

# Ensoulement and IVF embryos

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## Author's abstract

*This paper examines the metaphysical question of 'ensoulment' in relation to the theory, put forward in an earlier paper, that human life begins when the newly formed body organs and systems of the embryo begin to function as an organised whole, at which stage there is evidence of a change of nature.*

*Although Roman Catholic theology teaches that a human being is a union of physical body and spiritual soul, it is incorrect to interpret this in a dualistic sense. The meaning of 'soul' is considered and the conclusion reached that although both in the religious context and apart from it abortion is difficult to justify at any stage after conception, it does not follow that the use of 'spare' In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF) embryos should be rejected. If 'ensoulment' does not occur until the new organism functions as a whole then a decision not to make use of IVF embryos for medical purposes would be a heavy responsibility and not a 'safe' way out.*

Dr Jean Mill has argued (1) that the process philosophy of A N Whitehead is more suited to the analysis of the status of the IVF embryo and the body/soul issue than is the 'mediaeval interpretation of Platonic metaphysics and Aristotelian logic as given by Aquinas' upon which Dr Teresa Iglesias has based her analysis of this issue (2).

In an earlier paper (3) in which I argued that human life begins when the newly formed body systems begin to function as a whole towards the end of the embryonic stage, I did not go into the metaphysical question beyond mentioning that a being with two levels of life, one built upon the other, and two levels of activity, one cellular and the other holistic, may reasonably be thought to have a different 'essential form' or organising principle than one which has only one level of life and one level of activity, as the embryo. This was intended to indicate that the theory did not seem to contradict Aquinas's philosophy, and that, in terms of traditional Catholic thought, ensoulment might be understood to occur when the newly formed body begins to function as a whole.

## Key words

Metaphysics; ensoulment; dualism; abortion; IVF embryos.

I do not, therefore, think that on this question it is necessary to discard mediaeval metaphysics entirely, as Dr Mill would do. While agreeing that we need to weigh the current issues in a process context now that we know the world is not static and that we ourselves are products of an evolutionary process, I would rather say that this means we are now seeing with two eyes instead of with one and we thereby gain a new perspective. Christianity has always understood human life to be a process, a journey towards God – a Pilgrim's Progress – and in an evolutionary world this process can be seen as the continuation of the biological processes which bring new human lives into being.

Although, with Dr Mill, I cannot accept some of Dr Iglesias's conclusions, I also find difficulties with Dr Mill's recommendation that Whiteheadian process philosophy should be applied to the body/soul-IVF embryo issue. In that philosophy God is seen as intimately involved in the temporal process of the world, whereas if time and process are of this world they cannot be brought into any description of the nature of the Creator. Process theology is therefore not compatible with the traditional Judaeo/Christian belief that God is the Creator or ground of being. The God of Aquinas and of Scripture is both at the beginning and at the end, Alpha and Omega, whereas, as Dr Mill shows, the Whiteheadian God can only be understood as the 'teleological cause and not the efficient cause of creation'. Whitehead's philosophy leaves one asking whether there could be some other, greater, God who is the ground of existence and it raises difficulties with a number of other traditional Christian beliefs.

A philosophy which does not accord with fundamental Catholic doctrines is hardly an acceptable vehicle for tackling the question of ensoulment. There are, I think, alternative ways of looking at the problem without coming into conflict either with science or with traditional doctrine.

While science rules out the notion that God dwells somewhere in outer space, it cannot rule out the possibility that there is a God who is the source of existence, an omnipresent Power who may even have some purpose for us. The supposition that there is such a God, a God who has a good purpose for us

which will extend beyond the grave, led to the idea of the spiritual soul, and as Dr Mill points out this was originally a conceptual construct. That being so, however, the dichotomy between body and soul was not, as she says in her *abstract*, a central concept of mediaeval philosophy: dualism comes from the reification of the intellectual concept.

The Catholic definition of a human being is that it is a union of the physical and the spiritual; body and soul are not two distinct entities and therefore at the beginning of an individual human life neither becomes present before the other. 'Ensoulement' does not mean that something is added to the already-existing physical body: the physical and spiritual begin together. If, therefore, on the physical level a human life begins when the newly formed body parts and systems begin to function as a whole, as I argued, it would follow that this is when the spiritual nature, given by God, is united to the physical.

If we take the Christian belief that God wishes to enter into a personal relationship with each individual human being, a relationship based on love and including the requirement that we love each other, this in itself gives an added value to a human life, and I have considered elsewhere the possibility that soul is the new dimension arising from God's invitation (4). It is not inconceivable that the feeling we each apparently have of being an enduring person throughout the changes which go on in our lives arises from our personal invitation from God, our awareness – however dimly perceived and even if not recognised for what it is – that we are called to an enduring personal relationship with God in a partnership which death has no power to break.

For a loving relationship to be established, a degree of knowledge and awareness is necessary. In the context of evolution it is not inconceivable that God intended that sooner or later, along one path of evolutionary development or another, a species of creature would evolve possessing sufficient intelligence and self-consciousness to be able to respond to God. At that stage of evolution a personal invitation could have been extended: it might perhaps be thought of as an enhancement of the mind which evolution had produced, an awareness of something more than the mundane, 'conscience' perhaps, seeping in from the ground of being once the time was ripe. From that time onwards it would seep in anew, generation after generation, as each individual new member of the species developed the potentiality to receive it.

If intelligence and self-consciousness are the necessary requirements for the establishment of loving relationships, it would seem to follow that only when the natural basis of these mental requirements has been laid in the embryo could the super-natural dimension start to flow in, as it were, from God-the-ground-of-being. If the soul is not a separate entity but begins or takes effect when the biological processes have produced a new human life, neither earlier nor later,

then again it would follow that ensoulment occurs towards the end of the embryonic stage when, with the newly-formed brain acting as the central information-exchange point, the commencement of the functioning of the whole produces a new level of life and enables the processes which will lead to thought and personhood to begin.

Ensoulement so conceived is 'immediate' in both senses of the word used by Pope Pius XII in the quotation given by Dr Mill, and accords with Aquinas's 'Our flesh is conceived before it is animated', which she also quotes. There is no need to bring in Whiteheadian philosophy. Although we do have, as Dr Mill says, an aim towards which we progress as we mature, the God of traditional Christianity is both teleological cause and efficient cause, inviting us onwards as well as being the ground of existence.

Where the question of abortion is concerned, it is not important, in the religious context, exactly when ensoulment takes place. Even if the embryo is not yet fully human, it is in the preliminary stages of development towards the coming into existence of a being who will in due course receive the inestimable privilege of an invitation from God, and this makes its deliberate destruction no light matter. Its natural 'transitional' value is enhanced by a supernatural value. God, it might perhaps be said, is, like the mother, already expectant. The same can be said of the fertilised ovum before it has reached the embryonic stage: it would seem better to let it have a chance of becoming implanted in the uterus rather than to destroy it deliberately.

But where the question of the possible use of surplus IVF fertilised ova is concerned, the time of ensoulment does matter, and if this does not occur until late in the embryonic stage of development, there seems no reason why the opportunity of using the ova may not be taken, provided – as also seems to be the ethical conclusion even before the religious aspect is considered (5) – it is for no purpose less than the relief of that human suffering which cannot be relieved in any other way.

There is a difference between the ovum fertilised in the usual manner and the laboratory ovum, in that the first is already in its natural maternal environment where it stands a chance of becoming implanted in the uterus, whereas the second has no chance of surviving and developing unless steps are taken to transfer it to its mother (or provide it with some other means of developing, if there is any morally acceptable alternative). Until this is done the human work of helping nature to create has not been completed and it has no potentiality for developing into a human being, or, therefore, of receiving a spiritual dimension. Although it has the full complement of genetic instructions for a unique human individual, it does not have the power to develop of itself, and neither, of course, do the genetic instructions include the spiritual dimension.

The Catholic Church has never taught that conception automatically produces soul, but that ensoulment is God's work, and as Professor John Marshall has pointed out, after a miscarriage the baptism of the products of conception is forbidden by Canon Law unless some human form is discernible (6). And on the question of the use or abuse of human reproductive faculties and processes, I find it difficult to think that there is some overriding theological reason why these may be used only for procreation and not also for the purpose of fighting to overcome human disease and suffering.

Until recent years it was prudent to presume that ensoulment might begin at conception as this did no more than underline the religious unacceptability of abortion, but with the advent of IVF this presumption no longer provides a safe way out. Rejecting the use of surplus fertilised ova is a moral decision not to employ available means in the fight against genetic diseases or other causes of human suffering (that is, presuming that there are no other suitable means for achieving the same good), and if at this stage the embryo does not fulfil the definition of a human being either on the natural level or on the supernatural 'ensoulment' level,

and if its use does not deny life to any human being who could otherwise have come into existence, failure to relieve suffering through this work is a heavy responsibility towards God who gives these abilities as well as towards humanity who needs them.

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## References

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- (6) Marshall J. *The Tablet* 1984 Aug 18: 785 (quoted by Jessiman I. St Thomas Aquinas and procreation. *Catholic medical quarterly* 1985; XXXVI: 40).