One of the most fundamental questions that is increasingly facing bioethicists and society alike is the question, "What does it mean to be human?" "In what consists the act of being human?" "Is my humanity a 'bodily' humanity?" In every area of philosophical concern we are always thrown back to these basic questions.

I hold that every human being is a human person, and every human person is a human being. I also hold that the existence of a human being, say my own existence, began when my bodily existence began, that is when I was conceived.

There are some who do not maintain that human beings are human persons as I do. These differences in view indicate that here we are faced with a problem about the recognition of what we take human beings to be as we experience them, and so as we experience ourselves. Obviously, the facts, say, about our embryonic beginnings--as much as the beginnings of other animals--are well known to biologists and to most of us; the facts are the same, they are written in good biology books. Yet these facts, these realities, are seen to be different, interpreted to be different; so different that some would say: "now at that stage there is a human being in its embryonic form." Another would say, "there is no human being at all; we have only a blob of cells," while still others would say "we have a potential human being, but not a full human being." Now if the account of the facts is biologically the same, for we do not quarrel much about the facts, but we quarrel a lot about their interpretation, then there must be a question concerning 'the vision,' the manner of 'seeing' the facts, the manner in which the same reality is interpreted. What is it that underlies this difference in interpretation? What makes our vision differ?
Reality, the concrete material world of things and human beings is not anyone's property; it is there for everyone to pay attention to, to become aware of. But for human beings, this awareness is not only a matter of physical vision, not only a matter of intelligence but also a matter of will and of imagination. For some it appears impossible to imagine themselves as embryos. We must challenge our poor imagination with our intelligence and allow it to see beyond only what we want to see. The human being by his or her free will can pay attention, or listen, or want to be aware, or not at all. I am confident enough to say that "lack of awareness is the root of all evil;" this lack, of course, may be deliberate or not. The effort to 'pay attention to reality' is an effort not only of intelligence but also of will. By this attention truth is born; it dawns on us, i.e., reality is manifested to us.

So let me draw your attention to three fundamental aspects of the human being to which we have to pay attention in order to see them in relation to the kind of beings we are: (i) the human being is bodily, organic, physical, (ii) the human being is also an integrated-unity-of-life, a living being, a living whole, a one, an individual; and (iii) the human being is a being with a temporal continuity, a being with a history, a being in time.

Every one of us has a history; the most basic aspect of our history is our bodiliness--the fact that we are embodied beings, living physical organisms. Our organism begins at conception, and is then genetically constituted, and in that very fact endowed with human powers and potential for growth. The historical continuity of embodiment, say, about myself, can be traced back to conception when I was constituted organically as a zygote, and then embryo, fetus, infant, child, and now an adult who is still here. I have been the same being all the way through. So in bodily terms I can rightly and truly say, "look, I am here, as a female being, and I began as such a bodily being at conception." "Yes," you may say, "but as an intelligent being, or as a free being, you may not have begun there." My response to such an assertion is, "Why not?"

Note this: At conception, I was endowed with a physical organism that had the actual inner power to become what I am now. That power was there from the beginning. The development of a living organism, of a living being, is indeed a process, but the being itself with the process of coming-to-be-an-adult has been there all the time. The being has been total, one, yet developing all the time. Living beings, and so human beings, are not like machines or houses, that come to be by installments. You may have half a clock, or half a house constructed, but you cannot have half of a dog, or half of a human being. Either we are fully present or we are not present at all.

Let me now draw your attention a little more to the idea of the human being as a unity, and organic whole. Every living being is generated as a whole, grows as a whole, moves as a whole, relates to others as a whole, dies as a whole. The early embryo as a living whole is a stable organism. As I have said elsewhere:

The kind of life that a zygote or an embryo has, because of the power it actually possesses is personal power, is personal life, the life of a personal being. By this inner power the zygote turns into the adult person. And clearly, the presence of personal powers must be attributed to a personal subject, they belong to someone, they are of someone, they are of a personal being.²

What I have sought to offer is an outline of why I believe human beings and human persons are one and the same. It is my belief that it is impossible to separate the two without doing an injustice to the logic of life. If we fail to follow that logic, no matter if it leads us to a conclusion that we don't want to see, we empower tyranny over the weak. And once that tyranny is unleashed, as we know, it can be almost impossible to undo the harm that comes from it.


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