

## WHEN DID I BEGIN?: A REVIEW ARTICLE

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*When Did I Begin?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1988) by Norman Ford is a well researched and carefully documented pro-life book by a noted Catholic scholar who argues surprisingly that, while human life begins genetically at conception, nonetheless individual human life does not begin until some two weeks later. His thesis deserves careful attention since there are many significant issues—such as pre-embryonic experimentation, freezing, genetic engineering, and abortifacients—that bear on the two-week period after conception.

### I. AN EXPOSITION OF FORD'S VIEW

According to Ford, "it is necessary to distinguish between the concept of genetic and ontological individuality or identity" (p. 117). Genetic identity is established at fertilization. This is not, however, "speaking philosophically about the concept of a continuing ontological individual" (ibid.). The "establishment of the new genetic programme at the completion of fertilization is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition, for the actualization or coming into being of the new human individual at the embryonic stage of existence" (p. 118).

At pre-embryo stage (first fourteen days) "we could legitimately ask whether the zygote itself would be one or two human individuals" (p. 120). Why? Ford offers several reasons.

First, twinning can occur up to the embryo stage, and thus it seems to him implausible to speak of an individual human being where there is still the possibility of two. We would have to assume, for example, that the original individual (zygote) died when it gave birth to the two twins. This means that, say, "Susan, as in the case of the zygote, would cease to exist in giving origin to her identical twin offsprings, Margaret and Sally. In this case these would be the grandchildren of their unsuspecting mother and father" (p. 136). But, adds Ford, "there is no evidence to suggest an individual person ever ceases to exist when twinning occurs" (ibid.).

Second, experiments on sheep and mice—who, like humans, have interuterine births—show that there is no one individual being before the completion of implantation (fourteen days after conception in humans). For

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“the early blastomeres of sheep and mouse embryos could easily be disaggregated and be variously combined by techniques of micromanipulation” (p. 139). That is to say, by taking cells from one embryo and combining them with those from another, scientists have been able to produce wholly new individual beings. For example, by this method “chimeric” animals have been produced by this method that are part sheep and part goat. But if different embryos can be “taken apart” and “reassembled” during this preimplantation period (first fourteen days after conception), then it is obvious that there is no one continuing individual human being from the point of conception.

Ford concludes: “Though these experimental manipulations have not been performed on human embryos, they do shed light on the character of the developmental and regulatory potential of the human embryo as well.” He adds: “This is because of the acknowledged similarity existing in the early stages of embryonic development of all eutherian mammals.” For example, “the mouse and sheep embryo in particular very closely resemble, but are not identical to, the human embryos . . . both before and after the implantation stage” (p. 144).

In view of this evidence, Ford believes that “it is very difficult to sustain that the human embryo could be a human individual prior to the blastocyst stage when it differentiates into that which will develop into the embryo, fetus and adult human” (p. 156). This “collection of cells, though loosely strung together, is hardly yet one thing, nor is it several. It is not yet determined to be either one or several” (p. 178). Only “from the fourteenth or fifteenth day onwards, there is no doubt that it is Tom or Dick or Harry that is developing, or all three of them, but as three individuals” (*ibid.*).

What, then, is it before the end of the second week, if not an individual human being? According to Ford, it is a “potential” human person (pp. 122-123). It is genetically human but not actually an individual human. It has all the human characteristics necessary for individual life, but it is not yet an individual human person.

Borrowing from Aristotle (and Aquinas) who distinguished between form and matter, claiming the soul was the form of the body, Ford believes an individual human soul could inhabit a body that is not yet formed. And since the individual body does not appear until the “primitive streak” stage (about two weeks after conception), it is at this point that Ford believes the zygote becomes an actual, individual human being. Quoting Anne McLaren with approval, Ford writes (pp. 174-175):

If we are talking not about the origin of life . . . but about the origin of an individual life, one can trace back directly from the newborn baby to the foetus, and back further to the origin of the individual embryo at the primitive streak stage in the embryonic plate at sixteen or seventeen days [after conception]. If one tries to trace back further than that, there is no longer a coherent entity. Instead there is a larger collection of cells, some of which are going to take part in the subsequent development of the embryo and some of which are not.

So it is at this “primitive streak” stage when an individual, indivisible (except by death) human life begins. And it is here that Ford places the

origin of the human soul, which serves as the form of that body until death separates them. Here the ontological individual begins, as opposed to the genetic individual (p. 179). After this point, no more twinning is possible. There is one individual who is in continuity as an embryo, fetus, child and adult.

## II. AN EVALUATION OF FORD'S VIEW

There are many commendable things about Ford's presentation. First of all, he is a pro-lifer who respects the absolute value of human life from its very inception. Second, as a Catholic theologian he takes seriously the teachings of the Church on the sanctity of life. Third, as a philosopher he thinks clearly and deeply about the implications of the issue. Fourth, he takes into consideration not only the scientific evidence but also all of the Biblical data and theological pronouncements about when human life begins. Fifth, he stands in the venerable tradition of Thomas Aquinas, updating his view as the scientific evidence seems to indicate. Sixth, his approach is not simply a priori, beginning with a theological pronouncement about the origin of individual life and then making all the evidence fit it. Finally, Ford is not dogmatic about his conclusion. He confesses: "Though I believe my arguments show that the human individual begins with the appearance of the primitive streak, and not before, it would be presumptuous to declare that my claim was definitely right and opposing opinions were definitely wrong" (p. 182).

Notwithstanding these many positive features, there are some serious shortcomings in his conclusions. Several are worthy of note.

First, at best Ford's conclusions show only that individual human life begins two weeks after conception, not that actual human life begins there. Indeed, he admits that there is a living human nature from the very moment of conception (p. 115). This being the case, the next point follows.

Second, if human life begins from conception, it is moot to debate when a continuous individual (person) begins. Human life has sanctity whether it is yet individuated or not. Hence even if Ford were correct about when a continuous individual life begins, protectable human life admittedly begins at conception.

Third, Ford confesses that his argument is ultimately philosophical, not purely factual. When dealing with life-and-death matters this is precarious. For the decision to terminate life cannot be left to philosophers to determine. Some philosophers (or theologians) argue that it begins at implantation, some at animation, some at birth, and some later at self-consciousness. In short, unless a scientific (factual) basis is used for when human life begins (over which there is no debate), then there is no practical way to gain agreement on which to formulate laws.

Fourth, as Ford admits, his "opinion" on this matter is not the only possible one. In spite of his arguments, it is still possible that individual human life begins at conception. Several points are relevant here.

(1) The later splitting into twins could be a nonsexual form of "parenting" akin to cloning. Ford even acknowledges this as a possibility.

(2) His argument is based on the unproven assumption that human generation is the same as that of mice and sheep. Yet he admits there is no experimental proof for this.

(3) Also, the argument assumes the Aristotelian premise that humans can generate a genetically distinct but nonhuman offspring that only later becomes human.

(4) It overlooks the fact that a new, unique, genetically human individual is produced at the moment of conception (fertilization). This is not a potential human individual but an actual one. Ford even calls it an "individual" (p. 102) and admits that it is alive and possesses all its genetic characteristics for life at fertilization. Ford admits that "at fertilization there begins a new, genetically unique, living *individual*, when the sperm and the ovum lose their separate individualities to form a single living cell, a zygote" (p. 102, italics mine).

(5) In this regard, Ford falls into the same trap as many pro-abortionists who argue that the zygote (or even later embryo for many) is like an acorn, only a potential life (p. 124). But this is simply not true. An acorn, like a human zygote, is a tiny, living oak tree in a dormant state. Planting the acorn does not begin the life of an oak tree but only its growth. Likewise, when a living human zygote is "planted" (implanted) in his (her) mother's womb, this does not begin its unique, individual life. It simply facilitates its further growth.

(6) As Ford seems to imply, if human life is protected not from conception but only from implantation, then a number of serious moral and legal implications follow. Contraception (abortifacient?) and even experimentation on human zygotes are not ruled out absolutely. In brief, the "unalienable" right to life is thereby alienated from an admittedly individual human being for the first two weeks of its life.

### III. THE BOTTOM LINE

Let philosophers and theologians argue over at what point God allegedly implants a human soul in the body. Meanwhile, let human beings and human governments protect what we know to be human life from the very moment that a distinctly different human nature begins: at the point of fertilization. As Jerome LeJeune noted, "a human nature . . . is entirely constant from fecundation [fertilization] to normal death" (p. 127). Ford's citation of the New Zealand Royal Commission of Inquiry into Contraception, Sterilization and Abortion (1977) will suffice (p. 115):

From a biological point of view there is no argument as to when life begins. Evidence was given to us by eminent scientists from all over the world. None of them suggested that human life begins at any time other than at conception.