

Book reviews

When Did I Begin? Conception of the Human Individual in History, Philosophy and Science

Norman M Ford, 217 pages,
Cambridge, £19.50, Cambridge
University Press, 1988.

There is little time to lose. It is essential for the integrity of parliamentary debate and for the right conduct and regulation of embryo research that Norman Ford's argument and conclusion be assimilated before the British Government introduces its promised legislation in 1990–1991. Fr Ford is Master of the Catholic Theological College in Melbourne, Australia. He is master also, not only of the disciplines of philosophy and theology proper to his profession, but also of the most up-to-date studies in embryology available to him through Alan Trounson and Roger Short, in particular, in Melbourne, and other biologists of comparable eminence elsewhere. There results an exemplary exercise in the application of philosophical analysis to scientific data: an argument progressing by elimination to a clear and defensible conclusion. The conclusion is that 'the human individual begins at the primitive streak stage, but not before it. This is so because the conditions for the presence of an actual human individual, in the sense of an on-going living ontological individual with a true human nature, are not satisfied prior to the formation of the primitive streak' (p 173). 'That is when I began being me: ensouled with a rational soul or life principle, which makes the human body be the same individual from that stage until death' (p 175).

Fr Ford wrote his book out of a concern for a truthful basis to pastoral

teaching. His own traditional view – which equates the emergence of human personality with the formation of the zygote at fertilisation – he found incompatible with the scientific evidence of pre-embryonic cellular activity now available. This evidence is traced in absorbing detail (with diagrams); and at every stage – zygote, early cleavage, morula, blastocyst, early differentiation within the blastocyst, beginning of implantation – the test is applied: have we here a cluster of homogeneous cells, or a multi-cellular, heterogeneous developing human being having one ontological entity? At every stage the test is conclusive: there is no 'human being' (as distinct from being biologically human rather than murine, bovine, equine, etc) until, all indeterminacy, all possibility of twinning or of neoplasm, being past, cell commitment begins with the establishment of the primitive streak and implantation in the womb is complete (the true 'conception' in its historic meaning).

Fr Ford is patient and fair in presenting opinions from which he is driven to differ; even those of Professor Lejeune, which are shewn to rest on a radical misunderstanding of the scientific data on which they were alleged to be grounded.

The debt of civilisation to Aristotle is recognised in the careful and illuminating exposition both of his embryological observations and theories of conception, and of his philosophy of the soul – 'the cause and first principle of the living body', 'the form of actuality of matter organised into a living organism whose parts, organs and functions are for the benefit of the totality of what is alive' (pp 35,36). There is no room for Platonic or Cartesian dualism in embryology. Similarly Boethius and St Thomas Aquinas are given their proper respective places in the tradition. So are William Harvey and the seventeenth

century searchers for sperm and ovum.

Fr Ford's conclusion is not new. This reviewer has held it and expounded it for years, as have several distinguished Roman Catholic moralists who have seen it as their duty to develop received teaching in the light of advancing knowledge. What is new is Fr Ford's magisterial exposition and defence of that conclusion in terms and with a skill which must commend his work to embryologists and philosophers alike. As a work of scholarship it is greatly to be admired. As essential reading for those who must form social policy in the immediate future it is confidently prescribed.

PROFESSOR G R DUNSTAN
*Honorary Research Fellow
The University of Exeter*

Intensive Care: Facing the Critical Choices

TA Raffin, J N Shurkin and W Sinkler,
210 pages, New York, Oxford,
£11.95 pbk

This short American book can best be described as a layman's guide to intensive care and the ethical and emotional dilemmas it generates. The first half deals almost exclusively with intensive care – what it is, what it provides and why. Five chapters cover the body systems in turn and then comes a neat account, titled Program for recovery, which reminds the reader of the less technical but still very necessary components of management such as nutrition, sleep, exercise and incentive.

The transition to ethical matters is made primarily from chapter 7 onwards, with a consideration of death and dying which leans heavily on the