

Thomism on Human Conception

The following is taken from James Royce, *Man and His Nature*, 342-43.

"*At the Moment of Conception.* We shall propose our argument as follows:

- Since the soul is the principle of vital operations, the human soul is present when there is specifically human operation.
- But there is evidence of specifically human operation from the first moment of conception.
- Therefore the human soul is present from the first moment of conception.

The major premise is simply a restatement of the principle of causality. How do we know that there is a soul at all? As a necessary explanation to account for the facts. All the philosophers involved agree on this.

The minor is a question of evidence. St. Thomas was not a biologist. Aristotle, although he held epigenesis rather than preformation centuries before the microscope was invented did not have the technological devices necessary to uncover any evidence of specifically human organization and operation in the embryo during its first stages. He thought that he was unjustified in asserting true human life before the male embryo was 40 days old, and before 80 to 90 days in the female. St. Thomas was equally honest in following this scientific unwillingness to go beyond the evidence. They taught a succession of forms, the embryo having first a vegetative soul and later a sensitive one, before the human soul finally arrives. Aquinas postulates an exception by way of miracle to account for Christ's soul being present from the moment of conception, as he is apparently unwilling to let theological convenience dictate a systemic position which would go contrary to scientific evidence as he knew it at the time.

Some modern Scholastics seem reluctant to depart from this position, possibly because of unconscious emotional repugnance against asserting that St. Thomas was wrong. But if St. Thomas were alive today, he would be the first to insist that factual evidence and not his say should determine the issue."