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The afterlife of embryonic persons: what a strange place heaven must be

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Abstract Some commentators argue that conception constitutes the onset of human personhood in a metaphysical sense. This threshold is usually invoked as the basis both for protecting zygotes and embryos from exposure to risks of death in clinical research and fertility medicine and for objecting to abortion, but it also has consequences for certain religious perspectives, including Catholicism whose doctrines directly engage questions of personhood and its meanings. Since more human zygotes and embryos are lost than survive to birth, conferral of personhood on them would mean – for those believing in personal immortality – that these persons constitute the majority of people living immortally despite having had only the shortest of earthly lives. For those believing in resurrection, zygotes and embryos would also be restored to physical lives. These outcomes do not mean that conception cannot function as a metaphysical threshold of personhood, but this interpretation carries costs that others do not. For example, treating conception as a moral threshold of respect for human life in general, rather than as a metaphysical threshold of personhood, would obviate the prospect of the afterlife being populated in the main by persons who have never lived more than a few hours or days. 

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Introduction

Some philosophers treat conception as the threshold of personhood, as philosopher John Finnis does, by attributing the capacity to live the life of a human being to all human organisms after conception: 'Every living human being has this radical capacity for participating in the manner of a

person – intelligently and freely – in human goods. That is, every living being which results from human conception and has the epigenetic primordia (which hydatiform moles and, even more obviously, human sperm and ova lack) of a human body normal enough to be the bodily basis of some intellectual act is truly a human being, a human person' (Finnis, 2000, p. 31). Other commentators (Harris, 1995a,b)

have criticized this view of personhood, but it persists in both philosophical and political quarters (Murphy, 2010). The use of conception as the threshold of personhood is also sometimes invoked in certain religious traditions as well. In its 1987 *Donum Vitae*, the Catholic Church says that after conception there comes 'a new life', 'the life of a new human being', this 'individual-man with his characteristic aspects already well determined', and 'the biological identity of a new human being', among other phrasings. The authors of *Donum Vitae* then ask 'how could a human individual not be a person?' (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1987, section I.1).

Invoking personhood this way does not mean that the Catholic Church has formally declared conception to be the threshold of personhood, as will be discussed, but this approach to personhood is well worth exploring for its meaning for the ethics of assisted reproductive treatment, embryo research and abortion. This threshold also has, however, implications that might give some of its theological advocates pause. Among other things, if conception functions as the threshold of personhood, all who come to exist that way would presumably share the same post-life prospects. The prospect of an afterlife is assumed in many religions for all persons who achieve adulthood and even for those who die young, but if conception amounts to the threshold of personhood, the prospect of an afterlife would presumptively extend to all who cross that threshold. Because significant embryo loss occurs in human beings, the conception threshold of personhood would mean that human embryos constitute the front ranks of candidates for the afterlife, as against persons who are actually born. By itself, this outcome does not falsify the conception threshold of personhood, but other conceptions of personhood do not have to account for the prospect in which zygotes and embryos would be entitled to resurrected, immortal life. What follows here will show what the conception threshold of personhood would mean for certain religious views of the afterlife and how those outcomes are avoidable on other accounts of personhood.

Counting persons

Most human zygotes and early embryos do not survive more than a few hours or days because of genetic anomalies and developmental problems. Other embryos survive a while longer but, because of accidents of timing, fail to implant or are spontaneously aborted. All totalled, some researchers estimate that most – meaning more than 50% – in-vivo human conceptions are lost, which puts human beings who survive to birth in the minority of all conceived human beings (Benagiano et al., 2010). Research about the scale of embryo loss has occurred mostly within the past few decades, but it would be reasonable to assume that a high degree of embryo loss has always been the species-typical way by which human beings have succeeded in having children. In addition to the embryo loss that occurs during in-vivo conception, considerable embryo loss occurs in the course of IVF and other assisted reproductive treatments because of genetic and developmental difficulties, failures in implantation, spontaneous abortion and the intentional disposal of unwanted frozen embryos (No author, 1996). If

the embrace of the afterlife extends to any conceived person, all these lost zygotes and embryos have to be included in that reckoning.

The US Census Bureau (2012) estimates the total population as exceeding 7 billion, an enormous number in its own right, but it is dwarfed by the number of people who have ever lived. In 1995, the Population Reference Bureau estimated that 106,456,367,669 human beings have ever been born, although because of the difficulties involved, its authors call that number a 'guesstimate' (Haub, 1995). These numbers do not, however, include persons who were lost as embryos. According to existing estimates of embryo loss, the 106 billion people who have ever lived would represent less than half the number of persons ever conceived. For the sake of the discussion, let us say that that number represents 49% of human conceptions. If embryo loss has occurred at the rate of 51% across the history of human beings, the conception threshold of personhood would mean that another 115 billion people would have come into existence but not survived beyond a few days, making the total number of people who have ever existed as of 1995 in excess of 221 billion. Millions more people who died in the very earliest stages of life and who survived to birth would have, of course, come along since 1995.

Invoking conception as the onset of personhood contexts seems to require the conclusion that the majority of persons who have ever lived have died within hours or days of coming into existence. In certain religious contexts, invoking conception as the threshold of personhood seems to mean that those persons also constitute the majority of people moving into the afterlife.

After people die

According to some religions, people are immortal from the point of their creation onward in the sense that their immaterial souls never die. Thomas Aquinas (1975b, section 82, pp. 308–311) made a theological case for immortality on behalf of the Catholic Church. For example, if embryos are, in fact, human persons from the point of conception, this deathless fate would seem to belong to them as well.

According to Catholic teachings, heaven, a transient purgatorial cleansing, or hell are in store for all persons, depending on their sacramental relationship with God. But what outcomes could be in store for zygotic or embryonic human persons who lack the capacity to enter into sacramental relationships? Do the same prospects in the afterlife exist for these persons just as they exist for an adult who dies? Over the centuries, Catholic theologians have debated the fate of infants who die unbaptized (Hart, 2000). Commentators such as Augustine argued that such infants would – and could only – go to hell because they lacked the benefit of sacraments necessary for heavenly salvation (International Theological Commission, 2007, section 16). Other theologians declined to accept that outcome in light of their understanding of God's nature and revelation regarding salvation, and some advanced the idea of limbo, a border place between heaven and hell in which – it was postulated – unbaptized infants would enjoy the happiness of the natural order of human life but not the happiness available to a human being in the supernatural order. Limbo

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