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Incarnate Reason and the Embryo: A Response to Dabrock

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"Incarnate reason" names, in Peter Dabrock's essay, both the task of utilizing natural reason in ethical and political discourse, and an answer to the ontological question about human persons, "What are we?" In this essay, I investigate the significance of this construal for questions about the metaphysical, moral, and political status of the human embryo.

Keywords: *abortion, embryo, incarnate reason, John Rawls*

Christians are called to be in, but not of, the world (John 17:14–15). It is not given to them to remove themselves entirely from the secular sphere; rather, they must, as salt of the earth, go forth into the secular world, proclaiming the Gospel, and calling all nations, all persons, to repentance and salvation. They must make men thirsty for Christ.

This task is inseparable, however, from the task of the moral; and to the extent (but only to that extent) that the moral is inseparable from the political, so too is the Christian task inseparable from the political. From the moral standpoint, the task of Christianity is inseparable because God calls us to love Him in large part by loving ourselves and our neighbor. God wills our good in its entirety; for us to be faithful servants is thus likewise to love our good in its entirety. That good is to be found only in the Kingdom of Heaven; thus we are called to be possessed of a will oriented entirely and only toward the Kingdom (Grisez, 2008). Thus, it is toward the Kingdom that moral norms direct us, indicating those goods and evils, and forms of action required by, or inconsistent with, such a will.

In some cases, such a will—one informed entirely by love of God and desire for the Kingdom, and in no way inconsistent with either—must be also political. For some political wrongs are grievous affronts against other

members of the Kingdom, such as the unborn. Others, such as threats to the nature and stability of marriage and family, threaten the capacity of citizens of the Kingdom, and of kingdoms, to shape their wills appropriately. So the Christian task encompasses political concerns.

But how, then, are we to engage politically as Christians, or as a Christian Church? Peter Dabrock, it seems to me, nearly gets the description of the problem right by identifying two inadequate standpoints:

> Whoever takes seriously the existentially and socially relevant problems of life and death noted above cannot agree with the way in which theological ethics has recently been limited to distanced descriptions void of normative claims (cf. Fischer, 2002). Equally unsatisfactory is the other extreme, when theologians restrict themselves to the internal language of their church, and simply celebrate it as tantamount to public language . . .. Neither of these approaches . . . adequately accounts for the complexity of the modern world in its functional differentiations and worldview pluralism. That complexity of life orientations, after all, has taken hold of Christian individuals and communities themselves.

Dabrock's description of the first approach, with its lack of anything normative, calls to mind a fundamentally inert Christianity; and yet Christianity is shot through in its entirety with normativity—not with a detached picture of what we are, or how we find ourselves, but with a vibrant picture of the way we should and would be, were we guided only by love of God and the Kingdom.

Dabrock is slightly too hard, I think, on the "other extreme," those theologians who operate only in their own internal language. For some Christians, their own Christian standpoint determines that this is the normative way to engage with the world; and it would surely be unjust to require them to abandon that way as a requirement for entry into the public square (Wolterstorff, 1997a, 1997b). Yet other Christians find within their tradition a robust concern for natural law and natural reason, and recognize that, in the pluralistic world described by Dabrock, the appeal of reason is in many cases the first that should be made to those with whom one disagrees, even fundamentally. Such Christians can advance robust and substantive arguments in the public square without reliance on Christian concepts, yet entirely in good faith; and other Christians can reasonably rely on the division of labor that allots to some the task of advancing arguments in natural reason and to others the task of proclaiming the Gospel's norms in its own language (Tollefsen, 2007).

Both the task of utilizing natural reason, and the answer given to a set of reason's most important questions, is named "incarnate reason" by Dabrock. Those questions are: what are we, and why are we morally privileged in the way that we gesture toward by using the language of "human dignity"? Dabrock's answer, which I believe he is correct in seeing as an essentially Christian advance on Kant, is: we are human beings, corporeal in nature,

organisms in essence, whose lives as persons are inseparable from our lives as living bodily entities. Yet that bodily life is also personal: we are possessed of reason and freedom, and our bodily being images God in its being informed by a rational soul. We are neither purely material beings, nor purely angelic beings—we are incarnate reason, and it is as such that we are addressed by God.

Moreover, it is *by* incarnate reason that we may know ourselves. This, in turn, implies that reason is itself not an entirely, or, perhaps better, autonomously spiritual capacity in us. It relies on the evidence of the senses, and thus depends upon the scientific method to gain traction on its objects, which themselves include the things of this world and not simply the celestial spheres. Our reason is, moreover, Dabrock appears to believe, situated in history, in culture, and in the world. Although I think it is possible to go badly astray in making these claims, in themselves, they seem correct.[1] So we both are, and make use of, incarnate reason. And this, after "the philosophical objections to the connection between embodiment and reason have been taken care of," brings us to what Dabrock calls "the foundational theological project" of engaging with secular philosophical discourse.[2]

Here, I think, Dabrock takes a wrong turn, in seeing too close an analogy between incarnate reason and Rawls' "public reason."[3] John Finnis has amply demonstrated the slippery slide in Rawls between a normative concept of public reason and a descriptive concept. Rawls writes that an exercise of reason is public in the relevant sense if the deliverances of reason are such that "all people may reasonably be expected to endorse" those deliverances. Yet this is ambiguous between a de facto reading, according to which our ability to predict disagreement would suffice to rule out an exercise of reason as adequately public, and a de jure reading, according to which an exercise of one citizen's judgment was such that another citizen could reasonably disagree with it (Finnis, 2000, especially 76–80). Yet clearly, reasonable people have disagreed over the morality of slavery, as they do over the morality of abortion. Such disagreements are no justification for removing either issue from the public square or from treatment in the public square of such issues with the best available arguments.

That disagreement aside, I do, to reiterate, believe that Dabrock's conception of incarnate reason as both the means and, in a sense, the end that Christianity brings, in at least some modalities, to the public square, is on point. And although one might reasonably quibble—or more—with certain formulations used by Dabrock in describing the task(s) of the Church, or of theology,[4] I wish to set these aside to focus on a substantive issue in Dabrock's essay, his treatment of incarnate reason at the beginning of life.

Dabrock writes:

> The main advantage of the bioethical basic category of 'incarnate reason', so it has turned out, lies in its function for entitling all human beings in all phases of their

lives to the protection which comes with being recognised as bearers of human dignity and human rights. The distinction between being human and being a person in the philosophical sense of the term is therefore irrelevant for protective standards.

This is exactly right; as incarnate reason, human beings do not come into existence with their capacities for reason–or, for that matter, for reproduction, or for digestion—fully actualized and ready for use. Organisms are temporal beings, which, unlike artifacts, precede in their being the existence and differentiation of many of their parts. The primary actuality of an organism—its life, so to speak—is the fact of its being *its own* executor of its growth and development, and then of its maintenance, reproduction, and pursuit of many more species-specific functions and activities. If personal capacities such as freedom and reason are part of an organism's horizon of possibility, then they are with the organism from the beginning as the *telos* toward which that organism strives in its biological self-unfolding.

Accordingly, the common distinction between being a human *person* and being a *human being*, is a false one, introduced primarily into contemporary discourse as a way of discriminating among human beings—dividing them, for example, into those who may, and those who may not, be lethally experimented upon for the sake of the welfare of others.

Dabrock captures this point, and others, nicely, in the following passage:

> Embodiment provides the conditions not only for activity, but equally for perception, reception, passivity, suffering, becoming and disappearing, finitude, infirmity, and vulnerability (cf. Waldenfels, 1994, 463–538). This is why this concept suggests an understanding of humanity not only in terms of a development toward rationality but also of a diminishing or defective self consciousness. It has already been shown that whoever refuses to link man's existence as well as his privileged status with man's embodiment bears the onus of proof.

Dabrock sees here that the conception of incarnate reason under discussion allows us to recognize, as contemporary secular accounts often do not, that dependence, vulnerability, defect, and decay are intrinsic to the human condition without these features in any way diminishing human dignity and worth (for similar claims, see MacIntyre, 1999; Tollefsen, 2009).

Yet Dabrock resists the identification of the human organism in its earliest stages as a human being, transtemporally identical to the later fetus, neonate, toddler, adolescent, and so on, and this, apparently, for two reasons that strike me as exceedingly problematic.

One is this:

> . . . the project of extending unconditional protection to an assembly of cells, and extending it in the face of lacking protection for even developed fetuses when it comes to abortion (for example in Germany), is experienced by many as quite implausible. We should take that difficulty seriously. It might be that the radical abstractness of the view that unconditional protection should begin with fertilisation, and the deductive rigor with which what holds for humans after birth is claimed

valid for the earliest stages of human life as well, disregard normative sensibilities which are very important for morality and ethics (2010, 148).

There is certainly a difficulty here: unconditional protection for zygotes and embryos does cast into doubt the case for the moral and legal permissibility of abortion. However, three points must be noted. The first is that, whereas the moral case is much the same as regards the impermissibility of embryo-destructive research and abortion, the political case against the former is even stronger than against the latter, for the privacy concerns that might be introduced where abortion is considered are simply not relevant where embryo-destructive research is concerned. Embryo-destructive research is public—in its intended benefits, in its reliance on the public spaces, procedures, and financing of professionalized science, and in its expressive capacity—that is, in its ability to realize and express a certain set of social commitments (of the sort that, e.g., Leon Kass has argued will set us down the path toward further instrumentalization of the human[5]).

A second difficulty with this approach is that it fails to acknowledge the reasonable possibility that the West's entire social ethic with regard to unborn human life is not just deficient, but radically so. The tension between a reasonable ethic governing the treatment of embryos and that governing abortion perhaps *should* be resolved in favor of a much more restrictive regime over the latter.

And this raises the third problem, displayed in the final sentence of the quoted paragraph. How, one might ask, can a Christian bioethicist, in full awareness of the fallen condition of humanity, or the pressures exerted by original sin, which are exacerbated and empowered by contemporary technology, and rationalized by contemporary ideology, believe that widespread "normative sensibilities" on matters such as these provide an adequate guideline for us to go by? Our culture is *invested* in sexual and reproductive liberty and the progressive insurance of the body against illness, death, and decay—both of which investments lead us to cast a blind eye or worse over the claims of unborn and in vitro human beings. The prophetic witness of Christianity must surely do better than this bland acceptance of modernity even if one does not wish, as Dabrock rightly does not, to simply cast modernity off as of no value whatsoever. Here, modernity, with its constant emphasis on *achieved* autonomy, *achieved* independence, and the sovereign individual is *radically* deficient, and Christians must give voice to this fact.

So, the argument concerning the zygote and the embryo must be conducted afresh, without hedging it off in an illicit manner by appeal to the difficulties that a true and just position might bring about for people's normative sensibilities. Dabrock, however, indicates how he thinks such an argument would go, and here again, I think he account is inadequate.

Dabrock's discussion strikes me as problematic right from the beginning. He writes that the "question about the moment when, bio-medically

speaking, human life begins, is highly disputed already within embryology and developmental biology." But this claim is open to question. Pointing to a broad swathe of embryological and developmental biology textbooks, writers such as Patrick Lee, Robert P. George, and myself have claimed that there is, in fact, a general consensus among biologists as to when the life of an individual human being begins, namely, at fertilization, unless the individual is a monozygotic twin, or a product of human cloning.[6] To take just one striking example, Keith L. Moore and T. V. N. Persaud, in *The Developing Human*, summarize the events of fertilization as follows:

> *Human development begins at fertilization* when a male gamete or sperm (spermatozoon) unites with a female gamete or oocyte (ovum) to produce a single cell—a zygote. This highly specialized, totipotent cell marked the beginning of each of us as a unique individual. The zygote, just visible to the unaided eye as a tiny speck, contains chromosomes and genes (units of genetic information) that are derived from the mother and father. The unicellular zygote divides many times and becomes progressively transformed into a multicellular human being through cell division, migration, growth and differentiation (Moore and Persaud, 2003, 16).

Where does the idea that there is *no* consensus come from? Dabrock does not say. But perhaps he might draw support for his claim from a recent essay in which the eminent biologist Scott F. Gilbert attempts to refute the "error" that there is a consensus among scientists "as to when life begins" (Gilbert, 2008). Gilbert identifies five different views, ranging from fertilization up to birth; yet it is worth noting some important features of Gilbert's refutation of the alleged consensus. One is that many of the sources he cites for views other than fertilization are not scientists, but rather are philosophers, political theorists, or theologians.

More importantly, Gilbert shifts very quickly from speaking of a consensus on when an individual *human life* begins to speaking of the onset of "personhood." And this is surely a failure to respect disciplinary boundaries: personhood, although potentially an important philosophical concept for the discussion of the embryo, is no biological concept at all. So no attempt to answer the biological question: When does the life of an individual *human being* begin, should be answered by reference to the concept of "personhood."

It is further worth noting that even when Gilbert *does* quote scientists, it is often in a context that makes clear that *they too* are making this mistake. Thus embryologist Marilyn Renfree is quoted as saying "Assuming that monozygotic twins have separate souls, it follows that ensoulment must occur after cleavage" (quoted in Gilbert 2008, 169). Here "soul" is a stand-in for "person" and is every bit as nonbiological a concept. Elsewhere, Jane Maienschein denies that there is scientific consensus about when there is the beginning of a "meaningful" life;[7] but scientists should not, qua scientists, be expected to reach consensus on that matter, and philosophers, in orienting

their inquiries into the embryo, should begin by identifying what biologists say about the embryo insofar as they are speaking from a biological standpoint. And, in point of fact, Gilbert himself gives voice to the consensus in his own textbook. Consider the introductory sentence to his chapter titled "Fertilization: Beginning a new organism": "Fertilization is the process where by two sex cells (gametes) fuse together to create a new individual with a genome derived from both parents" (Gilbert, 2003a, 183).

Dabrock then characterizes debate over the embryo as arising from two different perspectives one can take on embryological development. If one focuses on the metaphor of a "genetic program" as essential to the question of the "mystery of beginning life," then "one will identify [that] beginning . . . with the genesis of a new diploid set of chromosomes," presumably, although Dabrock does not explicitly say this, because one will think that the genome contains all the programming information necessary for the development of the human being. On the other hand, from what Dabrock calls a "systems" perspective, one will see embryological development "as a highly complex process during which certain genetic and epigenetic wirings depend on existing environments. Any change in these environments has a decisive impact. Under such a model, organic life, with the genetic code unfolding its efficacy only in combination with epigenetic environments, involves a series of developmental steps." And, Dabrock concludes, "Here the mystery of the beginning of human life extends to the whole process of its early development. Unconditional protection thus is imposed only after that process has stabilised itself, i.e. with nidation."

Now it is true that embryologists and developmental biologists have paid more attention to the environment in which the embryo develops of late, and with striking results. However, several points must be made about this. One is made by Gilbert, who notes that the more extreme proponents of a developmental systems approach wish to see the environment as on the same "informational level" as the gene, such that both are equal participants in the developmental process. But, Gilbert notes, ". . . the specificity of the reaction (that it is a jaw that forms and not an arm; that it is a salamander jaw that forms and not a frog jaw) has to come from somewhere, and that is often a property of the genome" (Gilbert, 2003b, 349). The gene, on Gilbert's reading, plays a more instructive role, and the environment a more permissive role.

A second point concerns the way in which environmental impact is limited by the developing organism's identity. In his "Syllabus of Errors" essay, Gilbert identifies one error about embryos as this: "Instructions for development and heredity are all in the fertilized egg;" and a bit later, Gilbert takes to task those who think the genome alone contains all the necessary instruction for organic development. Gilbert cites some interesting cases in which the environment plays more than a passive role. For example, the brain cells of rats who receive

inadequate maternal care and grooming make insufficient glucocortoid receptors. The reason:

> [I]n the rats that did not receive adequate maternal care, the regulatory region of the gene encoding the glucocorticoid receptor is heavily methylated, precisely in the region that controls expression in brain cells. In the rats that had received maternal care, this same region of DNA was unmethylated, allowing the glucocorticoid receptor gene to be expressed in the brain. So do the genes control whether a rat is anxious or not? No. It is the environment that is instructive here, inducing a particular behavioral phenotype. The genome is permissive, giving the possibilities for both potential behaviors (Gilbert, 2008, 166).

Gilbert seems to suggest, and it appears that Dabrock believes, that evidence such as this militates against not just the claim that the embryo is sufficient unto itself for the course of its own development, but that therefore the embryo is not yet a complete individual member of the species, but only, in some way, a work in progress. But these are two entirely separate points. In fact, there appears to be *no* point in the development of a human organism's potentialities—the potentialities that belong to it as a member of the human species—at which it is beyond the range of the influence of its environment. This, surely, is itself one of the morals of understanding the human person as "incarnate development." If at birth I am raised in a Spanish-speaking home, I will grow up speaking Spanish; other environments will result in different courses of development. Some failures will be even more dramatic—failures of nutrition can stunt both physical growth and brain development. Some failures, indeed, will be "decisive"—that is, they will result in the death of the organism. None of these facts call into question that it is the effect of the environment on an *organism* and *its self-initiated growth and development* that we are considering. This organism is not made by its environment any more than a child is. Indeed, as Evelyn Fox Keller writes: "Prior to all its other remarkable properties—in fact, a precondition of these—is the capacity of a developmentally competent zygote to maintain its functional specificity in the face of the vicissitudes it inevitably encounters."[8]

Much more can be said regarding the organic unity and complexity of the early embryo. This evidence indicates the following take away moral: rather than attempting to reduce the embryo to some kind of genetic program, or reduce it away to a sum of interactions between various realities such as genome and environment, we should give pride of place to the embryo itself—that is the fundamental ontological unit in light of which the work of the genome or the environment is interesting, salient, or even fully intelligible. And that entity comes into existence at conception.

This has tremendous consequences for Christian bioethics, and for Christians in the public square. Human embryos are our neighbors, and Christians cannot, consonant with the command to love their neighbors as

themselves, stand idly by while human embryos are created, only to live, cryogenically frozen, at their makers' disposal, or to die, destroyed as part of a research program initiated to help other human beings. Nor can they stand by while embryos and fetuses are aborted to alleviate real or perceived tragedies in older human beings' lives. Christians must, as Dabrock admirably does, call for alternative solutions to these problems, such as those involving altered nuclear transfer or induced pluripotent stem cell research. But these alternatives, while solutions to the social problems induced by disagreement, and, potentially, to the health problems for which regenerative medicine is seen as an answer, do not themselves address the real problem—the problem of widespread injustice incompatible with a Christian ethic—head on. That is a task that no Christian, bioethicist or otherwise, can avoid.

NOTES

1. It is certainly unproblematic to write, as does Charles Taylor, "If a character in a novel set in the middle ages rejects a course of action because it is not 'fulfilling', or a man who figures in a story about a Neolithic village thinks of his lover as 'sophisticated', our sensibility is jarred by the incongruity" (Taylor, 1995, 131). Historicists such as Richard Rorty go far beyond such unobjectionable claims, however.

2. For answers to some of those objections, see Lee and George (2007).

3. The identification is rather quietly made in footnotes 13 and 14.

4. "Pluralism" is a particularly problematic word in Dabrock's essay. He writes, "It would be a huge loss, if representatives of the church or of society were to expect Protestant theology and church to speak with one voice. Such an expectation would not only discount the pluralism that essentially characterizes Protestantism," but that of the surrounding societies as well. In one sense, a pluralism within theology, understood as the attempt to come to a better understanding of the deposit of faith, is proper and to be expected. We are graced with awareness of the doctrines of the Incarnation or Trinity without having a full (even from the human perspective) understanding of their meanings. The efforts of theologians faithfully to work out these understandings are commendable and a reasonable diversity of approaches is helpful. But the pluralism of society is not like that at all; it is the pluralism of, in Robert P. George's words, a "clash of orthodoxies," constituted by radically incompatible and competing visions of the human good and human morality. How could Christ, who prayed that all would be one wish for *this* for his Church or the relationships between Her members? (Dabrock does go on, however, to reject an "anything goes" pluralism.) Nor is the following a helpful account of the mission of the Church: "Pronouncements by the church are primarily designed to uplift, encourage, comfort." The Church is charged with the task of guiding the faithful to their ultimate end, the Kingdom of Heaven; sometimes, however unpleasant it may seem to modern ears, this requires that the Church speak in entirely different modes of discourse than those suggested by Dabrock: authoritative definition, command, and condemnation, for example (Dabrock does go on to mention "admonition," however). Finally, it seems to me that Dabrock radically understates the degree of connection between Church and theology/theologian and overstates the degree of desirable "distance." As an instance of faith seeking understanding, no theology can merely have the "task of offering neutral counselling concerning the criteria for bioethical decision-making," as Dabrock claimed in an earlier draft (the final text's substitution of the word "objective" for "neutral" appears to be an improvement). This does not mean that theology is reduced to something merely hortatory, of course.

5. Kass writes, "I can call instead for a certain kind of expansiveness, a certain kind of generosity, a certain insistence that we should not wish to live in a society that uses the seeds of the next generation for the sake of its own. This argument appeals to the dignity with which we conduct ourselves, not the indisputable equality of the early embryo" (Kass, 2004/2005, 118).

6. See the various texts cited, as well as the evidence marshaled, in George and Tollefsen (2008).

7. See Maienschein (2003, 4–5). Maienschein *also* asserts that biologists "are quite clear" that an early embryo is "really little more than a bunch of undifferentiated cells": Maienschein (2007, 341). Such

"clarity" does not, in fact, seem present in the work of developmental biologists; however, even those such as Gilbert who do not think embryos are persons or are owed moral respect. See the quotation from Gilbert's *Developmental Biology* in the text.

8. Keller is quoted in Robert, 2004, 85.

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