

## BIOETHICS

### THE HUMAN STATUS OF THE PREEMBRYO

Presenters: Benedict M. Ashley, Aquinas Institute of Theology  
Mark F. Johnson, St. Joseph's College  
Thomas A. Shannon, Worcester Polytechnic Institute  
Maura Ryan, University of Notre Dame

Johnson began by providing the "state of the question," reciting the concerns that have led some Catholic theologians to question whether the preimplantation embryo ought to be considered a "person" as traditionally presented in Church teaching. Some writers, such as Donceel, thought that the medieval doctrine of delayed hominization fit well with modern theories of evolution, while others, such as Rahner and Häring, added theological concerns about "wastage." More recently, authors such as Richard McCormick and Thomas Shannon, using the seminal writings of Clifford Grobstein and Norman Ford, suggested that the biological facts surrounding the preimplantation embryo imply strongly, even probably, that the preimplantation embryo does not meet the criteria necessary to being a "person." Without taking a side on the issue, Johnson raised five questions for consideration during the seminar: (1) which academic disciplines should be employed in addressing this issue (biology, natural philosophy, metaphysics); (2) what the discipline of biology says about the preimplantation embryo; (3) whether the traditional answer to the metaphysical problem of delayed human ensoulment is so indebted to Aristotelian embryology that, in the wake of truer knowledge of embryology, we would do better to abandon the Aristotelian answer as well; (4) although we use biological information as normative in approaching this topic, what information do we use, logical or metaphysical, to critique the conclusions of biologists themselves; (5) whether the theologically inspired issue of "wastage" should be a factor in our considerations.

Thomas Shannon, who is inclined to the view that the preimplantation embryo is not a person, began his presentation by stating his presuppositions, namely the fact of the evolutionary development and process of living things and his commitment to Duns Scotus's doctrine of individuality. The Scotistic doctrine of individuality requires that this positive formality be found only in a reality that is indivisible and whose existence is incommunicable to others. When this doctrine is used to interpret the basic biological fact of the "totipotency" of the preimplantation embryo, namely the fact that the preimplantation embryo can "twin"

because its cells are not restricted, the doctrine would suggest that while the preimplantation embryo does possess a genetic individuality because of its own proper DNA, its acquisition of a developmental individuality is only gradual, and not present before implantation. This leads Shannon to maintain that the human preimplantation embryo does not possess an indivisibility necessary to be a person until its cells have become sufficiently restricted to prevent the embryo from becoming the source for more than one reality.

Benedict Ashley concurred with Shannon in his presupposition regarding the fact of evolution. But for his part he wanted merely to focus upon the biological information about the preimplantation embryo, and avoid importing metaphysical or other paradigms into the discussion. Ashley focused upon the character of the preimplantation embryo as a biological organism. All living things are composed of differentiated parts, parts that are unified by a single organ that contains a program that directs these parts to their appropriate functions, functions that serve the homeostasis and maturation of the whole. A unique organism is present when a reality possesses that directing program in a "brain-like" organ, and absent when that organ either does not exist or does not function because of some defect. For Ashley the biological question to be asked when considering the preimplantation embryo is whether in the preimplantation embryo, or even the zygote, there is a controlling center that is organizing the development of the whole. In Ashley's opinion the biological information shows that the highly complex development of the preimplantation embryo is taking place in an orderly fashion because of the presence of some controlling center, a controlling center that has been present from the zygote-stage onward, thus leading to the conclusion that an organism of the human species is present from conception. And for him that is the sufficient condition for personhood.

In the discussion that followed, pointed questions were directed towards both Shannon and Ashley. Many of the questions concerned the biological factualness of some of the statements made. Is it really true that the zygote's nucleus is active, and directive of development, as Ashley claimed? Or is it really true to claim, as Shannon did, that there is no differentiation of the individual cells in the preimplantation embryo? Is it possible, in the end, to avoid importing *any* presuppositions into the consideration of the issue, and simply to "let biology speak for itself"? (Ashley had used the notion of a "program," which seems to suggest a computer-based paradigm in his approach to the biological data.)

In the end, one questioner plaintively noted that Shannon and Ashley tended to address the questions asked of them in a "parallel" fashion; they each tended to answer the questions put to them from their own perspective, never really engaging the perspective of the other. What is the real difference between the two views if they both accept the biological information as it currently stands? Some discussion ensued, during which a general consensus emerged: Since so much of the discussion centered upon the issue of the genetic versus developmental individuality of the preimplantation embryo, the real question seems to be, as

Johnson phrased it, "What does it mean to be one?" or, as Shannon put it, "What does it mean to be indivisible?"

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## BLACK CATHOLIC BALTIMORE

Presenters: Cyprian Davis, St. Meinrad School of Theology  
Jamie T. Phelps, Catholic Theological Union  
Thaddeus Posey, University of St. Thomas

This workshop was convened at the request of Roger Haight, then president-elect of the CTSA, under the rubric of appreciating the heritage of the particular city in which the Society was meeting. The workshop aimed to contribute to correcting the misapprehension that black Catholics are a contemporary phenomenon.

Taking as his point of departure the arrival of Lord Baltimore in 1636, historian Cyprian Davis recounted the introduction, reception, and utilization of "African slave" labor in Catholic Maryland. Davis also discussed the early influx of the French, blacks, and mulattos from those islands known today as Haiti and the Dominican Republic as well. He uncovered the presence of a lively and vigorous black Catholic community, English-speaking as well as French-speaking, illustrated by thriving parish churches, schools, and the development of mutual aid and burial societies prior to the Civil War.

Thaddeus Posey, also a historian, concentrated his remarks on the Baltimore-based Oblate Sisters of Divine Providence. In 1829, under the direction of Sulpician Father James Joubert, Elizabeth Lange, Marie Magdalene Balas, Marie Rose Boegue, and Teresa Duchemin founded what is the oldest congregation of vowed woman religious of African descent in the Catholic world. The sisters conducted a school for black resident and day students and cared for orphans. Posey asserted that the sisters were a spiritual and cultural center for French-speaking black Catholics in Baltimore. Posey's research also uncovered at least two Catholic lay societies, the Society of the Holy Family and the Tobias Society, which were devoted to prayer, study, catechesis, and practical acts of charity.

Systematic theologian Jamie Phelps presented an analysis of the missionary dynamics and incipient ecclesiology of John Slattery who was a founder of the