

No Embryos in Paradise, Umberto Eco

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IT IS NOT MY INTENTION in this lecture to support philosophical, theological, and bioethical positions on problems relating to abortion, stem cells, embryos, and the so-called right to life. My approach is purely historical and seeks to examine what Saint Thomas Aquinas thought about such matters. At most, the fact that the church of today thinks differently makes my reconstruction particularly curious.

The debate is extremely old, dating back to Origen, who claimed that God created human souls that had existed from the very beginning. His view was immediately challenged, not least in the light of the words of Genesis (2:7) that "the Lord formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." In the Bible, therefore, God creates the body, and then breathes a soul into it, and this doctrine, which became the church's official doctrine, is called creationism. But this position posed problems so far as the transmission of original sin. If the soul is not transmitted by the parents, why are babies not free from original sin, so that they have to be baptized? Thus Tertullian (in *De anima*) claimed that the soul of the parent is "translated" from father to son through his semen. But traducianism was immediately judged to be heretical, since it presumed that the soul had a material origin.

The person who found himself in difficulty was Saint Augustine: he had to reckon with the Pelagians, who denied the transmission of original sin. He therefore supported the creationist doctrine (against bodily traducianism) while admitting, at the same time, a sort of spiritual traducianism. But all commentators take the view that his position is rather convoluted. Augustine was tempted to accept traducianism, but finally, in epistle 190, he admits to being uncertain and observes that the holy scriptures support neither traducianism nor creationism. We can also see how he wavers between the two positions in *De genesi ad litteram*.

Saint Thomas Aquinas was decidedly creationist, and resolved the question of original guilt in a most elegant way. Original sin is transmitted by semen like a natural infection (*Summa Theologica*, second part of part 1, question 81, article 1, reply to objections 1 and 2), but this has nothing to do with the transmission of the rational soul:

It is said that the child will not carry the iniquity of the father in the sense that he will not be punished for the sin of the father, unless he is a party to the blame. But this is what happens in our case: in fact original sin is transmitted from father to child through procreation, in the same way that actual sin is transmitted by imitation . . . Yet the soul is not transmitted, because the power of the semen is not able to produce a rational soul, nevertheless the semen cooperates as an instrument. Thus, through the power of the semen, human nature is transmitted from parents to children, and the corruption of human nature with it. In fact, he who is born becomes a party to the guilt of his parent; because by force of procreation, he inherits his nature from him.

If the soul is not transmitted with the semen, then when is it introduced into the fetus? Remember that, according to Thomas, plants have a vegetative soul, which in animals is supplanted by the sensitive soul, whereas in human beings these two functions are supplanted by the rational soul, which is what produces intelligent man—and what, moreover, makes a person, insofar as the person was, by ancient tradition, an "individual substance of a rational nature." It is the rational soul that will endure the corruption of the body and will be sent to damnation or to eternal glory—this is what makes man what he is and distinguishes him from an animal or a plant.

Thomas has a very biological view about the formation of the fetus: God introduces the soul only when the fetus acquires, stage by stage, first a vegetative soul and then a sensitive soul. Only at that point, in a body already formed, is the rational soul created (Summa, part 1, question 90). Therefore the embryo has only a sensitive soul (Summa, part 1, question 76, article 3):

The philosopher teaches that the embryo is first animal and then man. But this cannot be so, if the essence of the sensitive soul and the intellectual soul are identical: since an animal is so made from its sensitive soul, man however is so constituted by that intellectual soul. The essence of the sensitive soul and the intellectual soul is therefore not the same . . . We must therefore conclude that in man there exists one soul, which is sensitive, intellectual, and vegetative. This can be easily explained if we consider the differences of species and forms.

For we observe that the species and forms differ from one another according to various grades of perfection: thus in the order of nature animate beings are more perfect than inanimate beings, animals more than plants; men more than beasts; and in each of these kinds there are various grades. For this reason Aristotle . . . compares the various animals to [geometrical] figures, one of which contains another so that, for example, the pentagon contains and transcends the rectangle. In a similar way, the intellectual soul contains virtually all that belongs to the sensitive soul of animals and the vegetative soul of plants. Therefore, in the same way that the surface of the pentagon is not a rectangle because it has one figure different to that of the rectangle, so that the figure of the rectangle being contained in the pentagon would be superfluous, likewise Socrates is not a man by one soul and animal by another, but he is both man and animal by the same soul . . . the embryo has first of all a soul that is merely sensitive, and when eliminated, it is supplanted by a more perfect soul, which is both sensitive and intellectual.

In the Summa (part 1, question 118, article 1, reply to objection 4) it is said that the sensitive soul is transmitted with the semen:

In perfect animals, generated by coitus, the active force, according to the Philosopher, is in the semen of the male: but the fetal matter is provided by the female. This vegetative soul exists in this material from the very beginning, not at a later instance but in the initial act, like the sensitive soul exists in one who sleeps. But when it begins to attract nourishment, then it actually operates. This matter is therefore transmuted by the power enclosed in the semen of the male, until it becomes the sensitive soul: not in the sense that the power present in the semen passes to become the sensitive soul; because in such a case, the generator and the generated would be the same thing; and the process would be more like nourishment and growth than generation, as the Philosopher observes. But when, by the power of the active principle in the semen, the sensitive soul is produced in the principal structure of the generated being, then the sensitive soul of the offspring begins to work toward the perfection of its own body, through the acts of nutrition and development. The active power of the semen ceases to exist as soon as the semen is dissolved and the spirit enclosed within it has vanished. Nor is there anything strange in this fact, because this force is not a principal agent, but instrumental; and the movement of the instrument ceases once the effect is produced in the being.

And in the Summa (part 1, question 118, article 2, reply) Thomas denies that the power of the semen can produce the intellectual element, and therefore that a soul exists at the moment of conception. Since the intellectual soul is an immaterial substance, it cannot be caused through procreation, but only through creation by God. Anyone admitting that the intellectual soul is transmitted by semen would also have to admit that it does not exist alone and, as a result, that it is corrupted upon the corruption of the body.

In the same question (ad secundum) Thomas also denies that to the vegetative soul, present at the beginning, there is added another, namely, the sensitive

soul; and after this another still, that is, the intellectualive soul. In this way man would have three souls, so that one would be in the power of another. And he denies that the same soul, which at the beginning was merely vegetative, then develops, by action of the power of the semen, until it also becomes sensitive; and finally develops until it becomes an intellectualive soul, not just by the active power of the semen, but through the power of a superior agent, namely God, who would come from outside to illuminate it:

But this does not hold. First, because no substantial form is susceptible of more or less; but the addition of greater perfection changes the species, just as the addition of unity changes the species of number. Now it is not possible for the same identical form to belong to different species. Secondly, because it would follow from this that the generation of an animal would be a continuous movement, proceeding from the imperfect to the perfect, as happens in alteration. Thirdly, because the generation of a man or an animal would no longer be generation in the strict sense, because their subject would already be taking place. For if the vegetative soul is in the matter of offspring from the beginning, and is subsequently gradually brought to a state of perfection, this would involve an addition of further perfection without destruction of the preceding perfection.

And this is contrary to the concept of generation in the strict sense. Fourthly, because that which is caused by God is either something subsistent: and thus it must needs be essentially distinct from the preexisting form, which was nonsubsistent; and we shall then come back to the opinion of those who held the existence of several souls in the body. Or else it would not be subsistent, but a perfection of the preexisting soul: and then the intellectualive soul would perish with the body: and this is unacceptable . . . We must therefore say that, when a more perfect form supervenes, the previous form is corrupted, since the generation of one being always implies the corruption of another being, both in men and in animals: and this occurs in such a way that the subsequent form has all the perfections of the previous form, and something more. In this way, through various generations and corruptions, we arrive at the ultimate substantial form, both in man as well as in other animals. And this can also be seen in animals generated from putrefaction. We must conclude therefore that the intellectualive soul is created by God at the end of human generation, with the disappearance of the preexisting forms, and that this soul is both sensitive and nutritive.

The rational soul, at the moment in which it is created, therefore formats, so to speak, the two souls—vegetative and sensitive—and recharges them as an integral part of the rational soul.

In the *Summa contra Gentiles* (book 2, part 89, reply to argument 11) it is repeated that there is an order, a grading in the generative process, "due to intermediate forms in which the fetus is equipped from the beginning until its final form."¹

At what point in the formation of the fetus is it infused with that intellectualive soul that makes it a human person in all respects? Traditional doctrine was very cautious on this point, and it was generally said to be forty days. Thomas says only that the soul is created when the body of the fetus is ready to receive it.

In the *Summa* (part 3, question 33, article 2) Thomas asks whether Christ's soul was created at the same time as his body. Note that, since Christ's conception did not take place through the transfer of semen but through the grace of the Holy Spirit, it should not be surprising if in such a case God had created the fetus and the rational soul at the same time. But even Christ, as Man and God, must follow human laws: "The beginning of the infusion of the soul may be considered in two ways. First, in regard to the disposition of the body. In this sense the soul of Christ, like the soul of other men, was infused when his body was formed. Secondly, in relation to time alone. And thus, because Christ's body was perfectly formed in a shorter space of time than that of other men, so he also received his soul before them."

But the problem here is not so much when a fetus becomes a human being, but whether the embryo is already a human being. And Thomas is very clear on this point, as we have seen. And even though the Supplement to the Summa is not written by him but probably by his disciple Reginald of Piperno, it is interesting to read question 80, article 4. The problem is whether, upon the resurrection of bodies, all that has contributed to the growth of these bodies is resurrected. Several apparently grotesque questions arise from this. Food is transformed into substance of a human nature; humans eat the flesh of oxen: therefore, if what was the substance of a human nature is resurrected, will the flesh of oxen also be resurrected? It is impossible for one and the same thing to be resurrected in different men. And yet it is possible for something to have belonged in substance to different men, as in the case of the cannibal who eats human flesh, which is transformed into his own substance. Who then is resurrected? The eater or the one who is eaten?

Question 80 is answered in a complex and tortuous manner and seems not to side with any of the various opinions. But what interests us is that at the end of the discussion it is said that natural beings are what they are, not in terms of matter, but in their form. Therefore if the matter that first had the form of beef is then resurrected in man in the form of human flesh, it will certainly not do so as the flesh of an ox but as that of a human being. Otherwise it would mean that the mud from which Adam's body was created would also be resurrected. As for the question of cannibalism, according to one view, the flesh eaten never truly becomes part of the human nature of the person eating it, but remains that of the person who has been eaten. Such flesh will therefore be resurrected in the latter and not in the former.

But the specific point that interests us is that, according to this question, embryos will not take part in the resurrection of the flesh unless they have first been animated by the rational soul.

Now it would be infantile to ask Thomas to absolve those who carry out an abortion within a given period of time, and probably he didn't even think of the moral implications of his reasoning, which today we would describe as being purely scientific. It is curious, however, that the church, which is always quoting the teachings of Thomas Aquinas, has decided on this point to distance itself tacitly from his position.

Something similar has happened with the theory of evolution, with which the church came to terms a long time ago—it was sufficient to interpret the six days of the creation figuratively, as the fathers of the church have always done, and in this way there are no biblical objections to an evolutionary view. Indeed, the book of Genesis is an extremely Darwinian text because it tells us that the creation took place in stages from the least complex to the most complex, from mineral to vegetable, animal, and human.

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth . . . And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night . . . And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament . . . And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so. And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called he Seas . . .

And God said, Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind . . . And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: he made the stars also . . . And God said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life, and fowl that may fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven. And God created great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth abundantly . . . And God said, Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle, and

creeping thing, and beast of the earth after his kind . . . And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness . . . And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. (Genesis 1:1-27 and 2:7)

The choice of a battle against evolution and in defense of life, back as far as the embryo, seems rather more in line with the positions of Protestant fundamentalism.

But, as I have said, this lecture was not intended to enter into present disputes but only to explain the thinking of Thomas Aquinas, with which the church of Rome can do as it pleases. I therefore propose to stop here, leaving these documents for the consideration of my listeners.

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