THE BEGINNING OF LIFE

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The first of two lectures entitled 'Issues of Life and Death' delivered at St Mary le Strand in March 1999 for the Liddon Trust. The second lecture was on euthanasia

There are a number of ethical issues connecting with the beginning of life, most obviously abortion and most recently research on embryos. These issues have a number of aspects, particularly in relation to fertility treatment and genetic manipulation but they all assume answers to prior questions about what it is to be a human being and when it is that an entity, to use a neutral term, is accorded the full protection due to a human person. So it is that in this first lecture I will be concentrating on souls, persons and embryos.

Until recently it was usual to think and speak of human beings 'having souls'. This language was taken to indicate that our centre of consciousness, the 'I', that feeling, thinking, choosing mystery, that me which I know only in part but which nevertheless directs my being, is an immortal spiritual reality. According to the second century theologian Origen our souls pre-exist their bodies; and according to much Hindu and Buddhist thought this spiritual self can persist through multiple rebirths. Neither of these fascinating paths can be followed now. My starting point must be the traditional Christian view that each soul is created with its body, that each soul is unique and that we have only one earthly existence. So the Catechism of the Catholic Church says that 'every soul is created immediately by God [. . .] and [. . .] it is immortal.'[1] The Roman Catholic Church also teaches that from the moment the ovum is fertilised we have the life of a new human being, a person, a spiritual soul, even if this cannot be ascertained by empirical data.[2] The implications of this are obvious. In considering the possibility of abortion, even the morning after pill, and embryo research, we are considering what might or might not be done to a human soul.

A modern scientific view approaches the question of the beginning of life rather differently. On this perspective consciousness, our capacity to feel, think and choose, to remember and hope, is integrally related to the brain. We know that there is a correlation between conscious activity and impulses in the brain and that if part of the brain is affected by accident, illness, drugs or an operation the way we feel, think and act can be decisively affected. This is a fundamental assumption behind modern medical practice and much scientific research. It has also given new impetus to the age old philosophical debate about the nature of consciousness and its relationship to the body, which is today perhaps at once the most central and most teasing question of philosophy.

There are those who take the view that what happens in the mind is simply an epiphenomenon of impulses in the nervous system and brain. There is not only a correlation but what happens in the chemistry of the brain gives rise to thoughts and conscious choices: nothing that happens in the mind happens without these predetermining physical causes. However there are a number of reasons why this form of the 'identity theory', according to which the mind or soul and the brain are identified, should be subjected to sceptical scrutiny. First, on this account it is difficult to give consciousness itself a proper purpose in evolution. We now take it for granted that creatures develop particular capacities because these function in helping it to

[1] *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Geoffrey Chapman 1994), para 336.
[2] *Evangelium Vitae* (Catholic Truth Society 1995), para 60.

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adapt and survive. If consciousness were really nothing more than a reflection of what went on in the brain then what would be its function? In fact consciousness does have a very particular and crucial function. It is to transmute instinctual drives and sensual perceptions in such a way that the outcome of human choice does not simply reflect the strength of the sensory stimuli in the brain.[3] We are stimulated by what we take in through our five senses, and the brain is indeed given a programme by our genetic endowment. But consciousness does not simply act as a transmitter for all this. It transmutes what it receives in such a way that truly reasonable or totally unreasonable choices are made.

More generally there is the argument against any form of determinism, that it is logically self-defeating. For it would mean that the statement 'everything is determined' would itself be determined by the movement of certain impulses in the brain. But a fundamental assumption of rational discourse is that we can approach, even if we can never fully comprehend or grasp, the truth of things. The search for the truth about the relationship between mind and brain presupposes that however integral the one is to the other, there is a realm of the mind with its own validity and liberty.

Keith Ward gives the analogy of our ability to walk. We can walk from A to B; this is part of our physical given. But as human beings we can also envisage this walk and we can imagine not walking the distance but cycling it. Furthermore we can simply imagine that other place. To continue the analogy, we might also reflect on the morality of cycling or going by car. All this is no doubt physically rooted in our capacity physically to go from A to B. But it takes us off into a whole new realm of imagination, logic and conscious choice.[4]

This means in particular that there is the possibility of what has been described as 'top-down causation', an argument which has been developed by a number of people. Most emphatically this view does not deny the material, physical basis of our existence including consciousness. But it takes into account the fact that in the process of evolution the way a creature functions above a certain level of complexity is more than the sum of each individual part working on its own. An organism functions as a whole, and this gives it new capacities. Furthermore, there are certain critical thresholds in evolution where capacities, once latent, come into operation. One of these thresholds is the emergence of consciousness in human beings. At this point the human ability to predict consequences, and so take steps to safeguard and improve life, means that humans fairly quickly became dominant over other creatures. On this view consciousness serves a vital function and though integrally related to the brain in this life, cannot simply be reduced to it. Our conscious thoughts, hopes and choices play their part in a complex network of causality and may themselves trigger movements in the brain. As John Habgood has pointed out, explanations of how and why things happen should not be confined to the description of a simple chain of events, as when a vase is knocked over and broken.

> 'Most events have complex multiple causes. Why did I catch a cold? Because there was a virus about; because I had been overworking and was tired; because I travelled in a train full of people sneezing; because I have been living on a poor diet, There may be a hundred different causes, some of which will be of the kind 'a virus got into my body'; another of the kind 'I was run down'. In references to 'top-down causation' it is causes of the latter kind, the influence of the whole on the parts, which are in view.'[5]

As he goes on to say

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[3] Charles Rycroft (ed), *Psychoanalysis Observed* (Constable 1966), p 12.
[4] Keith Ward, *Religion and Human Nature* (Oxford University Press 1998), p 145.
[5] John Habgood, *Being a Person* (Hodder and Stoughton 1998), p 1467.

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> 'because the brain is such a plastic organ, constantly making new internal connections between nerve fibres or reinforcing or inhibiting old ones and because there is strong evidence that higher mental activities involve the brain as a whole rather than any particular part of it, it might be considered the example *par excellence* of the way in which emergent properties can affect the operation of the parts from which they emerged. Consciousness, in other words, really does make a difference. It is the tapping into, and attending to, all that our human environment has given us, and opening out of the human organism towards new realms of possibility.'

If we take this view, we will reject a reductionist materialism, but what are we to make of traditional language of the soul? Can we any longer talk meaningfully of God creating the soul immediately, as though there is a separate spiritual reality related, however integrally, to the body? What we know is that the 'I', our centre of consciousness, our capacity to reflect and choose, emerges at a particular stage, both in evolution itself and in the development of the individual life. This is the soul if you like. But it has not been created separately. It has emerged at a particular point, even it if was latent and potentially there before. This is what Keith Ward calls 'the soft materialist view', on which

> 'the soul originates and develops as the brain does, and its proper form of being is to bring to consciousness the properties of the material world in which it is embodied, and to shape those properties in accordance with reflectively formulated goals, rooted in the natural desires and behaviours of the physical organism.'[6]

This, we might argue, is very much in accord with the biblical view, which sees human beings not as souls trapped in bodies but as psychosomatic unities, body, mind and spirit bound together in an integral whole. As Genesis 2:7 puts it 'The Lord God formed man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils a breath of life; and man became a living being.'

This does not mean that language about the soul has become otiose. Soul language safeguards some fundamental truths about what it is to be a human being. First, that we have an inescapable spiritual dimension, an orientation towards God, and secondly, that God is immortal and desires us to share his immortality. Some may also want to retain the concept of God creating each soul immediately as a way of safeguarding two other truths. First, that each human being is unique, not just a result of their parents' genes, and secondly, that they are not just a material reality but

> 'a truly emergent entity, carrying new properties of understanding and intentionality. It has a unique individuality. It is capable, as the inner aspect of the brain of existing without that brain, though it is a natural part of its perfection to be embodied in a public world of interacting persons and, since it is essentially capable of conscious relationship to God, it is rational to hope that God will cause it to exist in a form in which such a relationship can be properly actualised.'[7]

My starting point was the statement in the Roman Catholic catechism that God creates each soul immediately and the general teaching of the Church that the language of persons and souls is applicable from the moment that the ovum is fertilised. I have suggested that if we look at life in developmental terms, both evolution of life on earth and the unfolding of the individual person, then we should think of consciousness, and hence the soul, as an emerging entity, rooted in the brain and on this earth dependent upon it, yet also inhabiting a rational and spiritual realm of genuine freedom. But at what point does this consciousness arise? And what status should be

[6] *Religion and Human Nature*, p 147.
[7] *Religion and Human Nature*, p 158.

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accorded to the emerging entity before its emergence? Here we move from the language of persons and souls to that of embryos.

Before considering the moral status of the embryo it is important to be clear about the process of development in the early stages after fertilisation. Fertilisation takes place when the ovum and sperm come together. This takes place in the upper part of the fallopian tube. At this point the single cell formed by fertilisation begins to divide into first two, then four, then eight small cells and so on in a process called cleavage. At the same time this cluster of cells passes down the fallopian tube into the cavity of the uterus during a period of four to five days. At first these cells are freely floating but over a period of six or seven days they enter the lining of the uterus and by the eleventh to the thirteenth day after fertilisation implantation is complete. During this period the sixteen or more cells are shaped somewhat like a blackberry and at that stage called a morula form a fluid filled space. Further development occurs resulting in some of the cells becoming the placenta and fetal membranes and others a plate of cells described as the embryonic disc. Within this disc the first recognisable features of the embryo begin to appear, the first of which is the heaping up of cells at one end on the fourteenth or fifteenth day after fertilisation known as the primitive streak; this marks the establishment of bilateral symmetry in the previous assembly of cells, after which twinning can no longer take place. By the seventeenth day the neural group appears and by the twenty-second or twenty-third day this has developed to become the neural folds which in turn start to fuse and form the recognisable antecedent of the spinal cord.

All of this is clearly a miraculous, awe inspiring process. But it is interesting and important that from the time of the ancient Greeks, although of course they had no knowledge of modern embryology, it was stressed that this is a process. According to Aristotle, or at least the view attributed to him, there is first a vegetable soul, then an animal soul and finally an intellectual soul, and it is only at the last point there is properly speaking a human being. On the Aristotelian view this animation, from the Latin word *anima* meaning soul, occurs forty days after conception in the case of the male and up to ninety days after conception for a female.

When it comes to the Church's tradition a similar process was acknowledged.[8] This was most relevant when it came to penalties for abortion. Abortion was always regarded as gravely sinful. But a distinction in the gravity of the offence was recognised depending on whether it occurred before or after the foetus was 'formed'. The distinction arose on the basis of the Septuagint translation of Exodus 21:22. In that version it reads

> 'And if two men strive and smite a woman with child, and her child be born imperfectly formed, he shall be forced to pay a penalty: as the woman's husband may lay upon him, he shall pay with a valuation. But if it be perfectly formed, he shall give life for life.'

The Greek word there literally means 'not yet so formed as to be a copy or portrayal of the human form' (*me exeikonismenon*). If it were *exeikonismenon*, then life was to be given for life. The Septuagint was the version most commonly used by the early Christian Fathers, as well as by the New Testament writers and this translation was followed in the old Latin versions. This makes the distinction between *nondum formatus* and *formatus*. St Gregory of Nyssa followed this distinction maintaining about the unformed embryo that 'so long as it is in this unformed state it is something other than a human being', as did St Augustine who said,

> 'if what is brought forth is unformed (*informe*) but at this stage some sort of living, shapeless thing (*informater*) then the law of homicide would not apply, for it could not

[8] G. R. Dunstan and Mary J. Seller (eds), *The Status of the Human Embryo* (King Edward's Hospital Fund for London and OCU 1998).

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be said that there was a living soul in that body, for it lacks all sense, if it be such as is not yet formed (*nondum formata*) and therefore not yet endowed with its senses.'[9]

The Celtic penitential suggested extremely severe penalties for abortion, but once again they made a distinction between 'the liquid matter of the infant matter in the womb', the usual term then for the forming embryo, and 'if the soul has entered it'. A similar distinction remained entrenched in canon law and the moral discipline of the Catholic west. It is also there in St Thomas Aquinas, who follows Aristotle closely, as well as the distinction in the Septuagint version of Exodus 21:22.

All this however began to change in the nineteenth century when advances in medicine made abortion more possible and safer. As a result the incidence of abortion rose and this was seen as a moral threat calling for a drastic remedy. Pius IX, therefore, in his Bull of 1869 declared excommunicate all who procured abortion, without any distinction as to whether the foetus was formed, animate or inanimate. This teaching has been followed by the Roman Catholic Church ever since.

This reading of the history, due primarily to Professor Gordon Dunstan, has been very influential both in shaping Anglican attitudes to the ethical issues surrounding the embryo and, one suspects, on the committee of inquiry under Dame Mary Warnock, which recommended that experiments on embryos be allowed under licence up to fourteen days after conception.[10] It is important to note however that even if this gradualist view of the moral state of the embryo is taken, it does not follow that no degree of protection should be accorded to it. On the contrary. We now recognise, for example, that whether or not animals have rights, we have a responsibility towards them and that, particularly in relation to animals with a developed nervous system, a degree of protection should be offered them. Furthermore, human beings have always felt deeply that when someone has died, the body of that person should be respected. There is a continuum: even in the early stages of development the cluster of cells has the potential to develop all those characteristics of thought and choice and love that distinguish us. The question however is whether that developing cluster of cells is to be accorded the full right to life that we recognise is due to both an adult and a newly born babe. Since Pope Pius IX the Roman Catholic Church has been quite clear that it should. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says

> 'Human Life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception. From the first moment of existence, a human being must be recognised as having the rights of a person—among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life'.[11]

One of the arguments in favour of this is that the potential for all those characteristics that we associate with being human is there from the beginning and the potential has the same moral standing as the fully developed.

Some point out that we can in fact trace the start of a person's life back behind the moment of fertilisation to the separate egg and sperm of the parents. The future life of a person is also in some sense there, in the two sets of separate genes. But we should make a distinction between potentiality and what is possible. There is certainly a possible life in the separate egg and sperm. But an intervention has to happen first. They have to come together. So we might say that there is a possible house in a pile of bricks. But we would not normally say that there is a potential house there. There is a potential when what is there can, under appropriate conditions, unfold without the intervention of new factors. So conception, when potential is there for the first time, is an appropriate starting point for moral reflection. But is the potential morally equitable with the actual, the fully developed? Certainly in everyday life we make a

[9] Quoted by Dunstan.
[10] Mary Warnock, *A Question of Life* (Blackwell 1985).
[11] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para 2270.

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distinction. Thousands of acorns fall from an oak tree and we think nothing of it. But on a particular grown oak there may very well be a preservation order. A severely mentally handicapped girl has the potential for child bearing. But for her own protection a decision might be made to sterilise her, to allow her potential for motherhood to be overridden by other moral considerations concerning her well being.

Huge changes take place in the period from fertilisation to the point when a child in the womb is viable. Strangely, both those who think that cells should be protected from the moment of conception, and those who think that moral status should only be accorded at the birth or when the child in the womb is viable, in fact discount the moral significance of these enormous changes. As Peter Byrne has written

> 'It is surely implausible to suppose that the whole moral question rests on what happens to one or other of the extreme points between which massive biological development occurs.'[12]

Those who argue for conception as the defining point for personhood argue that from this moment there is the potential for all those human characteristics of reflection, deliberation and appreciation. If we fail to acknowledge a human person here, will we not also fail to acknowledge a person at the end of life when someone might be far gone with Alzheimer's, or be deeply unconscious. This raises further questions which will be considered in my second lecture, but one point can be made here. At the end of a person's life we are dealing with a person. Their capacity to think or to choose may be intermittent or reduced to virtually nothing but there can be no doubt (except in the case of someone diagnosed as being in a Persistent Vegetative State, with which I will be dealing) that the presence before us is one who has developed into a person. There is no parallel here with the early stages after fertilisation.

It is also relevant to note that with the early cluster of cells it is not yet clear which will develop into a distinct individual. Some of the cells go to form the placenta and membranes. Further, at this stage, up to fourteen days, it is possible for the cells to form into twins or to begin to form into twins and then to reform.

Another fact to be taken into account is that as many as three-quarters of the eggs which are fertilised are lost, most of them before they implant in their mother's womb about a week after conception. Although it has been known for centuries that some embryos miscarry spontaneously, the magnitude of very early embryonic loss has only recently been recognised.[13] Moreover at least half of the fertilised eggs which miscarry are abnormal. This fact has a bearing on the earlier discussion about souls. If every fertilised egg was indeed a soul, that is, an immortal spiritual reality created independently of the biological process, then, according to these figures, three-quarters of heaven would be populated by souls that lived for less than a week. This does not seem congruous with what we know of a God who has chosen to create persons through a process of development. Indeed, it is very difficult to think of souls, with centres of consciousness, that have not come about through a process. It seems better to acknowledge the fact that nature is amazingly prodigal, not only in the number of acorns produced in each oak and the millions of sperms that are produced but also in the number of fertilised eggs which do not come to term.

This also has a bearing on foetuses which are identified as suffering from some disorder which would leave them to be born very handicapped. Parents in this position are in a terrible dilemma. On the one hand there is an evolving life to be protected. On the other hand, nature itself ensures that the majority of abnormal foetus are not born. God has given us medical skills and the capacity to interact with nature in

[12] Peter Byrne, 'The Animation Tradition in the Light of Contemporary Philosophy' in *The Status of the Human Embryo*, p 99.

[13] Peter Byrne, *Personal Origins, the Report of a Working Party on Fertilisation and Embryology of the Board for Social Responsibility* (2nd revised edn) (Church House Publishing 1996).

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order to maximise health. It can be argued that in allowing the abortion of an abnormal foetus we are simply carrying out our God-given responsibility as co-workers with God in the bringing about of a healthy human life. Here of course we have to be very careful. Handicapped people have made and continue to make the most amazing contribution to human existence. Those who have brought up a handicapped child, for example someone suffering from Downs Syndrome, will often witness to the great joy that this brings, as well as the anguish. Nor would we want to do anything which would undermine people who are differently abled or in any way lessen their sense of self-worth and value. But to say that the most wonderful good things can be drawn out of what seems to be tragic is not to say that God wills that tragic situation in the first place in order to bring good out of it. God wills health and healthy foetuses. The fact that divine love working in and through human love can create new possibilities under the most dire circumstances is a truth to which Christians are deeply committed. But God does not deliberately plan or organise those circumstances in the first place. They are inherent in creation itself. As Professor Dunstan has written, reflecting on the use of embryos for research in relation to the prodigality of nature,

> 'Upon this waste, medical intervention imposes an economy. If successful it provides a baby where otherwise there would be none. The genetic information stored in the cells can be read; what is thus learned can be ordered into knowledge; knowledge can be put to beneficial, lifesaving use. The argument is *not* that because nature is prodigal we may be prodigal; because so much life or potential life is lost, one more does not matter. It is the reverse. It is that nature's prodigality is turned to creative use; natural loss is lessened, albeit to a minute degree'.[14]

For a number of years Helen Oppenheimer has put forward the notion that a person is best understood as 'a centre of mattering'.[15] This is for her a basic concept, as that of the good was for G.E. Moore; one which cannot be defined in terms of anything else but which can be explicated through examples. The starting point for this is each person's sense that 'I matter'. This has the advantage that the old dichotomy between fact and value, which asserts that you cannot derive an ought from an is, no longer holds sway. Value is written in from the start.

The concept of mattering has a number of refinements. For example it implies a fundamental capacity to mind and to be minded about. Knowing that I matter, I mind, I can also enter other people's sense that they matter, that they mind, and I can experience them minding about me, attending to me, caring for me and loving me.

Like Keith Ward, John Habgood and the position of this paper, Helen Oppenheimer rejects the concept of a separate soul whilst at the same time arguing against a reductionist view of the person.

Helen Oppenheimer develops this line of thought in an interesting way in relation to abortion, drawing an analogy between the total dependence of the foetus on the mother and our radical dependence upon God. Abortion may be legally available but the mother has the gift of life.

I propose to take the concept of mattering and pursue it in a way that Helen Oppenheimer does not do, in relation to the status of the pre-embryo, the embryo and the unborn child. It is difficult to regard the pre-embryo as a centre of mattering. There is no 'I' to mind, even in an inchoate way. With the emergence of the embryo, however, and the formation of the primitive streak or very rudimentary nervous system, there begins the possibility of feeling, of response, even though at this stage it is

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[14] *The Status of the Human Embryo.*

[15] See especially Helen Oppenheimer. 'Ourselves, Our Souls and Bodies' in *Studies in Christian Ethics*, vol 4, no 1; 'Abortion: A Sketch for a Christian View' in *Studies in Christian Ethics*, vol 5, no 2; and 'Mattering' in *Studies in Christian Ethics*, vol 8, no 1.

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all unconscious. There is not at that point a self-conscious 'I'. But what is experienced from then on becomes part of the self.

An example from poetry could be given. In one of his poems Les Murray remembers his Australian boyhood. There is a vivid evocation of landscape and what it feels like to be a small boy in it.[16] He could not have articulated this sense at the time. But as an adult he was able to draw on the experience of these early feelings to make a poem. So, we might say, we draw on early responses, even in the womb, as we emerge, grow and became an articulate self. At some point along the line the embryo begins to mind, even if for a long time that minding is inarticulate.

Mattering is a polar concept. I matter to myself, but I am a self because I matter to others. Certainly, on a Christian view, I matter to God, who undergirds all human mattering. So although the pre-embryo is not a centre of mattering, it might matter very much to the parents who desperately want a child. The embryo and unborn child matter even more, for already they are experienced, imagined and expected. That of course is why a miscarriage can be grievously felt and even more a stillbirth, as good pastoral practice now recognises.

Helen Oppenheimer states that it does not help ethical considerations to draw a distinction between what is potential and what is developed, with the embryo being described as a potential person. But in ordinary life we often make a distinction between what is potential and that which is fully realised, and this distinction has important consequences.

As already argued, loss of potential is always real loss, as we might very much regret the early death of a promising musician. But the death of a world class performer leaves an even bigger hole. This is not just because a world class performer has become better known and appreciated. It is that in the course of his or her musical life there has been, to use the commercial phrase, 'added value'. The hours and hours of practice, the testing performances and deepening experience have made a difference. It is not just that there is a wider appreciation. There is something to appreciate, something has been developed which is recognised and applauded.

This brings out the importance of evolution, development and growth in the divine scheme of things. God has not just conjured things in the air ready made. Everything that exists, from the basic units of matter at the microscopic level, have come about through a process of growth, development and evolution. This is true of the individual life span as well. In short, there is something fundamental here for understanding human life and how what matters is to be achieved. Life is a process of growth in which value is increasingly recognised and realised. The summit of this of course is the recognition of God himself and the realisation of the divine life in us. As Helen Oppenheimer puts it,

> 'I think the image of value as "grounded" or "rooted" in God, as flowers are rooted in earth, ought to indicate that God is no optional extra. Sceptics, so to say, are non-gardeners who can truly appreciate the roses while knowing nothing about the soil in which they grow.'[17]

The concept of growth and development raises the question of drawing a line for ethical purposes, as does this whole theme. It is very easy to think that once we start drawing lines, where we draw them is simply arbitrary. This is not true. Reasons can be given and evidence adduced for drawing the line at one point rather than another. It might be argued for example that setting the speed limit at thirty miles per hour in a built up area is arbitrary. This is not so, for evidence can be brought forward to show that if drivers go much faster, there will be greater injury and loss of life. If it is argued that the speed ought to be lower, it has to be pointed out that drawing lines also

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[16] Les Murray, 'Spring Hail' in *Collected Poems* (Carcanet 1998), p 8.

[17] Helen Oppenheimer, 'Mattering' in *Studies in Christian Ethics*, vol 8, no 1.

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involves weighing one value against another, in this case the desire to safeguard life with the value of personal freedom. It has been pointed out that the best way of reducing road deaths would be to fix a sharp spike on every car steering wheel pointing towards the driver. By this method road deaths would be reduced to zero. But it would be at the expense of other values in a way that most cars users would find intolerable.

We have to draw the line about what counts as cruelty to animals. Jains believe that we should not harm even the smallest insect, and members of one sect always wear a covering over their mouth in order not to draw in any insects by mistake. Most people, however, would tread on a few ants without giving it a second thought. When it comes to animals with more developed nervous systems, greater sensitivity is shown, and pets can take on many of the characteristics of human beings. But again, where we draw the line is not totally arbitrary. Evidence can be bought forward, for example in relation to the nervous system and how much the animals do in fact suffer.

It is easy to think that when we get into the business of drawing lines, then we are concerned solely with a human judgment. But not only can evidence be adduced for drawing the line at one point rather than the other, it is still a reality that is being responded to, rather than a value being imposed. This is crucial in relation to the developing embryo. In saying that we draw the line at, say, the formation of the primitive streak, we are not saying that human beings have decided to attribute value at that point. Rather, the developing complexity of the organism, together with the rudimentary beginnings of a nervous system, have a value which is recognised. This was a point strongly made by the Warnock Committee. Although there was disagreement amongst members of the committee about whether research should be allowed in the first fourteen days after conception, they were totally agreed that at whatever point the line was drawn the growing entity, to use a neutral term, was inherently valuable at that point. It was not that human beings decided to accord it value. Rather, the value was a given and something to be recognised, not created.

Michael Banner has recently written a profoundly Christian, indeed prophetic, critique of the practice of abortion in our society in which he argues that the very terms in which the debate is conducted are misconceived.[18] If we looked at the issue in a truly Christian way then

> 'Abortion would not first of all be thought wrong, but would be quite simply, as Bonhoeffer says, unthinkable.'

Banner begins with a persuasive demolition of a purely consequentialist approach to abortion. In contrast to this there are certain actions which are simply wrong whatever the consequences. And we all agree that there are at least some actions which fall into this category, for example torturing children. This raises the question of the foetus. Are we or are we not dealing with a person, whom it would be wrong in all circumstances to kill? He considers a number of arguments which seek to show that killing a foetus is a justifiable exception to the general rule about killing people. The foetus is not rational, it is not viable, it does not feel pain and, being incapable of feeling pain, is not a sentient being.

Banner argues that some of these criteria, for example the capacity to think or to feel, are stipulative. In other words a definition is given which assumes what has yet to be shown. Stipulative definitions are, he says, arbitrary in that there are any number we could use. For example we could say that to be a person someone had to have an IQ in excess of 100. Two points can be made in relation to Banner's argument. First, we are not trying to stipulate the criteria which must be a met for an entity to be categorised as a person but pointing to characteristics by which we recognise a person to be such—for example an ability or capacity to talk, to pray and to think.

[18] Michael Banner, *The Practice of Abortion: A Critique* (Darton, Longman and Todd 1999).

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Secondly, the only alternative to such inward characteristics is the human body. But not every body is a person. A dead body is the body a person who once was alive but is so no longer. The body deserves respect but is not given absolute protection. We now diagnose people as brain dead and switch off the machine that keeps their bodily functions going. There is the mysterious case of Persistent Vegetative State (PVS) to be discussed in the next lecture. It is true that some Roman Catholic theologians have argued for the body rather than the mind as an indication of personhood; have taken a biological rather than a biographical approach. But if, for example, the upper brain has been irrevocably damaged, though the body may continue to function, it is difficult to say that we are still dealing with a person. The body is, on this earth, an indispensable precondition of personhood: but it does not, by itself, constitute what it is to be a person.[19]

Banner also argues that it is wrong to deprive people of capacities they will possess in the future, so the potential for sentience is as morally significant as actually being sentient. An answer to this point was made earlier. But Banner brings in the fact that we now acknowledge an obligation to future generations, through such concepts as sustainable development. Though future generations lack present capacities including sentience, we allow their claim upon us. We do indeed, but we do not allow the claims of the unborn generations of the future totally to override matters of life and death here and now. However strong the claims of the future might be, we still recognise that the claims of those now alive for the means to achieve a basic standard of living are paramount. In other words, whilst we quite rightly recognise that the claims should lead the developed world to stop polluting the atmosphere, we recognise that the issue, though no less pressing, is more complex in countries like India and China which are in the process of development.

Banner then goes on to consider the development of the pre-embryo and the reasons commonly given, which I have already discussed, for thinking that it does not have absolute protection. He argues that the matter is unproven and that a proper moral caution indicates we should not use such arguments 'for if the killing of a foetus is possibly wrong that possibility argues against killing, rather than providing a justification for it.' Therefore killing the foetus cannot be regarded as a morally justifiable exception to the general rule against killing people. But there is an ambiguity about his use of the word 'killing' here. There are degrees of wrongness. Killing a cat or a dog without proper justification is wrong, but it is not of the same gravity as killing a baby.

Banner believes that we have to go beyond the present debate. Even a 'right to life' approach is misconceived because it is predicated in response to the 'right to choose' school and could imply that life, rather than God, is the reality to which we are called to respond. Nor is it any use attempting to reform the law. Instead, we have to take up Bonhoeffer's 'sharp swords' of God's wisdom and simplicity and proclaim life in Jesus Christ:

> 'This way of life, in what is done as much as in what is said, would be welcoming of children, female as well as male, handicapped as well as unhandicapped, planned as well as unplanned . . . in that life of discipleship there would be nothing of the despising of human existence; instead . . . there would be a life of joy in which abortion would not first of all be thought wrong, but would be quite simply, as Bonhoeffer says, unthinkable'.

This is a moving passage and it is easy to be swept up by its sheerly Christian spirit. The problem is that it collapses ethics into theology. It assumes that when something challenging is said about our life in Christ all is morally clear. But let us apply that

[19] Nigel Biggar, 'God, the Responsible Individual, and the Value of Human Life and Suffering' in *Studies in Christian Ethics*, vol 11, no 1.

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approach and spirit to other problems, the use of artificial means of contraception for example. We could say that when a couple engage in the act of love they should let matters take their course and welcome any child that ensues. Sexual love between married people is a sacramental act. If it is engaged in, let God look after the result. But most people do not think like that. We believe that it is responsible to plan the number of children we have and to use the most effective method of doing this. Or to take another example. I am attacked in the street. On a Christian view, that is, seeing the attacker as a person created and redeemed by Christ and bearing in mind the words of Jesus, I do not resist. But there is a serious question about whether I should or should not resist in some such circumstances. If the assailant attacks not only me but my child I have a duty to resist.

There are ethical questions to be answered, as well as the theological perspective to be given. The ethics needs to be done from and within that perspective. But it still has to be done. For abortion is not unthinkable. Indeed Banner himself allows it in one case when both the unborn child and the mother are going to die anyway unless there is an abortion.

I said that Banner's position is profoundly Christian and prophetic. Society needs to hear what he is saying and I would far rather it heard him than me: for it needs a prophetic stance, one which challenges its whole way of looking at this and other issues. But in the quiet of a counselling room for some who are deeply troubled, a teenager who has been raped for example and is full of revulsion for the foetus she is carrying as a result, there are ethical questions to be answered. How we answer them depends, as Banner agrees, on the status of the developing embryo. The position taken here is that if we consider a person as one who minds and is minded about there may be times, however few,when abortion is not only thinkable but may tragically be right, as for example it is sometimes tragically right for a country that is attacked to defend itself.

I must emphasise that nothing I have said should be taken as any lessening of the Church of England's dismay at the high level of abortions in our country at the moment.[20] The 1983 Resolution of General Synod said:

> 'All human life, including life developing in the womb, is created by God in his own image and is, therefore, to be nurtured, supported and protected.'

Resolutions of the General Synod have consistently sought to narrow the grounds on which abortion is carried out, and have maintained that the law has been interpreted too liberally, resulting in an unnecessary number of abortions. For example, the 1993 General Synod Resolution reiterated its view that:

> 'The number of abortions carried out since the passage of the Abortion Act 1967 is unacceptably high.'

A 1980 statement of the Board for Social Responsibility put it in these words:

> 'In the light of our conviction that the foetus has the right to life and to develop as a member of the human family, we see abortion. the termination of that life by the act of man, as a great moral evil. We do not believe that the right to life, as a right for attaining to persons, admits of no exceptions whatever; but the right of the innocent to life admits surely of few exceptions indeed.'

With that important safeguard and qualification the main theme of my lecture has been to argue:

First, that we should fully accept all assured scientific findings that relate consciousness to what happens in the brain and nervous system. This does not mean that

[20] *Abortion, a briefing paper* (Board for Social Responsibility. Church House, Westminster SWIP 3NZ, 1997).

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consciousness is reducible to those electrical impulses. On the contrary, consciousness has evolved because it has a distinct function in helping human beings to adapt and survive. There is a realm of mental activity which enables us to do that, one which is itself the cause of brain movements rather than their effect. This mental realm, though integrally related to the brain and body in this life, could in principle be expressed in other ways, through other media, which is what Christians mean when they talk about the resurrection of the body.

Secondly, I suggested that if we see consciousness as an emerging entity in this way, dependent on the brain having evolved to a certain point both in the evolutionary process itself and in the life cycle of the individual, we need to be very circumspect in talking about the soul being immediately created by God at conception or some point shortly afterwards. We cannot for example think of souls as independent, spiritual realities implanted by God. Rather, soul language points to a central truth about our humanity, that we are orientated towards God and shaped for immortality. To say that our souls are created immediately by God is to highlight each unique individual existence and its spiritual status.

Thirdly, I looked more closely at the development of the embryo, and argued on the basis of the Church's teaching until the nineteenth century and what actually happens in the development of the embryo, that though the cleaving cluster of cells is to be protected it cannot be accorded the moral status of an adult or newly born baby. The implication of this of course is that abortion in the early stages of pregnancy, and research on embryos up to fourteen days, cannot be absolutely debarred on moral grounds. There may indeed be grave and good reasons for an abortion under certain circumstances. There may also be overridingly good reasons to do with human fertility or advancing scientific knowledge that would greatly benefit humanity, why research should be carried out. Nor should we think of this as simply a cowardly concession to the spirit of the age. It is good that we can interact with nature, as God's co-workers, in bringing about the health which he wills for humanity and those healthy children that he desires. In short, this is something positive we can say with confidence and not just on the defensive. But even more positive is our vision of what it is to be a human being. In his poem on the resurrection, Gerard Manley Hopkins put it in these words:

> 'In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
> I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and
> This Jack, joke, potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,
> Is immortal diamond.'[21]

We can look at human beings from many different points of view. We are a strange mixture of the physical and the spiritual, the mortal and the immortal. We are as fragile and passing as potsherd, patch and matchwood. But all the time we are also immortal diamond, a person being shaped towards God and for God. In the end, this is what we are called to be and through Christ can be. When all else has served its purpose and falls away, we are immortal diamonds.

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[21] W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie (eds), 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection', *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Oxford University Press 1970).

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