

# Misinterpreting Aquinas

SIR — John Godfrey's arguments<sup>1</sup> in his not-so-veiled attempt to justify human embryo experimentation rest on fallacious reasoning and citations made out of context.

While accepting Godfrey's claims about the teaching of St Thomas Aquinas as agreeing with Aquinas's thought, we sense that a false impression is created through his convenient omissions of what Aquinas also says. Aquinas did *not* believe in continuous, gradual development. Rather, he held that during ontogenesis the embryo takes on a succession of discrete forms, the process being accomplished not by any *internal* process, but by the *external* power of the seed (*a virtutis quae est in semine, Summa Theologica* IaQ.118a.1ad4). Aquinas does specify the number of days this process requires; however, he categorically considers abortion (and, by extension, human embryo experimentation) as evil.

We also take issue with Godfrey's expedient deification of Aquinas. For although he "continues . . . to be the master of philosophical and theological universalism", Aquinas was subject to the same fallibility and corruption as the rest of us. Thus his thought is considered an extraordinary help, not the gospel truth.

Finally, we fail to see why a theology of person must be conceived as a transliteration of embryology's current grasp of the early stages of human development, as Godfrey suggests. Although it is true that embryology and modern genetics illuminate biological aspects of human reproduction and development, providing valuable knowledge for practical and humanitarian endeavours, these sciences alone inform us only in part about what it is to be a person. It seems to us that the essential meaning of an individual human life can be apprehended through modes of thinking commonly considered philosophical or theological. Clearly, one's assessment of the irreducible worth of a person influences the significance one attaches to information suggesting when during embryogenesis a human being may rightfully be called a person.

**David A. Jones**

*Blackfriars, Oxford, UK*

**Donald T. Haynie**

*New Chemistry Laboratory,*

*University of Oxford,*

*South Parks Road, Oxford OX1 3QT, UK*

SIR — The axiom "There is no moment when human life starts" must be discarded as unsound. If it denotes that life is continuous from one generation to the next, then it is a boring truism: spontaneous generation theories were refuted long ago. If used to convey the idea that (human) life appears as a diffuse living

magma, from which individuals of obscure inception emerge, it is obscurantism.

Godfrey<sup>1</sup> concludes, from the fact that both egg and sperm are alive, that there is not a clear-cut beginning for individual human life. That seems an unfair inference. Fairness forces us to acknowledge that egg and sperm differ utterly from the zygote. Gametes are wonderfully differentiated but terminal cells, fatefully condemned to die in a few hours or days. Fertilization changes things radically: besides a complex cellular process, it originates a new, sudden and violent burst of life that grows and lasts years and years.

When the Pope speaks of fertilization, he is not analysing cellular or molecular phenomena in a reductionistic mood. He is dealing with the human action of begetting children. Godfrey's blurred biological picture of fertilization denies a fundamental fact of life: fathering. If human life does not begin with fertilization, what is then the biological and human decisive role of the father? Children would appear then as products of an odd and nameless asexual continuum, not the conception of the love and flesh of a woman and a man.

As scientists, we must not cut ourselves off from the real world. Godfrey's Commentary, with its adversarial feelings towards John Paul II, represents, among other things, an impoverished and unnatural version of human fertilization.

**Gonzalo Herranz**

*University of Navarra,  
School of Medicine,  
31080 Pamplona, Spain*

SIR — Godfrey argues that the Pope ignores most of modern genetics and embryology<sup>1</sup>. But he bases his criticism on a misunderstanding of what the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church believe.

Details of the time taken for fertilization and development of the nervous system are not central to the concept of the person as understood by the Church. Even so, the advances in our understanding of fertilization and embryology have emphasized the importance of fertilization as the start of the life of a new individual.

The presentation of St Thomas Aquinas's view of ensoulment is a most remarkable adaptation of what he actually said. Examination of articles XXVII and XXXIII of his *Summa Theologica* clearly shows that he argued that infusion of the soul occurred at the same time as formation of the body, with no distinction between the sexes. Subsequently, 38 years after his death, the Council of Vienna formally defined that the soul is the 'form' of the body. ". . . Spirit and matter in man are not two natures united, but rather their union form a single nature."<sup>2</sup> The

dignity of Man is dependent on this single nature and it explains why Catholics give equal respect to all humans regardless of their state of development or intellectual ability.

It is a sad reflection of our times that there are many who, though professing the Catholic faith, ignore its teaching. The Pope has addressed this problem in his recent encyclical *Veritatis splendor*<sup>3</sup>. Catholics believe that there are such things as absolute truths that cannot be changed — otherwise they would not be truths. God has given us free will and so we have the freedom to accept or reject the truth; we cannot change it. Aquinas was right in arguing that fairness and common sense should be used in applying human laws. But the teaching of the Church in the area of reproduction is based on natural law. Just as a scientist cannot change the law of gravity because it does not suit his purpose, so too the Church cannot change the nature of Man.

Many have used the fear of overpopulation to criticize the Church's stand against artificial methods of contraception. Those interested should refer to data detailing the efficacy of natural methods<sup>4</sup>. Those data and the subsequent correspondence<sup>5</sup> prompted the editor of the *British Medical Journal* to comment: "This correspondence, I must say, has changed what may have been a prejudice on my part against natural methods of contraception."<sup>6</sup>

**Michael Jarmulowicz**

*(Hon. Secretary to the  
Guild of Catholic Doctors)  
6 St Andrews Road,  
London NW10 2QS, UK*

1. Godfrey, J. *Nature* **373**, 100 (1995).

2. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Chapman, London, 1994).

3. *The Splendour of Truth Shines*. Pope John Paul II. (Publ. Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993).

4. Ryder, R. E. J. *Br. med. J.* **307**, 723–726 (1993).

5. *Br. med. J.* **307**, 1357–1360 (1993).

6. *Br. med. J.* **307**, 1292 (1993).

## Tree of life

SIR — "Living organisms range in size from a diameter of about one hundredth that of a typical human cell to a length of 30 metres, with weights ranging from the infinitesimal to that of a medium-sized airliner" — H. C. Bennett-Clark's review of *Diatoms to Dinosaurs* (*Nature* **372**, 629; 1994).

Perhaps because Bennett-Clark is a zoologist he has overlooked the fact that there is another kingdom of living things called plants, which include the largest of all living things, the sequoia trees of California, estimated to weigh more than 1,000 tons. Some airliner!

**Harry Miller**

*3A, Satyanarayanan Avenue,*

*Boat Club Road,*

*Madras, Tamil Nadu, India 600 028*