

Oct. 16, 1986

p. 7

Public attitudes to the human embryo can easily be based on gross ignorance regarding the facts.

1. Did the Warnock Report, which allowed British scientists to do harmful experiments on young embryos, say whether or not an embryo is an individual human being?

No. It refused even to try to answer this question of fact.

2. Do medical textbooks say when an individual human being begins its life?

Yes. At fertilisation.

3. Do scientists who wish to experiment on embryos reject these textbooks or criticise them?

No. They simply do not mention them.

4. What authorities do they refer to?

Mr Ian Johnston, of the Royal Women's Hospital Reproductive Biology Unit, recommended a paper by the British theologian, Dr Gordon Dunstan as "the best possible description that fits my own personal views and many of those working in the field."

5. What evidence does Dr Dunstan offer in this paper?

(a) Two scientific concepts and five scientific facts which do not refer to the beginning of individuals.

(b) Religious writers who relied on the erroneous views of ancient scientists such as Aristotle.

6. What did Aristotle and the religious writers who relied on him hold regarding the beginning of an individual life?

They held that: (a) the early embryo could not be a living human individual because it was formed out of the semen and the bulk of the menstrual blood which had not been shed at the period due after intercourse.

(b) Both blood and semen were simply residues from food and were homogeneous, with none of the complexity of a cell.

(c) There was therefore no question of a single organised living thing being there from the start.

(d) The process of formation of the fetus was similar to spontaneous generation, which at that time everyone accepted.

7. Does Mr Ian Johnston hold these scientific views?

I presume he does not, and that he has not realised that Dr Dunstan relies on them. But in this case "the best possible description that fits (his) own personal views" is without any scientific foundation.

8. Why are Dr Dunstan's arguments from modern science not relevant?

He makes no attempt to show how any of the scientific facts he cites is incompatible, as he claims they all are, with the embryo being "an individual", "a human identity." Indeed, if they were, not even you or I, here and now, could be an individual.

In the beginning . . . the human embryo

The following paper, The Personhood Of The Human Embryo by Fr T.V. DALY SJ, was delivered at the international conference on Health Law and Ethics, Sydney, in August this year in a session on The Human Embryo and Public Attitudes. Fr Daly is professor of philosophy at the Jesuit Theological College, Parkville.

He assumes criteria or individuality that would exclude adults like you and me.

My whole life is a process, yet I can be an individual.

If fertilisation can trigger cleavage, it can trigger the development of an individual life.

Cells belonging to an individual can easily have the power to change their function, or to regenerate, as those in a rose-shoot do when it is planted as a fresh cutting, or to move and reorganise as do blood cells and the cells involved in healing wounds, or to delay a while in taking on a specialised function.

9. What is life?

Life is the capacity which an organised individual has for building up its own structure and powers and for maintaining and developing these by calling upon external resources that were not part of its own organisation, despite the variety of activities and challenges.

10. Is there only one life, or are there a number of lives that can be counted?

Life in the abstract can be handed on from generation to generation, but only to new individuals which can be counted, and each of which had to begin living, and can end life by dying.

11. How can a life end, or a new life begin?

A life ends when it loses its central organisation. It can be absorbed into a larger individual, as happens when a living thing is eaten by another, or it can break up into parts which become distinct individuals of another sort, such as organs, cells or molecules.

A new life begins when two organised units join together to form one with appropriate powers of growth or action, as in sexual generation, or when, as in asexual generation, a few organised individual forms from within another and splits off from it.

12. What has the fact of identical twins got to do with the time when a new individual starts to exist?

This fact shows that there existed an individual with enough power to generate another similar individual. This new one will be a few days younger than the first.

13. But aren't there only one or two cells in the hundred-cell embryo that eventually become the human being?

No. All the cells in the trophoblast as well as in the inner cell mass are part of the single organised individual. Some of its organs complete their contribution early in life and are discarded, as are the milk teeth and the ductus arteriosus.

The fetal placenta and membranes are no longer required after birth, but before that are definitely parts of the single developing organism.

14. What powers has the zygote or fertilised egg, that is, the single cell which is a new individual beginning its life?

The zygote has the power to develop its own organs, to grow into an adult of a particular species, and to determine its detailed characteristics as a child and as an adult.

Every one of the capacities possessed by the mature adult is no more than a development of capacities that were possessed by the single cell zygote. The best food and conditions can produce no more than what the genetic constitution of that cell was capable of.

15. What is a person?

A human person is an individual thing of the sort that has a capacity to see, hear, feel, inquire, understand, invent, communicate, affirm, decide and love.

16. Is a fertilised egg a person?

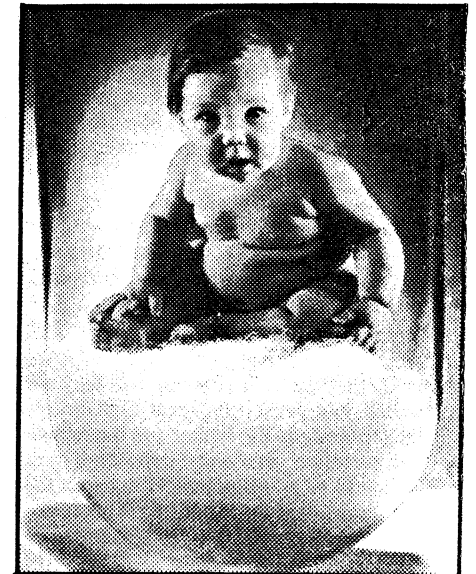
Yes. A fertilised human egg is already an individual human person. All human capacities originate in the single fertilised egg and nowhere else.

17. But isn't this blatant speciesism, which Prof Singer condemns so strongly?

No. Helga Kuhse and Peter Singer admit that obviously no plausible theory could condone the random killing of people while they are asleep.

If we move the word "self-aware" in another statement of Singer's to allow for this, we find that:

It would not be speciesist to hold that the life of a being capable of self-awareness, of



abstract thought, of planning for the future, of complex acts of communication, and so on, is more valuable than the life of a being without these capacities.

The genome of the human embryo is a particular form of organisation that gives it this capability, so I am not a speciesist when I say that the life of a human embryo is more valuable than the life of a being without such capacities.

18. How then can Prof Singer reject any appeal to the human species?

Prof Singer claims frequently that mere membership in our own biological species cannot be a morally relevant criterion for this right (to life).

But he rarely gives any indication of what he means by "biological species," still less of what he means by "membership."

The closest indication seems to be possession of the appropriate set of chromosomes. He seems to miss the fact completely that an individual with the set of chromosomes belonging to "a member of the species Homo sapiens" has, precisely in those chromosomes, the capacities that will enable it to exercise the characteristics that he speaks of and that most people would say mark it out from all other animals.

19. What relevance has all this to public attitudes to the human embryo?

Any assessment of public attitudes to the human embryo will be worthless unless it has included an investigation of the assumptions of respondents regarding the facts.

My paper shows that assumptions by the public that a human embryo is not a person from the time of fertilisation are likely to be based on a distortion of the history of embryology, a neglect of basic inquiry, and ignorance of the relevant results of contemporary biological science.