

The Moral Status of the Human Embryo

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How we see embryos shows how we see each other

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The question of the moral status of the human embryo is a core issue in modern biology and reproductive technologies. For this reason it ought to be of utmost concern to Christians who believe in the sanctity of human life as a gift of God.

By and large, the biological sciences cannot and do not intend to tell us about the nature or purpose of the living organisms they study. Theirs is a descriptive and analytical role, explaining how things work rather than why they exist. But it is only when we know what something is for that we can decide how we should treat it. So, what is a human embryo in itself, why does it exist the way it does, and what is it intended to become?

Normally, embryos are created from the fusion of a sperm and egg in the process of fertilization or conception that takes about 24 hours to effect. The majority of human embryos come into existence this way. Another way for embryos to form is when one embryo reproduces itself in identical twinning. The second embryo in this process possesses the same DNA as the first because the latter has actually cloned itself.

Theoretically it is possible to produce embryos by two artificial procedures known as embryo splitting and nuclear transfer. In the former, an early embryo whose cells are capable of becoming all other cell types in the human body, is split in two or three parts each of which may become a separate embryo. In the case of nuclear transfer the nucleus of an egg cell is replaced with the nucleus of an adult cell that carries the DNA of that person. The egg is artificially stimulated and grows, (as in the case with Dolly the sheep), into a living copy of the body cell donor.

Once fertilization has taken place cell division begins, a process that will eventually produce the whole foetus and baby, the new born infant, then the full-grown adult person. Conception was the start of that biological process that has caused every one of us to become the human creatures that we are today.

From a biblical and theological perspective we believe that the human person is a mysterious entity of soul/spirit and body. In this duality the soul is the determinative principle that animates and coordinates the body and enables it to grow and function. Death occurs when the soul leaves the body; by analogy, we reason that the presence of the soul explains the self-directed growth and development of the embryo from the start.

Three issues are commonly raised against the belief that personal human life originates with the embryo. The first is the large number of embryos lost through miscarriages, before or after implantation. Miscarriages are said to account for about 15% of natural pregnancies. However, it is generally agreed that a large proportion of miscarriages are not viable embryos because of chromosomal deformities or other serious defects. The rate of deformed newborns is therefore kept from being much higher than it actually is, by miscarriages. However, the loss of even a minority of viable embryos still raises questions about the goodness and power of God that are not easily answered.

The second objection is based on identical twinning which occurs during the first week and not after two weeks. This is the legal reason for justifying embryo experimentation during the first two weeks. It is argued that two embryos forming during that period means that before this a human being could not have existed. But it may well be that the first embryo is already programmed to reproduce itself after some days. If, as can happen, the two embryos again become one, then presumably one of the two embryos has died in unusual circumstances. The possibility of twinning (1 out of several thousands of pregnancies) is therefore no reason to deny human status to the embryo from the beginning, and, after all, the vast majority of embryos never twin.

Thirdly, the embryo is often described as simply a clump of undifferentiated cells that lack unity or purpose. But, the early embryo displays a remarkable degree of unity and purpose. For example, some of the embryo's cells will form the placenta that is the lifeline of the embryo and foetus; the embryo forms a north-south axis that will form the head and feet of the foetus; prior to implantation the cells of the embryo are contained within a single layer, thus showing its determination to grow as a single organism; cell differentiation occurs from within the embryo rather than from any outside influence such as the mother. So the embryo displays all the unity and organization of an individual organism with an intrinsic goal-directedness. In fact, it has been claimed that the zygote, the original human cell, is the most determined and specialized cell in the entire process of human development.

Since the embryo is an organism we need to contemplate its existence as a whole rather than stay with its several biological parts or processes. It is all too easy to isolate the first two weeks of the embryo as though this belonged to some separate period from the rest of its life and growth. Classical philosophy and theology both help us to think rationally about the nature of our human being as a whole and from the beginning of our life cycle.

Natural law teaches us that simply being alive is a universal good, in fact, the highest good that anyone can receive, because without this good no others, such as knowledge or friendship, are humanly possible. Because of this we have learned to speak of the right to

life, which is the language of law applied to human being for its protection universally. Since human embryos are primitive human beings they should have the right to the full protection of the law. Even if we are not sure about their status we ought to err on the side of caution and still protect them from being destroyed.

The human self is the ego at the centre of our being that makes each of us conscious of being “me” and no one else. Because of this central “I” that does not change, each of us is conscious of our own life as a whole from childhood onwards. This continuity of the self is what gives our life a single meaning and enables us to find meaning in reality as a whole. The baby who eventually becomes an octogenarian is one and the same person, in spite of biological changes over the years. But the belief that every human being is a ‘someone’ or a subject, leads us back to the embryo as the starting-point of that personal existence. Beyond that we cannot go in finding objective grounds for our individual human being.

Secular philosophers argue that we only become persons over time, when we become capable of social activities or are self-aware. But logically we must be something already in order for us to become something that we were always capable of becoming. We might say with some philosophers that the human person consists of a being that involves a becoming, and that this becoming happens only because we are already substantially what we do become. “The child is father of the man”. The human embryo is already a member of the human family but only needs time and a right environment to become what he/she already is. The complete genetic code in every embryo witnesses the completeness that already exists.

It may be claimed that the embryo lacks personhood because biologically it is only an impersonal cluster of cells. Yet the embryo already possesses a social life in the sense that no embryo comes into existence in isolation from the will, choice and acts of other persons, especially those of a caring mother and father who have joined together to create this new individual life and person. From the outset the embryo is a being-in-relation like all of us, establishing herself and being established by others as a social creature.

When we turn to a theology based on the Bible we find further supporting arguments for our belief in the full moral status of the human embryo. Certainly the Bible does not speak the language of modern embryology but it does say a lot about human beings, their nature, contingency and calling, and it expresses all this in relation to life in the womb. For example, God reveals himself as the One who gives life to all living organisms, as in Acts 17:25 and 1 Timothy 6:13. God is pro-life because God is the living God who delights in the gifting of life to his creatures, especially humankind made in his own image. Most clearly in the Gospel history of Jesus, God’s own Son, do we see his commitment to the life of the world (John 3:16, 1 John 4:9).

But the Bible narrows this down further. God is the One who actually creates life in the womb. The many pregnancy stories in the Bible witness to the role of God as the patron of life in the womb. To desperate Rachel who demanded children from him, the equally desperate Jacob declares, “Am I in the place of God?” (Gen 30:2) The two biblical sites

that reflect this most clearly are Job 10:8-12 and Psalm 139:13-16. In each passage God is pictured as a divine architect or weaver of great skill and artistry who brings together in the womb the whole human being as a single entity. From the beginning he knows us personally and calls us his own in a covenant of life that extends to the end of our earthly life-span. As the Personal God he bestows on us our personal existence from the beginning, thus making us in his image.

But perhaps most telling proof of all is the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. God reveals himself there as the One who creates life in the womb at conception. The Church through its history has confessed in the words of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in Jesus Christ God's only Son our Lord who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary." When the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary (Luke 1:35) she conceived in her womb the Person of the incarnate Son of God. The time of conception was the point when the Word became flesh and began to dwell in our midst. Because Jesus is our human Representative before God the beginning of his human journey must be the starting-point for ours. The Church has never contemplated the embryo in Mary's womb as any other or any less than the full Person of the Son of God. His conception illumines ours and tells us about our own beginning.

The moral status of the human embryo and the treatment each deserves, is a question that science raises but cannot answer. Only metaphysical philosophy and classical theology can provide the answer, especially as that streams to us from the pure light of God's infallible Word in Scripture and from Jesus Christ, his eternal Son, our Lord.

Each of us began as an embryo, a point the size of a dot, but we have become full adults through a single process of human development. How we treat and think of the weakest members of our human family will affect the way we regard one another generally. When we deny the full humanity of our embryonic children we deny it to us all with destructive, long-term effects. By disposing so easily and so often with our human embryos we are showing the beginnings of an erosion of human values with respect to that most precious of all human goods, the gift of life itself.