

Abortion and delayed hominization, September 21, 2005

In the summa contra Gentiles book two chapter 89 Aquinas makes these remarks concerning the delayed reception of the human soul in the process of generation:

"Matter proceeds form in point of time; matter, that is to say, considered as being in potentiality to form but not as actually perfected by a form."

And later in the same chapter he says

"The body is not formed by virtue of the soul of the begotten, as regards the body's foremost and principal parts, but by virtue of the soul of the begetter, as we proved above. For all matter is similarly configured to its form; and yet this configuration results not from the action of the subject generated but from the action of the generator."

The problem with applying this to modern embryology is that we know that the zygote is the principal cause of the process of development that leads to a mature human being. That is, the zygote is the first stage in the existence of the principal cause of that process. So at one time the principle efficient cause of that process is the one-celled zygote; and another time it is the two-celled organism; and another time it is the four-celled organism; and so on.

Aquinas's remarks about the soul being infused later assume that the body receiving the soul is passive not active with respect to its development. That is certainly true with respect to of the soul as created by God, rather than as produced by human or any other created activity. But Aquinas's argument for the delayed reception of the human soul presupposes that we are talking about a begotten rather than a begetter. And it presupposes that the begotten is not the agent that forms the body of the begotten as regards its foremost and principal parts. Rather what is presupposed is that the begetter is the agent.

In other words Aquinas's understanding of the late reception of any substantial form in the process of generation, that is, the reception of the substantial form at the term of the process rather than at the beginning, assumes that there is an exterior agent causing the process, that is, in agent exterior to the body being formed. Today we know that that is not the case. We know that from the moment of conception the zygote is an efficient causal system, and agent causal system, acting toward making itself into a complete human being. Therefore the whole analogy with the process of generation as conceived by Aristotle applies only up to the point of conception, and does not apply after that point.

The only remaining argument then which seem to be the one expressed by Donceel when he says, "the human soul can exist only in a highly organized body" (page 79). But as we know from Behe the zygote is indeed a very very highly organized body. And in addition to the generic description of the zygote as very highly organized, there is the specific description of the zygote as the principal cause of whatever is human in the remaining process that the zygote initiates.

For example, the acorn is the principal cause of everything oaken in the completed oak tree. By that I mean that there are many other causes that contribute to the acorn's production of an oak tree. Water, nitrogen, oxygen, warmth, etc. But those other causes are found present in the generation of trees that are not oak trees, plants that are not oaken plants, bacteria, and so on. None of those other causes explain why the oak tree has the properties specific to an oak tree. The acorn is the only cause in that process, the fertilized acorn, is the only cause and that process that contributes the characteristics to the result that make an oak tree and oak as opposed to some other kind of tree.

Likewise, the zygote is the cause in the process that contributes the characteristics that makes the body it forms human, not some other kind of body. So from the beginning the cause of that process is not only very very complex; it is complex in a specifically human way. Since it is the principal cause of specifically human effects, why can't the zygote contain a specifically human

substantial form. Better, why should not the zygote contain a specifically human substantial form?  
that is, it is much more appropriate for the zygote to contain a specifically human substantial form  
than not.