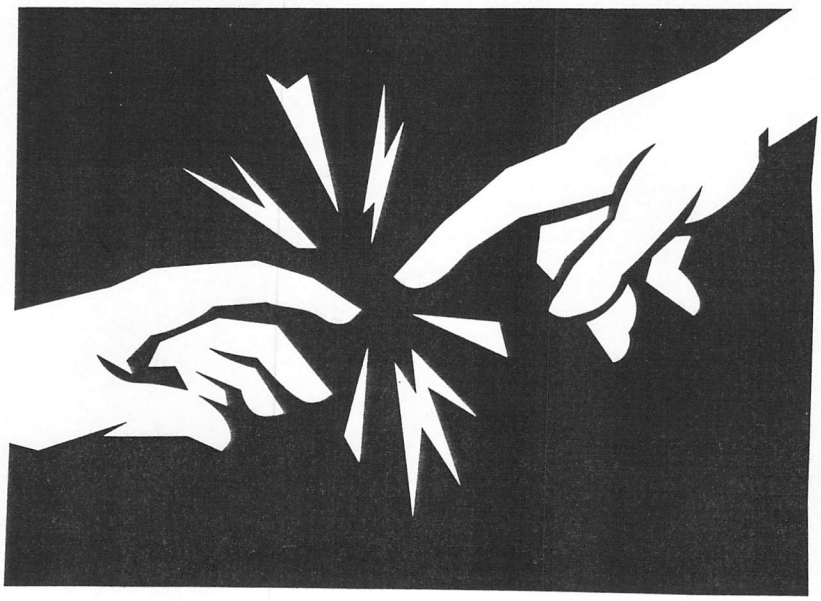
WHEN HUMAN LIFE BEGINS:
A Catholic Perspective

BY RICHARD M. DOERFLINGER



The question of how to treat human life in its earliest stages requires contributions from both faith and science. The conversation between the two has not always been smooth. Today some people still point to the mistreatment of Galileo in this regard, and with some justification. There was never any need for Church officials to set biblical truth against scientific truth. To be sure, Galileo probably could have avoided a great deal of trouble by restricting himself to his scientific conclusions about the relationship between the earth and the sun. Instead he declared that the Bible must be wrong, that Joshua in the Old Testament could not have made the sun stand still because it always stands still. And today we can look back and note that Galileo was wrong, too—the sun is not, in any meaningful sense, the center of the universe any more than the earth is.

The resources for outlining a more productive relationship between religion and science were part of our Catholic tradition long before Galileo. In the thirteenth century, building on ideas taken from Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas spoke of the relative autonomy of different fields of knowledge, each with its own method and its own aspect of the truth about God and his creation. Enriched by this Thomistic tradition, our Church teaches—as a matter of faith—that faith and reason, properly understood, cannot contradict each other (for example, see the First Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius*, Chapter IV). The work of scientists is both valid and valuable in its own right. Yet there are some questions that science cannot answer, because they lie beyond scientific evidence and cannot be subjected to scientific method.

In fact, science and religion have a very important feature in common: They both constantly delve below the surface of our ordinary experience and bring us news of things unseen. They do not stop at appearances. Both disciplines can see through a tactic used by the National Institutes of Health at a recent briefing for science reporters. There an NIH spokesperson defended the destruction of human embryos by making a dot on a piece of paper and declaring that the embryos in question were as small as that dot. Any reader of the Old Testament could have told this man that sometimes we must pay attention not to big winds but to small, whispering breezes. Any scientist could have told him that the uranium atom is awfully small as well, but it had a

horrific effect on the city of Hiroshima. For that matter, any child who has read Dr. Seuss could have shared with him the insight of that great philosopher, Horton the elephant: "A person's a person no matter how small." Science, religion and the wisdom of childhood all agree: Physical size is no measure of importance.

In the area of embryology there has been no Galileo case pitting science against religion. On the contrary, at each stage of its history, the Church has kept pace with the best scientific knowledge available.

Unfortunately, for centuries scientific understanding of the beginning of life was inadequate. The most widely accepted account in the Middle Ages was derived from Aristotle, who was a better philosopher than biologist. He thought an embryo could not have a specifically human soul until some weeks into pregnancy. He thought the *form* of the new human being was supplied only by the father, and that this form needed some time to prepare the unformed matter from the mother's menstrual blood into a being capable of a rational soul. (One implication of his theory was that every embryo starts out male; if development takes a detour to produce someone of the "weaker sex," a few extra weeks may be needed to form that embryo into a human being.)

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During the period when this account was thought to be true, the Church still taught that abortion at any stage was gravely wrong—one was still turning against the good of new life and destroying a being with a human purpose and human destiny who was in the process of becoming a human person. But in Church law a distinction was recognized between the abortion of an "unformed" and a "formed" fetus, with only the latter seen as having the full gravity of a homicide. In the nineteenth century the discovery of the ovum, as well as discoveries in genetics, undermined the scientific assumptions behind this approach. Now we know that fertilization produces a new, unprecedented being with his or her own built-in potential for further development—a being which is not a part of either father or mother, but a living organism in his or her own right. And we know that this being's membership in the *human* species is determined right then, at fertilization, and not at some other point. It was because of these new findings of science that the Church, in the nineteenth century, dropped the obsolete distinction between the "formed" and "unformed" fetus that had been part of canon law for centuries.

Today, without injecting religious assumptions into the matter, it makes perfect sense to say that each human being begins the project of his or her life at fertilization. All human development after that point is a *continuum*—an unfolding of potentialities already inherent in that first embryonic cell. Or to put it another way, looking backward instead of forward, it makes no sense at all to say, "I was once a sperm cell" or "I was once an ovum." But it makes perfect sense for each of us to say "I was once an embryo"—the same kind of sense that it makes for us to say "I was once a newborn baby" or "I was once a toddler," though we may not remember that baby or that toddler or have much in common with them in terms of abilities, thoughts, or desires. Even the NIH Human Embryo Research Panel, which met last year and proposed federal funding for experiments that would destroy many human embryos, concluded that the embryo is "a developing form of human life." To be sure, some people have argued that the early embryo, during the first week or two of development, is not a human *individual* in the same way that a later embryo is. None of these arguments is a finding of science, but a conclusion based on logical or *philosophical* assumptions that are very much open to question.

For example, *some* (a fraction of 1 percent) early embryos can spontaneously "twin" and produce *two* embryos that develop separately. Some people can conclude: *therefore*, all early embryos lack any "individuality" and have not yet determined how many

people they will be. But of course, this doesn't follow at all. Even that tiny minority of embryos that "twin" may well have been pre-programmed to do just that from fertilization—they always "knew" how many they were. And the vast majority of embryos never do this at all and so pose no problem—one embryo, one soul, one person. Embryologists have found that by carefully splitting off one cell from, say, an eight-cell embryo, they can induce such twinning. The original embryo will compensate and develop normally, and the cell that has been split off may develop as its genetic twin. But again that doesn't mean the original embryo was a formless mass of interchangeable cells. It probably means that the process of development and differentiation is a relationship, a conversation among the parts of the embryo. Disrupt that conversation and you disrupt the role that any one cell *would* have played in the developing human, and you force both the original embryo and the now isolated cell to compensate if they are to survive.

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Throughout our life every cell in our body has the genetic information needed to create a new individual. That is why people say the "cloning" of adult human beings is a scientific possibility. But the *expression* of most of that information has been suppressed, so the cell can play a specialized function in the whole organism. If you remove one of our cells early enough in development, breaking off this cooperative process, that suppression can be reversed and the genes for producing a complete organism may again be expressed. But so what? On the day we *can* clone an adult, will all *adults* cease to be human?

Finally, there is the argument that many embryos (perhaps as many as half) do not survive to term. The NIH panel cited a British medical group on this point, insisting that we cannot claim "absolute inviolability" for "an organism with which nature itself is so prodigal." But fallacies abound here, too. First, we really don't know how many of these early losses were complete fertilizations in the first place. For many, perhaps most, the nuclei of egg and sperm never joined to create a unified, developing organism. Second, we don't know how much of this loss is really "natural" and how much is due to environmental pollution, tobacco, alcohol, coffee, etc. We certainly shouldn't blame those losses on God or nature. Third, it simply doesn't make sense to say that because a being's future survival is uncertain we may treat him or her as having no claim on life here and now. Logically, that would be like saying: Half of African children die before adulthood; therefore, an African child is not a human being. None of us will live past adulthood; therefore, no adult is a human being. No, the continuity of human development from conception to natural death is difficult to deny. Therefore, when people deny that life begins at fertilization, they are usually making a moral claim rather than a scientific one. They are saying: "Yes, all right, this is a living human being, but some human beings are not persons with a right to life. Such rights are based on the possession of certain human abilities and characteristics that embryos don't have."

And this is, in fact, the kind of claim the NIH Human Embryo Research Panel made. The panel's own report did not provide much support for this claim, but referred interested readers to a more complete account published by the panel's own chief ethicist, Professor Ronald Green. His article is titled: "Toward a Copernican Revolution in Our Thinking About Life's Beginning and Life's End." He begins by acknowledging that it is hard to deny personhood to the unborn child based on his or her cognitive functions or lack of brain development—because by that standard, "it seems to be true that if the fetus is not a person, neither is the newborn or the young infant." He ultimately concludes that there is no *objective* basis for calling *anyone* a person. Rather, which human beings deserve that status is a social convention, to be determined by popular vote in any given society. The criterion used by the voters must be a subjective one—that of enlightened self-interest.

Green says we must decide in each case whether treating someone as a person will serve our own "broadest human interests," or place too much "restraint" on our liberty. If major health advances might be obtained only by doing lethal experiments on a class of humanity, that fact can make those human beings into non-persons! Indeed this is a real "revolution" in the ethics of medical research. For centuries, researchers have wanted the freedom to do whatever they think is needed to advance science and human well-being. And for centuries, civilized society has insisted that this not be done by harming or killing innocent human beings.

One society in our century neglected this norm, so it had to be restated in 1949 in the Nuremberg Code: "No experiment should be conducted where there is an *a priori* reason to believe that death or disabling injury will occur." Or as the World Medical Association's Declaration of Helsinki said in 1975: "Concern for the interests of the subject must always prevail over the interests of science and society." The ethic of the NIH panel makes these declarations meaningless. By that ethic, we first identify the interests of science and society, and then decide whether you deserve respect as a "subject"—depending on whether you get in the way of those larger interests. Your rights are respected, as long as it is convenient for us to respect them—which means that you have no rights at all. You have privileges, granted at the sufferance of those who wield power in your society. If your death becomes more useful than your life, you have no basis for complaint. Such a standard is not confined, and cannot be confined, to any one stage of life. That is why Green speaks of a revolution in thinking about life's beginning and life's *end*. We can redefine some members of the species as *not yet* being persons, some older and weaker members as no longer being persons, and some severely handicapped people in the middle as "never were" persons, if we need to make use of them to advance our own more worthy lives.

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Note that what the NIH panel proposes is really the *opposite* of a *Copernican* revolution. Copernicus (as well as his colleague Galileo) tried to show us that we are *not* the center of the universe. The NIH now says that we (at least those of us who can argue and vote) *are* the center of the universe. *We* will decide who lives and who dies, who is a person and who is disposable research material, based on nothing more exalted than our own desires of the moment. I see it as proof of my own position that the intellectual elite of the NIH panel, in trying to come up with an ironclad argument as to why the *embryo* is not a person, has found it necessary to argue that nobody else is either. The entire concept of inherent human dignity had to be set aside. From a religious viewpoint, one can go further: The panel's claim that human whim is the final arbiter of who has fundamental human rights is correct if and only if there is no God. For only then could such a godlike task be placed so completely and arbitrarily in the hands of whoever has social and political power at a particular time. If the panel's approach is right, then God is dead—and he left authority over life and death to the most violent species, in this bloodiest of all centuries. We can *all* thank God that the human embryo research panel's theory is *not* correct. ❧

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Illustration by Jim Nuttle