allowed to develop. However one may try to dress it up, the reason for this provision is that we do not wish to find ourselves answerable to a brother or sister whom we have manipulated in this way. The 'scientific' world view, by seeing the human body as a 'thing', necessarily splits the unity of the human person. The temptation to see the human person as a spiritual core trapped in, or at least limited by, a physical body which the person manipulates, is deeply dehumanising. It is not just the body which is sick, or which is feeble, or which is in a very early stage of development, or is in the process of dying – it is the person.

Our body is not merely a limitation: a) It is part of what a person means by 'me'; b) it is the only medium through which a person can express his or her thoughts, unlimited longings, freedom and relationships. The idea of a spiritual core using a physical machine is an anthropology which fits well with Utilitarianism. This is a philosophy which seeks to evaluate human actions in terms of the happiness or pain that will result from them. It began in a world that was starting to see the importance of science, as an attempt to give morality the kind of certainty that is found in mathematics or science.

The problem is that it sees our freedom as a mechanism for producing results and moral reasoning as an evaluation of the machine's 'products'. This approach is so common in our day that at first glance we may wonder what is wrong with it. It is true that we have responsibility for what we can foresee as the possible or even inevitable results of our actions. But to think of that as the only criterion is to miss the depth of meaning that is involved in the use of our freedom.

The unity of the person, who is a living body, is open to an understanding of ourselves which is richer and to a moral approach which can properly take account of other even more profound aspects of moral responsibility. Our choices are, for instance, a language which 'says' something to the people I affect about my attitude towards them, and in particular whether or not I regard them as being of equal dignity to me; our choices are a way of deciding not just on a particular course of action, but on the kind of person I choose to be and the values I choose to endorse and act upon. Sometimes the idea of the soul only seems to 'come into its own'

in thinking about the after life. We speak about 'saving our souls', as if the resurrection of the body were not part of the earliest Christian creeds! We are a unity, a living body and will remain such for all eternity, when God (not we) saves our souls:

> The earth which is promised to the meek, which will be given to the gentle as their inheritance, is the body of the saints raised up to eternal happiness because of their humility and clothed in the glory of immortality. No longer opposed to the spirit in any way, it will be in perfect agreement and unity with the will and the soul. Then the outer self will belong to the inner self in untroubled and secure possession.[22]

What occurs in the interval between our death and the resurrection of our bodies – if the notion of 'interval' is relevant at all beyond time and space – is a transition to our eternal state, which will be for those who are saved the perfect agreement and unity of a living, embodied being, the fulfilment, beyond all expectations, of what we now are.

Identity

A little while back, we passed over those robots or computers who were going to outstrip us. The idea provides a basis for some thought-provoking science fiction, which like all good science fiction makes us take a fresh look at our assumptions and where they may be leading us. We do not need to worry about computers becoming persons, even if they can increasingly excel us in performing calculations. You could probably programme a computer to complete the most fiendish Sudoku puzzle in a microsecond! That would not make it a person. We do need to worry that we may allow ourselves to become slaves of our own technology in more subtle ways by coming to think that the products and benefits of technology can provide the meaning and purpose of human life. One characteristic of a machine is that, however complex it is, an identical model, the same in every way, can be produced. No two human beings are truly identical.

22. Leo the Great, on the Beatitudes, Sermon 95 (*Breviary*, Saturday, Week 22).

The question about whether a machine could ever be considered as a person is poignantly posed by the Steven Spielberg film, *AI* – the title refers to Artificial Intelligence. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks sums up the film in this way:

> In it, a couple whose son is in a coma acquire a child-robot that has been programmed to love. The question is whether they can return that love, knowing that he/it is one of a type taken from a production line of dozens of identical products. The answer given by the film is that they cannot, which is almost certainly true and a reason why we should never go down the road of reproductive cloning or anything else that threatens to reduce persons to types. The essential irreplaceability of persons is what gives love its vulnerability, its openness to loss and grief, its fragility and its pathos.[23]

We hear fantasies about people achieving immortality by cloning themselves. In fact, a human clone would no more be the same as his or her original than identical twins are the same as one another. Indeed clones would be even less alike because they would grow up in different generations.

Anyone who is acquainted with identical twins knows that in many respects the word 'identical' is far from appropriate! However alike they may seem to be, they are decidedly not the same person. They have their own individuality, their own names, and are usually much happier to be called by their names than to be referred to as 'the twins'! Nor, in spite of what we discover about how alike our genome is to that of the chimpanzee, are animals going to become persons. Animals do not have the sort of identity that humans have. When a pet dog is described as being like one of the family, the word 'like' is important. If people thought that Rover actually was one of the family they would be getting things badly out of perspective. On the other hand, a human being is a member of a family. He or she has relationships which are unique and a life story which is unique. The human being is one of us in a way that no machine and no animal could ever be.

This is the case even if someone is permanently incapable of exercising simple human functions. There might be no series of experiences and

23. Sacks, J., *The Dignity of Difference*, Continuum, 2002, pp. 55–56.

choices, remembered, reflected on and made into a life story. And yet we have no sense that there is anything inappropriate or condescending or imprecise about referring to him or her as 'my brother' or 'my daughter'. We recognise a member of our race, whom we ought to welcome and love. The issue was well summed up in an intervention at the recent Synod of Bishops on the Eucharist:

> Descartes sought centuries ago to overcome philosophical relativism by the assertion, 'I think, therefore I am.' Perhaps today relativism can be overcome by a simple and yet more profound insight, 'I love, therefore I am.' Or even better, 'I have been loved, therefore I am'.[24]

Religious Views

It is sometimes suggested that the view of the human person outlined here is a 'religious view'. One hears it said, for instance, that abortion and embryonic stem cell research are opposed by people with 'religious views'. There are often two subtexts in such statements. One is that 'religious views' have no proper place in public discussion. This is clearly an area where careful distinctions need to be made, but it may be sufficient to point out here the anomaly that is created by saying on the one hand that people's deepest convictions have nothing to do with politics and decrying on the other the fact that people have no interest in or commitment to politics. Might it not be that to tell people that their views about the meaning and purpose of life are irrelevant is bound to result in a trivialising of politics? The other subtext is that such views are somewhat quaint and entirely irrational. In fact, revelation 'introduces into our history a universal and ultimate truth which stirs the human mind to ceaseless effort'.[25] Some of the great thinkers in history have been philosopher–theologians. The truth revealed in Christ, the beginning of the new creation (2 Cor 5:17), the One who is drawing all people to himself (Jn 12:32), may find an echo in the hearts even of those who have not accepted his Gospel.

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24. Anderson, C.A., *Synodus episcoporum* Bulletin, no. 20, Vatican Press Office, 12 October 2005.
25. John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, 14.

Most of the points I have made so far are, in any case, not religious at all. I have been reflecting on the meaning of our own experience of ourselves and our relationships, with occasional indications of how these reflections harmonise with and how they are deepened by a Christian outlook.

The Church's Nuanced Position

Although a great deal of what we now know points firmly in the direction of the conclusion that the human person begins to exist at conception, the teaching of the Catholic Church is more nuanced. It is worth quoting at some length what Pope John Paul said in his encyclical on the Gospel of Life:

> Some people try to justify abortion by claiming that the result of conception, at least up to a certain number of days, cannot yet be considered a personal human life. But in fact, from the time that the ovum is fertilized, a life is begun which is neither that of the father nor the mother; it is rather the life of a new human being with his own growth. It would never be made human if it were not human already. This has always been clear, and ... modern genetic science offers clear confirmation. It has demonstrated that from the first instant there is established the programme of what this living being will be: a person, this individual person, with his characteristic aspects already well determined. Right from fertilization the adventure of a human life begins, and each of its capacities requires time – a rather lengthy time – to find its place and to be in a position to act. Even if the presence of a spiritual soul cannot be ascertained by empirical data, the results themselves of scientific research on the human embryo provide a valuable indication for discerning by the use of reason a personal presence at the moment of the first appearance of a human life: how could a human individual not be a human person?
>
> Furthermore, what is at stake is so important that, from the standpoint of moral obligation, the mere probability that a human person is involved would suffice to justify an absolutely clear prohibition of any intervention aimed at killing a human embryo. Precisely for this reason, over and above all scientific debates and those philosophical

> affirmations to which the Magisterium has not expressly committed itself, the Church has always taught and continues to teach that the result of human procreation, from the first moment of its existence, must be guaranteed that unconditional respect which is morally due to the human being in his or her totality and unity as body and spirit: 'The human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception; and therefore from that same moment his rights as a person must be recognised, among which in the first place is the inviolable right of every innocent human being to life.'[26]

The Pope points to the unity of human life from conception to death, and to the establishment of what he calls 'the programme of what this living being will be', the indications that would suggest 'a personal presence at the moment of the first appearance of human life'. Nevertheless, the Church does not make definitive statements about the precise moment when human personhood begins.

What it does say very firmly is that the mere probability that a human person is involved would be sufficient to justify an absolute prohibition on deliberate killing of this being. In spite of what one may sometimes read, that is the consistent position of the Christian tradition from the beginning.

In June 2001, a group of twenty-three theologians from the Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox and Reformed traditions made a submission to the House of Lords on the subject. They included Cardinal Cahal Daly, the present Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams and Bishop Kallistos Ware, Orthodox Bishop of Diokleia. Their conclusion, after noting one brief exception in the seventeenth century, which was condemned by Pope Innocent XI, was that the Churches until the second half of the twentieth century were unanimous on this point:

> The Christian Churches teach not that the early embryo is certainly a person, but that the embryo should always be treated *as if* it were a person. This is not only a case of giving the embryo the benefit of the doubt – refraining from what might be the killing of an innocent person. It is also that the ambiguity in the appearance of the embryo

26. John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, 60.

has never been thought of as taking the embryo out of the realm of the human, the God-made and the holy. When Pope John Paul II asks, 'how can a human individual not be a human person?' he is not denying the mysteriousness of the implied answer. Christians recognise the embryo to be sacred precisely because it is inseparable from the mystery of the creation of the human person by God. What is clear, at the very least, is that the embryo is 'a living thing – under the care of God'.[27]

The group sums up its conclusions in five statements:

I. Though penalties have varied, the Christian tradition has always extended the principle of the sacredness of human life to the very beginning of each human being, and never allowed the deliberate destruction of the fruit of conception.
II. The origin of each human being is not only a work of nature but is a special work of God in which God is involved from the very beginning.
III. The Christian doctrine of the soul is not dualistic but requires one to believe that, where there is a living human individual, there is a spiritual soul.
IV. Each human being is called and consecrated by God in the womb from the first moment of his or her existence, before he or she becomes aware of it. Traditionally, Christians have expressed the human need for redemption as extending from the moment of conception.
V. Jesus, who reveals to Christians what it is to be human, was a human individual from the moment of his conception, celebrated on the feast of the Annunciation, nine months before the feast of Christmas.

The Wonder and Mystery of Human Life

In spite of all the aliens we can meet in science fiction, in spite of the search for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI), we do not know whether any other creatures like ourselves exist in the entire universe. Each

27. http://www.linacre.org/atheol.html#FNT58#FNT58.

human life is uniquely valuable. It may be that, in the entire, vast universe, and certainly on this planet, we are the only instance in which nature comes to self-awareness. 'The heavens are telling the glory of God' (Ps 19:1), but we are alone in being able to tell that glory in words, in poetry, in song, in art. In spite of the fact that we have a strong resemblance to other living creatures, we are also aware that it is only in us that nature finds a voice and can contemplate itself and can praise the Creator. In spite of the attempts to portray human beings as no more than sophisticated machines, and the human mind as the product of electrical currents in the brain, we know that we are more than that:

> Once we set aside a misreading of Darwin and the glamour of hyped-up neuroscience, biological reductionism loses its credibility and we can see what is in front of our eyes: that we who lead our lives are not at all like beasts who merely live them.[28]

Each human life is uniquely valuable. The gifts and the life story and the relationships that each one has are unrepeatable. No one else will live, or ever could have lived this human life. And yet the process by which any given life came into existence – requiring the meeting of vast numbers of ancestors all at precise times and in precise conditions, not to speak of all the possible different outcomes of any given act of intercourse – means that the odds against any particular person, any one of us coming into existence are incalculable! We have an infinitely better chance of winning the lottery than we had of being conceived! We should never allow that sense of wonder to be dulled. The challenge to be people of wonder is even greater for us who are Christians. When we see ourselves in the light of faith, in the context of the Incarnation and Redemption, that vision bears fruit 'not only of adoration of God but of deep wonder at (ourselves) … In reality, the name for that deep amazement at human worth and dignity is the Gospel, that is to say: the Good News'.[29]

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28. Tallis, R., 'You can be a beast, but I'm human', *The Times*, (London), 29 October 2005.
29. John Paul II, *Redemptor hominis*, 10.

Further Reading

Salvifici doloris, Apostolic Letter of Pope John Paul II on The Christian Meaning of Human Suffering, 1984.

Evangelium vitae (The Gospel of Life), Encyclical letter of Pope John Paul II, 1995.

Declaration on Procured Abortion, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1974.

Donum vitae: Instruction on Respect for Human Life in its Origin, and on the Dignity of Procreation, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1987.

These four texts are available on the Vatican website http://www.vatican.va.

Assisted Human Reproduction: Facts and Ethical Issues, Irish Catholic Bishops' Commission on Bioethics, Veritas, 2003.

The Wonder of Life, Pastoral Letter to mark the Day for Life 2003 and the 25th Anniversary of the Pontificate of Pope John Paul II, Irish Bishops' Conference, Veritas, 2003.

Human Life is Sacred, Irish Bishops' Conference, Veritas, 1975.

See also the website of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Commission on Bioethics: http://www.healthcare-ethics.ie/home.html.

Material will also be found on the following websites:

The Pontifical Academy for Life: http://www.academiavita.org.

The Linacre Centre: http://www.linacre.org.

The Guild of Catholic Doctors: http://www.catholicdoctors.org.uk/index.htm.

Lord David Alton: http://www.davidalton.com.

'When do Human Beings Begin? Scientific Myths and Scientific Facts' in the *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 1999, 19:3/4:22–47.