St. Thomas, Abortion and Euthanasia: Another Look

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10 June 1981
St. Thomas is usually thought to have rejected abortion and euthanasia as murder (viz. the statement of The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith "On Procured Abortion"). By going back to Aquinas' own words I show that this is mistaken: that he explicitly states abortion prior to a certain point of fetal development to be non-murderous and that his position, when consistently developed, allows for euthanasia under analogous circumstances. These claims are argued by presenting an analytical exposé of Aquinas' metaphysics of man and of human ontogenesis. The implications of this for current bioethical concerns are sketched briefly.
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[1] Official Catholic teaching condemns abortion and euthanasia as murder: as violations of divine law, crimes against life, attacks on humanity, and offences "against the dignity of the human person". On matters of official doctrine there can be no argument. There can, however, be discussion about the historical necessity of such teaching. More precisely, there can be discussion about whether the positions of previous and revered Catholic thinkers necessarily imply the current position of the Church or whether, alternatively, they are compatible with a divergent point of view.

The present paper is intended as such a discussion. Its purpose is to see whether St. Thomas' teachings necessarily entail the current official position on abortion and euthanasia, or whether they leave open or indeed imply a more liberal position. I intend to show that the latter is the case: that when consistently developed, the teachings of St. Thomas allow for abortion prior to a certain point in the human gestation period, and for euthanasia after a certain point of neuro-physiological deterioration has been passed. I also intend to show that both of these conclusions are not mere accidental consequences but direct implications of the Saint's position on the nature of man. I am fully aware that these claims stand in flagrant opposition to the position usually ascribed to St. Thomas. The views of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith as expressed in their pamphlet on Procured Abortion is a case in point. However, we are here dealing not with a question of dogma but of historical fact, and in such cases there is no authority like the word of the individual himself. Consequently in order to argue my thesis I shall eschew the use of all commentaries and only appeal directly to the writings of St. Thomas himself. Ipsa dixit! will be the touchstone of what follows. Any disagreement will therefore have to deal with St. Thomas' own pronouncements. For the sake of clarity as well as expository convenience I have divided my argument into five parts. In the first, I shall consider St. Thomas' analysis of the nature of man qua man (insofar as that is relevant to the present context); in the second, I shall sketch his position on the development of man from

1 Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration On Euthanasia (Vatican City, 1980) p. 7 sec. II.

2 Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration On Procured Abortion, p. 10 note 11.
semen to organically complete and besouled human being; in the third, I shall apply the results of these considerations to the issue of abortion, follow it in the fourth with a similar treatment of euthanasia, and conclude in the fifth with a brief look at some objections. Before I begin, however, a word of warning: St. Thomas' biological knowledge is woefully inadequate by current standards. His statements about semen, for example, or menstrual functions and gestation in general, when taken at face value, are simply false. However, in all of these and similar cases I have assumed that what is important about the Saint's discussion and of lasting value are not the specific material details involved in his arguments but the fundamental principles that characterize his approach. Consequently, wherever the Saint's biological knowledge proves inadequate I have supplied the lack from contemporary science, and where a particular pronouncement is based on biological misinformation I have recast his reasoning in light of what I perceive to be the principles governing his analysis. In other words, whenever necessary I have tried to modernize St. Thomas' expression without losing the thrust of his underlying stance. Such a procedure may strike some readers as unacceptable — to which there are two replies: First, not to do this would be to condemn the relevance of the Common Doctor to a milieu that is essentially medieval in its factual knowledge; and second, any rival interpretation (like the one currently taken to represent St. Thomas' thought) has to accept that very notion of exegetical procedure which I propose to adopt. In which case, it all comes down to a matter of the accuracy of the particular interpretation — and the way is cleared for the sort of examination I propose to undertake.

[2] To begin, then, with St. Thomas' analysis of the nature of man. When St. Thomas was writing there were two philosophically respectable ways of analyzing the nature of man qua man: the Platonic-Augustinian and the Aristotelian respectively. The former described man as a unitary complex of two ontologically distinct

3'Semen' does not mean for St. Thomas what it means for us. It refers to the material stuff produced by the (male) parent, which without any further formal contribution by the female, contains the formal potential for fetal development given the right nutritive conditions. Strictly speaking, it has no exact parallel in contemporary language. Its closest modern analogue would be that of a fertilized ovum insofar as the latter's developmental potentials are concerned. For more on fetal development from semen, see pp. 15 ff. et passim below.

4So, for instance, St. Thomas variously identified menstrual blood as food for the fetus, the gestation of male children being formally complete at the end of the second month, etc.
substances: the material body and the spiritual soul. The Aristotelian approach, on the other hand, characterized man as a single substance constituted not of two distinct substances but of form and matter: the soul and the body respectively.

St. Thomas was an Aristotelian. Consequently he adopted the second mode of analysis and maintained that neither body nor soul by itself was properly speaking a human being but only the ontological complex composed of the two. "This man," as he put it, "is not a soul but a complex of body and soul"; or somewhat differently, "Man is not a person simply because of his soul but in virtue of the latter together with his body." Why? Because, "Nothing is complete in its species unless it has that which is necessary for the proper activity (operationem) of its species." The proper activity of man qua man, however, "is understanding, since it is in this that he differs from animals, plants and inanimate things." Since "the intellect is the principle of intellectual operation" i.e., of understanding and rational self-awareness, and since "whatever exists has its proper activity through its form", it follows that the intellective soul must be "united to the body as its form". It

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5 He explicitly rejects the first as leading to the consequence that man is not "one in an unqualified sense, nor... a being in an unqualified sense but only by accident". [Summa Contra Gentiles (SCG) II:57:3 et passim; see also Summa Theologica I:76:1 ff. and de Anima VI:c; etc.]

6 Summa Theologica (S.T.) I:75:4c; cf. ibid. I:29:1:5, 75:4:2, 76:1:c, 118:3c; III:50:4c; Commentarium in quatour libros sententiarium Magistri Petri Lombardi III d.5 q.3 a.2s, and III d.21.q1 a.3 s. etc.

7 Commentarium III d.5 q.3 a.3s.

8 de Anima I:r

9 SCG II: 79:5

10 SCG II: 76:1

11 de Malo IX:r

12 SCG II: 83:35; 89:3
is "that by which man is man".\textsuperscript{13} As he put it so clearly in his tractate against the Averroists,\textsuperscript{14} "The proper activity of man, however, insofar as he is man, is to think (intelligere)....The principle by which we think in turn, is the intellect....It therefore follows that the latter is united to the body as its form." Understandably, St. Thomas also characterized the ontological complex of body and intellective soul as a single substantial unit and insisted that each on its own would be called "man" only equivocally. Nor is it surprising that he should say that although the soul of man may exist in separation from the body after death, this will not be permanent because that is not its natural and proper mode of existence.\textsuperscript{15}

For Aquinas, then, it is the ontological complex composed of body and soul and this alone that is properly called a man. Focusing more closely on the soul itself, however, we note several important things. The first centers in its nature as a substantial form, and is expressed by Aquinas like this:\textsuperscript{16} "... a substantial form differs from an accidental form in that an accidental form does not confer being simpliciter but being-in-a-certain-way. So, for example, heat does not bring about the existence of its subject in any absolute sense but merely its being hot. ... A substantial form, on the other hand, does confer being simpliciter, and that is why when it advenes the entity in question is said to be generated in an absolute sense. Wherefore we must say that there is no substantial form in man other than the intellective soul..."\textsuperscript{17} Or, as he stated the point on another occasion,\textsuperscript{18} "...in this man there is no other substantial form besides the rational soul, and through it not only is he a man but also an animal, a living being, a body, a substance and a being tout court." However, the notion of a substantial form does more than merely supply St. Thomas with an analysis of the being of substance. It also imposes certain certain metaphysical conditions that must be met by

\textsuperscript{13} de Malo IV;3;r

\textsuperscript{14} de Unitate intellectu contra Averroistas p. 244. See also ibid: 233, 235, 241 et passim.

\textsuperscript{15} ST I: 89: 1c; 118: 3c; I-II: 4: 6c; Commentarium III d.5 q 3 a 2 s

\textsuperscript{16} ST I: 76: 4r

\textsuperscript{17} Cf. ST I: 76: 6r

\textsuperscript{18} de Spiritualibus Creaturibus III; see also de Unitate pp. 233 & 241.
the material substratum to which the form supposedly advenes: 19
(1) Every substantial form has a "proper substratum" or "proper matter" to which alone it can advene (which alone it can inform); and (2) by its very nature, every substantial form determines a particular type of activity or way of being that constitutes the "proper function" or characteristic excellence of the substance in question. 20 Since these conditions are crucial to the argument of this paper, they are worthy of closer attention.

St. Thomas' acceptance of (1) is beyond doubt. His own words speak for themselves. Thus, at a rather general level, he maintains that
(i) "It is natural for every form to be united to its proper matter;" 21 (ii) "Forms must be proportionate to their proper matter since they are related to one another as act to potentiality, the proper act corresponding to the proper potentiality;" 22 and (iii) "No matter can exist except in its [proper] substratum," 23 where the context of (iii) makes it clear that St. Thomas intends 'nature' in the sense of substantial form.

The point of these remarks - and herein he follows Aristotle closely - is that the matter of a given substance must be ontologically commensurate with the form that it is to receive. Otherwise the complexion of form and matter cannot occur.

However, St. Thomas does not confine his remarks to this level of generality but also states the point explicitly with respect to the

19 The present discussion is confined to what St. Thomas calls "mixed substances" in the de Ente. Although this limits the general scope of what is here argued, this poses no problems since it does hold for man's substantial form - which is all that concerns us here.

20 For the Aristotelian basis of this, see pp. 6 f. below.

21 SCG II: 83: 10.

22 SCG II: 83: 35.

23 Commentarium III d.2 q.2 a. 3 s1
substantial form of man: his intellective soul. Thus, he argues that "The soul is united to the body as form to matter. Of course, every form has its proper matter, for there must be a proportion between actuality and potentiality." herewith echoing clearly the general position expressed in (iii); or...since the soul is united to the body as its form, it is united only to that sort of body of which it is properly the act."

All this, of course, immediately raises the question of how the phrase "proper matter" is to be understood; above all, in the human context. To find an answer we must begin with a brief look at what St. Thomas himself indicates as the source of this notion: Book I of the Nicomachean Ethics. Here Aristotle, in the course of adumbrating the nature of happiness, advanced the following claim: Every thing is capable of a variety of acts which are determined by its nature or (substantial) form. However, among the various possibilities thus open there is, for each kind of thing, one particular sort of act for which it is best suited and the exercise of which constitutes its distinguishing and characteristic aretē or functional excellence. For instance, although a knife may be used for all sorts of purposes, by its very nature it is best suited for cutting. Cutting, therefore, constitutes its distinguishing and characteristic act (functional excellence). Again, a horse is capable of all sorts of activities, but by its nature is best suited for running. Running therefore constitutes its functional excellence.

24 Cf. ST I:76 passim. See also above.

25 SCG IV: 84:4; cf. de Anima 1c and Ir5, X, et passim.

26 SCG II: 89: 3

27 SCG II: 60: 2

28 From 1097b 23 to 1098a 17 passim.


30 The example is Aristotle's.
The distinguishing and characteristic sort of activity that constitutes the functional excellence of a thing Aristotle called its "proper function", and maintained that whatever it may be, it is determined by the most noble and metaphysically most elevated aspect of the substantial form of the thing in question. With respect to man, he claimed that his "proper function...consists in an activity of the soul in accordance with a rational principle". He held this because he considered the rational (intellective) soul to be the form of man.

St. Thomas followed the Aristotelian schema closely. That is to say - and herewith we turn to (2) above - he agreed that the proper function of a thing is determined by the nature of its substantial form; and more particularly, by its metaphysically most elevated aspect. He also agreed that the rational (intellective) soul is the substantial form of man, and claimed that therefore "Man has a proper function that is higher than that of the other animals, namely understanding and reasoning, which is the proper function of man, as Aristotle says at Ethics I;" or, somewhat differently "The proper function of man, ..., insofar as he is man, is understanding....The principle, however, by which he understands, is the intellect....It therefore follows that the latter is united to the body as its form...because it is a power of the soul which is the act of an organized physical body."

Given his acceptance of the notion of a proper function, St. Thomas' following remarks assume particular significance: (vi).

31 This, of course, assumes the concept of a hierarchy of substantial forms - which I shall not discuss here.

32 1098a 7

33 Cf. de Malo IX r

34 SCG II; 60: 2 et passim; see also de Malo, loc. cit.

35 Cf. de Malo IV; 3r; de Spir. Creat. III; ST I: 75:4r; 76: 1; 117: 2r; de Unitate 233f. , etc.

36 SCG II: 60: 2. See also ibid. II: 76: 19; 79: 5; and ST I: 76:1 et passim.

37 de Unitate 244. See also ibid. 233, 235, 241, et passim.
Nothing has full membership in a species unless it has that which is necessary for the proper function of that species.\(^{38}\) (vii)"... it is natural for every form to be united to its proper matter.\(^{39}\) (viii) "But forms must be proportionate to their proper matter, since the two are related to one another as act to potentiality, the proper act corresponding to the proper potentiality."\(^{40}\) The implication of these and similar remarks is clear: For St. Thomas, the presence of a given (kind of) substantial form in a given piece of matter is possible if and only if the matter is "proportionate" or "proper" to the form in question; where this, in turn, means that the material substratum must be capable of (allowing) an exercise of the proper function associated with the kind of substantial form in question. Consequently\(^{41}\) "Just as a form does not advene to matter unless the latter is made proper by [the presence of] the requisite dispositions, so the form can not remain in the matter once the proper dispositions have ceased to exist."

Once again, the implications of this are obvious when applied to man. The human soul, which is the form of man, cannot advene to a particular parcel of matter unless the latter is "proportionate" to the soul: constitutes its proper matter, as it were. This in turn means that the matter in question must be an organic body which, in virtue of its qualitative organization and constitution, is capable of sustaining the proper function of man.\(^{42}\) This can be specified still further by saying that it must be the sort of organically developed body that allows for the various and characteristic operations of

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\(^{38}\) \textit{de Anima} I:9

\(^{39}\) SCG II: 83: 10

\(^{40}\) SCG II: 83; 35. See also \textit{ibid.}, II: 89:3

\(^{41}\) \textit{de Anima} I:9 ad 16

\(^{42}\) This does not imply and is not intended to imply that the proper function is performed by means of a bodily organ. For more on this, see below.
human soul. As St. Thomas himself put it,\textsuperscript{43} "...Since the intellec-
tive soul is the most perfect of souls, its proper perfectible subject
is a body having many different organs through which its [the soul's]
various operations can be carried out." All this immediately poses
another question: What must the physiological nature of an organic
body be like in order for it to be able to function in this way? That
is to say, what must be the nature and constitution of the "different
organs through which its [the soul's] various operations can be
carried out?"

At this point there looms the threat of conceptual disaster. It
is tempting to say that since modern medicine has shown that under-
standing and rational awareness can obtain only when there are
functioning higher brain centres, only a body exhibiting the latter
can be the proper matter of a human soul. After all, understanding
and rational awareness are the proper function of man. Such an
inference, however, would be unacceptable. It would be flatly contra-
dicted by St. Thomas' often-repeated statement that "no operation
(activity) that is proper to the intellective soul occurs by means
of a corporeal organ;\textsuperscript{44} and his insistence that\textsuperscript{45} "The intellect...
by which we understand, can know the natures of all sensible things,
wherefore it is impossible that its operation, which is to under-
stand, is exercised by means of some corporeal organ. Whence it
follows that the intellect has a unique operation in which the body
is not involved." In fact - so it could be argued - the implication
of this seems to be that the whole inference that an intellective
soul can only exist in an organically developed body as in its
proper matter, is invalid.

But to argue thus, too, would be mistaken. Although St. Thomas
does repeatedly and emphatically state that the proper function of
man - understanding - is not carried out by means of a bodily organ,
he also insists that the exercise of that function has certain

\textsuperscript{43} SCG II: 86: 4. Cf. de Potentia III: 12. "...since the soul is
the act of a body with organs, the body is incapable [of receiving] a
soul prior to organization." See also ibid. r5 and de Anima Ic and
I r s.

\textsuperscript{44} de Spir. Creat. III. See also SCG II; 58: 9 ff., 60:5, 62:9,
49:5, 8 f.; etc.

\textsuperscript{45} de Anima I: XIV. See also Commentarium II: 19: 1: 15
necessary sensible preconditions which do of necessity involve specific organs of the body:46 "The soul is a blank slate on which nothing is written...Whence it follows that it receives the intelligible species from external things by mediation of the sensitive powers, which cannot have their proper operation without bodily organs. Consequently, it is essential for the human soul to be united to a body. Therefore if the human soul is united to a body, namely because it must receive the intelligible species from things via the senses, it is essential [necessary] that the body to which the rational soul is united be such that it be best able to present the intellect with the sensible species from which result, in the latter, the intelligible species. Therefore it follows that the body to which a rational soul is united must be optimally disposed for sensing. ...Consequently, since a well-developed brain is necessary for having well-conditioned interior sensible powers such as imagination, memory and cogitative power, things are so arranged that quantitatively speaking man has proportionately the largest brain among all the animals.47" In other words, in the eyes of St. Thomas the proper neurophysiological development, although not directly involved in intellection, nevertheless is a sine qua non of intellective operation since the latter is possible only when both exterior and interior senses are operative. And these do occur by means of bodily organs. Therefore the proper function of man does require the existence of an organically developed human body since it is contingent on the latter as its antecedents.48 (Another way of approaching this would be to say that the different senses, both inner and outer, are but different functional capabilities of one and the same substantial form which also has the capability for rational awareness. Therefore even though rational awareness itself does not require a special kind of material substratum for its operation, the other constitutive powers do. That is why the soul requires for its "proper perfectible subject a body having different organs through which its [the soul's] various operations can be carried out...."49: Not because the intellective power requires such

46 de Anima I: 8

47 Cf. ST I: 91: 3 r 1

48 We here ignore the case of the separated soul which, as Aquinas avers, is a special not to say praeternatural case.

49 SCG II: 86: 4
a substratum but because the necessary antecedents constitutes a single ontological unit.)

The preceding conclusion therefore stands. Only a body that is organically sufficiently developed to allow the sensitive powers of the soul - and above all those of memory, imagination and cogitation -- to operate can be the proper matter of the form that is the human soul. Furthermore, this analysis is not tied to the specifics of which body part corresponds to what power and what operation, but is couched essentially in functional terms. It therefore allows us to bypass the question of the physical/medical details that St. Thomas may have had in mind and to look instead to contemporary medicine for what this might entail in terms of physiology. In other words, it allows us to see that the power of the Saint's analysis is not blunted by his lack of medical knowledge, but instead permits us to project it directly and without dislocation onto the contemporary scene.

How, then, would this position be expressed in contemporary terminology? Quite simply as the claim that only a body whose neural system is sufficiently developed to allow external sensory processes as well as memory, imagination and cogitation to occur can function as the proper matter of a human soul. Neurophysiology has shown that these operations require the presence and functional integrity of a developed non-limbic cortex of a human sort. It follows that only a body in which the latter is present can function as the proper perfectible subject or matter in Aquinas' sense.

With this, the first task is complete. I have set out in purely functional terms what in the eyes of St. Thomas are the necessary conditions for something to be able to have a human soul and have indicated what his position would look like when adjusted to the contemporary state of the knowledge and couched in current vocabulary. If we now were to follow current usage and distinguish between a human body, i.e., a genetically determined biological unit on the one hand, and a person (a rational moral agent) on the other, we would then also have a criterion for deciding what St. Thomas would consider the necessary conditions for a human body to count as a person. It is interesting and important to note that this criterion would be neither

50 See note 46 above.

51 Recognition of this underlies the Harvard Criteria for death and is reflected in the California Natural Death Act and similar acts of other States.
genetically oriented nor include physiognomic parameters but would again be wholly functional in nature. It would therefore be capable of handling a wide variety of physiological variations without being forced to deny personhood.\[^{52}\]

[3] The relevance of all this to the issue of abortion lies in the fact that it provides an answer to the question, At what point in the development of the human fetus does the latter become a person? i.e., At what point does the fetus acquire an intellective soul?

What was said above about the requirement of "proper matter" or a "proper perfectible subject" for the human soul is here crucial. It entails that a fetus cannot have a human soul ab initio but instead must acquire it - and personhood with it - at a later developmental stage: Only when the body has attained the sort of complex neuro-physiological (organic) development discussed above. This in turn entails that prior to that stage of development we are not dealing with a human person but an entity that is specifically different. Therefore until that point is reached, abortion cannot be an act of murder.

This conclusion stands in flagrant opposition to the position of those who have claimed the authority of St. Thomas for their contention that abortion is always an act of murder.\[^{53}\] We must therefore investigate whether the inference just drawn is consistent with what St. Thomas says about the development of the fetus in utero; and more importantly still, whether the inference about abortion is actually drawn by him or whether it merely remains a conceptual implicate.

\[^{52}\] In other words, St. Thomas' notion of a human being in the "proper sense" of the term corresponds to what we should nowadays call that of a person. For more on this see E-H.W. Kluge, The Ethics of Deliberate Death (New York, 1981).

\[^{53}\] Cf. Ad. Tanquerey, S.J., Synopsis Theologiae Moralis et Pastoralis: ad mentem St. Thomae et S. Alphonsi hodiernis moribus accommodata. Tomus prius: De Poenitentia, de Matrimonio et Ordine (Roma, 1906); supp. I ad Matr. §§ 63 ff.; H. Noldin, Summa Theologiae Moralis II: De Praeceptis (Bonn, 1906) §§ 329 ff. (although see ibid., § 334:b for some misgivings); and the Sacred Congregation's Declaration on Procured Abortion, loc. cit. - to mention but three examples.
There can be no doubt that the inference is consistent with his account of the development of a fetus. Thus, when considering the hypothesis that the human soul is present from the very beginning, he divides the question into two parts — Is the soul already present in the semen? and, Is the soul present in the fetus at all stages of development? — and argues as follows:...since the soul is united to the body as its form, it is united only to a body of which it is properly the act. Now, a soul is "the act of a natural organized body" (de Anima 412b6). Prior to the organization of the body, therefore the [human] soul is not present in the semen. This sort of reasoning is in perfect agreement with what the previous discussion led us to expect. St. Thomas is here enunciating explicitly the consequence of the thesis that a substantial form requires its proper matter. The semen (or for that matter, the ovum) simply cannot function in that role because it lacks the necessary organic complexity. The only thing that is present in the semen is said to be a certain "formative power" — a point to which we shall return later.

St. Thomas also confirms the second part of our inference; namely, that the soul is not present from the moment of conception. For, in discussing that very issue, he considers the various developmental stages of the fetal body and reasons as follows:..."The body's formation [in utero] cannot be attributed to the soul of the embryo by reason of its generative power, because not only does that power not function until the powers of growth and nutrition, which are its auxiliaries, have completed their work — for the generative function is the prerogative of that alone which exists as a completed being — but also because the generative power has as its object not the perfection of the individual itself [i.e., its development] but the preservation of the species." In other words, the formative development

54 See note 3 above and pp. 16 ff. below.

55 SCG II: 89: 3. Compare ST II-II: 64: 1c, I:118: 1c, 2c and r 3-4, I: 119:1, III-I: 21-7, etc.

56 Commentarium In Tert. Lib. Sent. III: 5: 1s

57 Cf. Commentarium In Sec. Lib. Sent. XXX: 2: 2s

58 SCT II: 89: 9. See also ST I: 119: 1 f. For an analogous, protracted discussion, see de Potentia III: 11 f.
of the embryo cannot be attributed to any generative power that might be found in a human soul because not only does that presuppose that the organism itself exists already as a completed or "formed" human being, but it is the wrong sort of power in any case. It accounts not for organic development but for reproduction.

St. Thomas continues: "Neither can the formation of the body be attributed to the nutritive power, whose function it is to assimilate nourishment to the subject nourished. This is not the case because in the process of formation (i.e., of development) nourishment is not assimilated to something already existing but is brought into a form more perfect in character." That is to say, while the nutritive power in a human soul could account for the metabolic processes of a body, it cannot and does not account for the formative process that the body undergoes from its minimally developed beginning to its organically and structurally developed end. Therefore once again, this power of the human soul would be the wrong sort of power to appeal to in order to explain fetal development.

Nor - so St. Thomas continues - "can the formation of the body be attributed to the power of growth." After all, "the proper function of this power is to produce a change not in form but in quantity only," whereas it is precisely the changes in fetal form - in physiology and morphology - that are to be explained. As to the suggestion that it is the sensitive and intellective powers of a human soul that provide the explanation, St. Thomas gives this short shrift: "...the sensitive and intellective parts [of the human soul] clearly have no operation that is appropriate to such a function." Aside from these five powers, St. Thomas recognizes no other powers in the human soul that could even remotely be conceived of as accounting for fetal development. That is why he concludes that "...the formation of the [human] body, especially as it concerns its primary and principle parts, is not due to the soul of the entity that is ultimately

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59 Strictly speaking, in the soul of the father. See In Tert. Lib. Sent. III: 3: 5: 1s; ST. 1: 118: 1 r 4; De Potentia loc. cit.


61 SCG II: 89:9

62 SCG II: 89:9

63 SCG II: 89:9

64 SCG II: 89:9
generated;" i.e., it is not due to the soul of the developed human being. Nor, so he continues, is it due...to the formative power active by virtue of the soul of the thing generated. It is due to a formative power acting by virtue of the generative [power of the] soul of the father." "This formative power," so he tells us..."...converts the matter prepared by the mother into the substance of the [bodily] members." For,..."There is a formative power in the human semen just as there is in that of animals....By the action of this power, the fetus first lives a nutritive life, followed by a sensitive one."

At this point we must mention and address an important objection. It might be argued that all that the preceding shows is that in the eyes of St. Thomas the development of a human fetus is not due to the exercise of any power of a human soul. That, however, is quite different from showing that no such soul is present. In fact, there is his statement that "it is obvious that the soul is that in virtue of which the body exists," and his claim that "it is manifest that the intellect is not united to the body insofar as it is an intellect", needing a bodily organ for its operation, "but insofar as it has other powers." It is precisely these powers - so it could be argued - that we see sequentially expressed in the ontogeny of a human being; and that is why..."in this human being there is no substantial form other than the rational soul, and it is by virtue of it that the human being is not merely a human being but also a animal, a living being, a body, a substratum, and a being." The hypothesis of immediate and continued animation, therefore, is not only logically


66 In Sec. Lib. Sent. XVIII: 2: 3s.

67 In Sec. Lib. Sent. XVIII: 2: 3s ad 4.

68 A position which clearly expresses the primacy of the soul.

69 de Malo XVI: 1 r

70 de Spir. Creat. III
compatible with the previous passage but actually is the only way to reconcile these assertions with the rest of what he says.

Consistency demands that the first point be admitted. In and by itself the hypothesis of immediate animation is compatible with the thesis that the ontogenetic development of the human body is not due to the powers of the human soul. Therefore the hypothesis cannot be rejected for that reason. However, there are at least two reasons why it can: On the basis of St. Thomas' own ontogenetic account, and on the basis of his metaphysical doctrines.

The ontogenetic account, when considered in its entirety, speaks for itself. The following version of it is taken from On Spiritual Creatures: 71 "...in the generation of man ... there are many generations and corruptions that succeed one another.... Therefore, since at first there is only a vegetative soul in the embryo, when the latter has attained a greater perfection the less perfect form is removed and is succeeded by a more perfect one which at the same time is both vegetative and sensitive; and the latter giving way, it is replaced by the highest and most perfect form, namely the rational soul." In his tractate On the Soul, he states it as follows: 72 "... since corruption and generation do not occur without the loss as well as addition of a form, it follows that the imperfect form which previously inhered [in the body] is thrown off and a more perfect one induced; and so on, until the conceptus has [its proper] form. Consequently it must be said that at first there is a vegetative soul in the semen. That soul, however, being thrown off in the process of generation, another one which is not merely vegetative but also nutritive replaces it. To this, again, is added another one which is at the same time both vegetative, sensitive as well as rational." Finally, he puts it still more explicitly in the Summa Contra Gentiles 73 "... the more noble a form is and the further it is removed from the elemental form, the more numerous must be the intervening forms through which the final form is reached step by step. Therefore the intervening generative processes will also be many in

71 de Spir. Creat., III: r 12.

72 de Anima XI r 1. See also In Sec. Lib. Sent. XVIII: 2: 3s.

73 SCG II: 89: 1. See also ibid. II: 89: 21: III: 1: 21-7; IV: 84: 6; STI: 118: 1c and r3-4, 2c. See also de Anima, loc. cit.
number. That is why in the generation of animals as well as of man (wherein exists the most perfect type of form), there are many intervening forms and generations. Therefore the vegetative soul, which is present first, where the embryo lives the life of a plant, perishes and is replaced by a more perfect soul that is both nutritive and sensitive in nature, and then the embryo lives the life of an animal. However, this soul being corrupted, it is succeeded by a rational soul that is given from the outside, whereas the previous ones had been present through the power of the semen. Therefore the human body, considered insofar as it is capable of having a soul, is prior in time to the soul insasmuch as it does not yet have a soul. At that stage, however, it is not yet actually human but only potentially, since it is actually human only when it is perfected by a human soul. These passages show incontrovertibly that Aquinas considered fetal development to involve a series of morphologically distinct stages, each with its own particular kind of substantial form appropriate to the body's level of organic complexity. First there is the form of semen, then that of blood, to be followed by that of a plant, which in turn is replaced by that of an animal. Finally, when the body's development is sufficient to allow it to function as the proper matter of an intellective (rational) soul, the animal soul also perishes and the human soul advenes. St. Thomas' words at the end of the last passage sum it all up very neatly: The human soul is not present from the very beginning. Instead, "in the process of generation of the body first has a vegetative soul and a sensitive soul by virtue of the power inherent in the semen. These souls, however, do not remain but, passing away, are replaced by a rational soul."

St. Thomas' account of human ontogenesis, therefore, supports the previous conclusion. It is interesting as well as important to note that it can also be shown to follow from his general metaphysical position. We saw above that St. Thomas considered a generative process, whether this occur in man or beast, to be one in which the constitutive nature of the entity in question undergoes a profound formal change. In effect, a change where one substantial form replaces another. Metaphysically speaking the notion of such a succession can be understood in two ways: as the sequential manifestation of forms that already pre-exist in the entity but only attain to actuality when the material conditions are right, or as the acquisition of forms which previously did not exist in the entity in question.

74 Cf. de Anima XI: r1

75 Cf de Anima XI: r1 and In Lib. Sec. Sent. XVIII: 2: 3 s.

76 SCG II:89 and 6.
The first alternative, if it is to amount to more than the mere claim that the entity is potentially some other kind of thing, requires the postulate of the ontological presence of the unactualized substantial forms in the being that undergoes the generative process. In other words, it requires acceptance of the doctrine of seminal reasons. St. Thomas’ rejection of that particular doctrine is beyond dispute. Consequently his metaphysical position allows him only the second alternative: The series of substantial forms are not all present in nuce but arise newly at the appropriate developmental stages. Furthermore, St. Thomas also rejected the theory of the plurality of substantial forms. Consequently we should expect him to say not only that the various substantial forms involved in the generative process do not exist in an unactualized fashion prior to their manifestation, but also that they cease to be present when the next higher form advenes. This expectation is actually met: "Since matter can never be denuded of all forms, it follows that whenever it receives one form it loses another and conversely," for "no body can receive the substantial form of another unless by corruption it loses its own." Therefore "in man, as in other animals, when the more perfect form advenes the previous [less perfect] one is corrupted."

All this implies that from St. Thomas’ metaphysical viewpoint, a generative process is one in which the species of the entity undergoing alteration changes with each alteration in substantial form. St. Thomas himself fully appreciated that fact and stated it as follows in the case of man: "The species of the subject formed (i.e. of the human embryo)...does not remain the same, because it first has the form of semen, then that of blood, and so on." Since the human soul is a substantial form, it follows that even if St. Thomas had not said so explicitly, the logic of his metaphysics would have entailed that the human soul cannot be present from the moment of conception. As to the suggestion that it is present but itself undergoes a develop-

77 de Spir. Creat. III

78 SCG II: 49: 3. Cf. ST I: 76: 3 f and de Anima IX c and XI c.


mental process commensurate with that of the body. St. Thomas also rejects it, and once more on metaphysical grounds: 

"Some say that the very same soul which at first was merely vegetative afterwards, by virtue of the active power that is in the semen, is brought to such a state that it becomes a sensitive one, not indeed through the active power of the semen but through the power of some superior agent. ...But this cannot be admitted. First, because no substantial form admits of more or less. Instead, the addition of a greater perfection results in a difference in species. ...However, it is not possible for one and the same form to belong to different species." — which, of course would have to be the case if the alternative suggested were correct.

Summing up, then, the result of what has been argued so far is this: Not only the logic of St. Thomas' metaphysics but also his very own words entail that so far as he was concerned the human soul is not present from the very beginning but advenes to the developing fetus at some later stage which is functionally defined in terms of the body's capability to act as the "proper matter" of an intellective soul, allowing it to carry out its "proper function". We have also seen that this advention of an intellective soul constitutes a substantial change for the fetus: an alteration in its species, and that the relevant physiological parameters of this change cannot be understood as mere quantitative augmentations but as neurophysiological in nature since only a neurophysiological development of an organic body can account for the increase in sensory sophistication that is here involved.

[4] It remains to state the implications of this for the problem of abortion. They are quite clear: Until the infusion of a human soul, the fetus is not a human being but differs from the latter in species. Indubitably, it is possible to kill such an entity. However, it will not be possible to murder it. Murder is possible only in the case of human persons. Therefore whatever else it may be, the deliberate killing of a fetus prior to its reception of a human soul cannot be an act of murder. Abortion, being a species of such deliberate killing, cannot therefore be murder either. At least, not

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81 We ignore the suggestion that the human soul is present as the substantial form from the beginning and that the various developmental stages are but successive manifestations of the powers inherent in it: St. Thomas himself rejects this. See pp. 16 ff. above.

82 ST I: 118: 2 ad 2.
according to the logic of this position. The same conclusion can also be expressed in more medically oriented language: If an abortion is performed before the neurological system of the fetus has attained the complexity necessary to allow for the (internal and external) sensible functions requisite for rational awareness - memories, sensation, cogitative ability and imagination\(^{83}\) - then it will not be an act of murder.

It is one thing for a position to entail a particular conclusion; it is another for the individual who propounds the former to accept the latter as well. Therefore whatever the cogency of what has been argued, it is at least theoretically possible to claim that St. Thomas did not accept the latter.

However, while theoretically possible, in actual fact the suggestion is ruled out by St. Thomas himself. For instance, in his Commentaries on the Fourth Book of Sentences of Master Peter Lombard he explicitly raises the question whether those who procure an abortion are guilty of murder. He replies:\(^{84}\) "... those are murderers who bring about an abortion when the infant is formed and has a soul." In other words, if the infant is developed along certain lines, then abortion is murder. Of course this is not the same as the previous conclusion, since the latter is a biconditional. However, in the very same place just quoted St. Thomas immediately goes on to say that\(^{85}\) "Already St. Augustine said that an unformed infant does not have a [human] soul, and that therefore [its death] is punishable by a money fine and not by a soul taken for a soul." That is to say, if the entity aborted does not yet have a soul then the act of abortion is not an act of murder, since only these are punishable in a capital fashion. This statement is logically equivalent to the claim that if it is murder then it involves an entity that has a human soul. When the two statements are taken together, as St. Thomas intended them, they constitute the very biconditional argued for above. Abortion is an act of murder if and only if the fetus has developed to the stage of having acquired a human soul. Of course it might be argued that St. Thomas was unaware of the logical implication of these two assertions and would not have made them had they been clear. Such an argument, however, is tantamount to saying that one of the greatest minds of all time was

\(^{83}\) See pp. 10 ff. above.

\(^{84}\) In Quat. Lib. Sent. IV: 31, exposition of the text; author's emphasis.

\(^{85}\) In Quat. Lib. Sent. IV: 31, author's emphasis.
unaware of the nature of a simple biconditional: It is to grasp at straws. As a matter of practical reality, therefore, the conclusion must stand. Not only does the logic of St. Thomas' metaphysics allow for abortion prior to a certain point of development of the fetus, his very own words confirm his acceptance of such a conclusion.

[5] If we ignore the details of St. Thomas' reasoning, the underlying principle of his position on human ontogeny can be stated like this: If a genetically human, living body does not have an intellective soul, then it is not human in the moral sense - is only "equivocally" human - the fact of its being alive notwithstanding. In the context of fetuses and abortion this was particularized to read: If a genetically human, living body does not yet have an intellective soul, then it is not yet human in the moral sense - is not yet a person - the fact of its being alive notwithstanding. The temporal parameter of this particularization is, of course, accidental. What counts is the functional relationship between the disposition of the body and the presence of an intellective soul. Parity of reasoning therefore suggests that a similar particularization is possible at the other end of the temporal scale: for bodies that no longer have an intellective soul. Thus particularized, the principle would then read: If a genetically human, living body no longer has an intellective soul, then it is no longer human in the moral sense - is no longer a person - the fact of its being alive notwithstanding.

In the previous discussion we have seen that it is precisely because of the particularization of the principle to fetal contexts that abortion is allowable within the thomistic framework so long as a certain point of development has not been passed. Therefore it seems reasonable to assume that the thomistic framework would also allow for euthanasia after a corresponding point of organic deterioration has been passed.

In this section I intend to show that this in indeed the case. Before proceeding, however, a word of caution. Whereas the existence of not-yet-besouled human bodies is a commonplace of organic development, that of no-longer-besouled human bodies is not. By and large, the possibility of the latter has arisen only with the advent of refined and powerful medical techniques. Consequently, in contradiction to the issue of abortion, one ought not to look in the writings of the Saint for explicit pronouncements or discussions on whether it is morally permissible to kill a no-longer-besouled human body. The possibility, and hence the problem, simply did not exist. What one can do, however, is to see whether his position, when consistently developed, will cover this sort of situation and provide the same sort of solution as it provides in the case of abortion. In what follows, I shall argue that an extension in this direction is possible and would be in keeping with the spirit of the position of the Saint himself.
A further factor to keep in mind when proceeding is this: The term 'euthanasia' has recently received a wide variety of logically distinct uses, and therefore is anything but clear. For the purposes of this discussion, however, I shall ignore this variety as well as the controversies surrounding the precise meaning of the term itself. Instead, I shall simply understand it as the deliberate bringing about of the death of a biologically human being that is no longer a person. The thesis of this section, then, is that euthanasia, when understood in this sense, is allowable within the parameters of the thomistic framework.

It is tempting to argue for this thesis in the way suggested above. As in the case of a fetus, so here too, mutatis mutandis, the same principle holds. When the neurophysiological structures of a given body have deteriorated below the point where the brain can support the various necessary prerequisites for intellection it no longer constitutes the proper substratum of an intellective soul, wherefore a human soul can no longer be present. Consequently, in such cases we are no longer dealing with a human being in the moral sense, and euthanasia will be permissible.

However, we may be unwilling to rest so important a matter on the mere assumption that the Common Doctor would be bound by consistency of reasoning. In that case we might attempt an argument simply on the basis of scattered remarks by the Saint himself. For example, thus: The human soul, being a substantial form, is what turns an organic body into the functionally integrated whole that is a person. "Death, however, is the separation of the soul from the body." That does not, of course, mean, that the body ceases to exist. It continues, indeed with many qualitatively identical characteristics except it no longer has a soul; i.e., "when the soul is departed, there do remain flesh and bones but only in an equivocal sense." That is to say,


87 In Tert. Lib. Sent. III: 21: 1 a 3

88 De Anima I: 9; Cf. ibid. X pass.
"the soul being gone, there does still remain an order in the body ... as it were, like an acquired disposition"\textsuperscript{89} which persists for some time. It is this disposition, this vital integrated functioning that, while it persists, mimicks the activity of the body when still besouled but in fact no longer betokens any such thing. The mere fact of persistent functioning, therefore, does not make a body morally human, wherefore killing such a body cannot be an act of murder, no matter what else it may be.

In the end, however, it may be felt that such reasoning is too tenuous, particularly the last; that what is needed is more detail, and above all a deeper and more coherent connection with the overall ontology in which it is supposed to be at home. I shall now try to provide such a connection.

The core of the issue is of course the fact that within the thomistic metaphysical framework, any substantial form, and a fortiori an intellective soul as well, requires its proper substratum for its existence. Consequently, unless a living organic body has a certain constitution, it cannot function as the proper substratum of a human soul. In the case of man, however, the notion of proper substratum is not defined in temporal terms nor in terms of mere possession of a certain degree of organic specialization in the body as a whole. It is defined in terms of functional capability. Unless the body has an integrated functioning complex of organs that allow for sensation, imagination, memory, estimation and the like,\textsuperscript{90} it will not be a proper substratum. St. Thomas himself spelled this out in terms of functional disposition and then went on to say,\textsuperscript{91} "... just as the form does not advene to matter unless the latter is made proper by the [presence of the] necessary dispositions, so also once these dispositions cease to exist it will no longer be possible for the soul to remain in the matter; and in this way the union of soul and body is dissolved by the removal of warmth, natural moisture and other factors of this sort insofar as the body is thereby disposed to receive a soul."

Making due allowances for the level of 13th century medical sophistication and focusing on the underlying principle that is here involved, what this amounts to is simply, as we have said: When the capacities

\textsuperscript{89} In Tert. Lib. Sent. II: 2: 3 s.2

\textsuperscript{90} See pp. 10 f. above.

\textsuperscript{91} de Anima I: 9 ad 16
for sustaining the processes necessary for intellective awareness are no longer present, the body is no longer a proper substratum for an intellective soul and it is "no longer possible for the soul to remain." Since contemporary medicine identifies the capacity for such processes as the presence and functional integrity of the higher (non-limbic) brain centres, this means that when these centres are rendered permanently dysfunctional the body as a whole is no longer a proper substratum for an intellective soul. Therefore even though it may still be an otherwise functioning entity in a biological sense, the fact that these latter functionings have nothing to do with intellective awareness renders their presence irrelevant. The human soul can no longer be present, wherefore the entity as a whole is no longer morally speaking human. It follows that to euthanatize such an entity, all other things being equal, cannot entail a charge of murder.

Logically speaking, this inference is valid and it does tie the conclusion to St. Thomas' overall stance on the metaphysics of substantial forms. The trouble, however, is that it runs completely counter to our ordinary conviction that when an organic body is alive a soul must be present. After all - so we are tempted to reason - even according to Aquinas it is the soul that is the vivifying principle of a body. Only because there is a soul is there life. How, then, could the inference possibly be valid? Something must be wrong.

Part of the reply to this is already contained in what was quoted above. To appreciate this, however, we must draw a distinction between life properly so called, and merely ordered functional interaction. The former involves the presence of a soul - although we must remember that such a soul need not be intellective or human in nature. The latter, on the other hand, does not require a soul but is merely an "acquired disposition" of the body which may linger on for some time. Therefore it is simply false to say that because a given body exhibits the functional integrity that we associate with life as engendered by a human soul, that therefore a human soul must be present. The latter must involve a special kind of functional integrity, namely that associated with the higher brain centres. The former, being merely metabolic in nature, may be present even when the higher centres are destroyed. In such a case, although we could speak of human life in an extended sense, it would in fact be just that: an echo of human life.

See the analysis of the ontogenetic development of man above.

Various contemporary theologians, both Catholic and Protestant, appear to maintain a similar position. For a bibliography and discussion, see Kluge, Ethics.
Another way to meet the objection would be to go somewhat more deeply into Aquinas' metaphysical position and focus on his distinction between relative and absolute corruption. The latter we should nowadays characterize as the complete destruction of the entity in question so that nothing at all remains. The former, on the other hand, we should merely call the loss of one substantial form belonging to one species and its replacement by another. Every-day life provides no examples of absolute corruption, only of relative; for, no matter what is done to a given entity, something, even if only a quantum bundle, remains. St. Thomas, who was aware of something very much like this, therefore stated that... when a thing is corrupted it does not dissolve into absolute non-being, any more than the thing is generated from absolute non-being." Instead, it merely undergoes a substantial change.

Applying these metaphysical notions to the case of human death, it follows that the corruption that befalls a human body at death is relative only. In other words, the departure of the intellective soul does not destroy the body utterly but merely is the loss of the previous substantial form. It betokens the removal from the species of man. That St. Thomas himself took something like this to be the case is apparent from his following assertion: "After the soul's departure ... flesh and bones and the like parts are so-called only in an equivocal sense, because none of these parts is then possessed of its proper operation which stems from the specific nature of the things whose parts they are." The following statements from his Commentary on the Third Book of the Sentences of Master Peter Lombard are also to the same effect: "When the second cause removes its influence from what is caused, there can still remain, in the same thing, the influence of the first cause. So, for instance, when being-rational is removed being-alive remains."

The first of these two passages entails that what remains after death is still an organic body, although strictly speaking it is no longer properly human. In the language of the preceding discussion, although what remains is biologically human it is no longer morally human. The second passage, on the other hand, goes further and main-

94 SCG II; 55: 4; Cf. Quaest. Quodlib. II d.19 q.1 a 1


96 In Tert. Lib. Sent. III: 12: 1: 3
tains that the body that remains may still be alive in a purely organic sense even though the principle of rational vivification— the intellective soul— has gone. In other words, St. Thomas is here merely restating what he previously expressed in terms of the continuation of an acquired disposition. When we put all of this together we see that our previous conclusion fits well into the framework of what St. Thomas said. The fact that a given biologically human body— more specifically, that what according to its previous mode of existence would have been called a human being in the moral sense of the term— still evinces life does not entail that it is still a human being in the proper sense of the term. If the body in question can no longer function as the proper matter of an intellective soul then it is merely a living organic body that is human only in the biological sense: only "equivocally". When "being rational is removed, being alive remains". Being alive, however, is not the same as being human.

It is an immediate and trivial corollary of this that if there is a biologically human body that falls into the category of merely being-alive, it will be specifically different from being-human in the full-blooded moral sense. Whence it follows that those moral considerations that are appropriate in a human context are inappropriate here, and that actions which in a properly human context would be immoral do not now deserve such an evaluation.  

Which brings us to the implications of all this for the question of the moral status of the decerebrated, of those whose higher brain centres have been rendered perceptually dysfunctional, and so on. In short, it brings us to the issue of the moral status of those whose neurophysiological systems are constitutionally no longer capable of functioning as the proper matter of an intellective soul. The implications are similar to those of a fetus as discussed above. Just as to deliberately bring about the death of an individual who does not yet have an intellective soul is not an act of murder, neither is it to deliberately bring about the death of an organism that no longer has an intellective soul. In both instances we are dealing with entities that are specifically different from human beings in the moral— in the "proper"— sense of the term. The upshot, therefore, is that so long as the parameters just indicated are observed, the thomistic framework allows for euthanasia without incurrence of the charge of murder.

97 Or, for that matter, can never function thus. The implications of this re infanticide are obvious. See Kluge, Ethics.

98 Which does not, of course, entail that no moral scruples whatever apply.
The exegetical part of this paper is herewith complete. However, before closing, I should like to consider briefly several objections that might be raised not indeed on the basis of St. Thomas' own words but as based on established opinion and common sense.

The first objection deals with abortion: The biological history of a fetus shows that its development does not proceed in a discontinuous fashion but in continuous stages from the moment of conception. Continuous development differs from all other types in that the numerical identity of the developing being remains one and the same. In fact, this is trivially so since otherwise we should not talk about development but only replacement: the replacement of a qualitatively less advanced entity by a more sophisticated one. This being the case, it follows that the fetus undergoing development must be one and the same throughout its developmental process. The outcome of this process is an entity which is definitely a human substance. In view of the continuous numerical identity of the fetus throughout its career, it therefore follows that it also must be human the whole time. Otherwise it could not be one and the same. Consequently abortion will always be murder, no matter when it is performed. 99

This objection would be telling were it not for one fact: It completely overlooks St. Thomas' own evaluation of the fetal developmental process. As he put it, "the species of what is formed does not remain one and the same." 100 The reason why he said this, and indeed why he had to do so, lies in his metaphysics of substantial change. Within the thomistic framework, substantial change necessarily involves a change in numerical identity. Not, to be sure, of the ultimate material substratum of what is altered - although that, too, is debatable 101 - but of the substance in question. After all, as Aquinas put it, "numerical identity is impossible for a thing if one of its essential principles cannot be numerically the same." 102 There is no more


100 SCG II: 89: 3

101 After all, numerical identity in the strict sense applies to substances only. See note 102 infra.

essential a principle than a substantial form. Substantial forms of different species are numerically distinct. Therefore, since in substantial change a substantial form of one species is replaced by another, it follows that such a change cannot retain the numerical identity of the "thing" in question. Consequently, while conception may well mark the beginning of the developmental history of one and the same material unit, from the Thomistic viewpoint this is irrelevant so far as the numerical identity of the substance is concerned. What counts is the numerical identity of the same substance - of the same person - and that requires continuous presence of one and the same substantial form. Since that form is present only at the end of the process, it follows that we are dealing with specifically and therefore also numerically distinct substances at beginning and end. The objection, therefore, turns out to be the result of a confusion and hence collapses. It may be that it would be different with a different metaphysics; but by that very token it would not be an objection to the preceding analysis.

A second objection focuses on the example of the Incarnation and on this basis maintains that since Christ had a human nature from the moment of conception, it follows that this must hold for all others who are human like him: for all men.

Again, however, St. Thomas himself provides an unequivocal reply. To be sure, so he argues, the conception and developmental history of Christ qua human being did not include a stage where the Christ-body did not have a soul and therefore was not human. This, however, was a very special case and must be distinguished from all others. As he put it, "It must be replied that according to faith, the conception of Christ must be said to have occurred in an instant: For, it is not the case that the human nature was assumed before it was perfected in its species, since its parts are not assumptible except as a whole. However, the propria and accidents of human nature are not predicated of the Son of God prior to this assumption. Therefore whatever

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104 Cf. In Lib. Sec. Sent. XVIII: 2: 3s; etc.

105 Cf. SCG IV: 81 pass., etc.

106 In Tert. Lib. Sent. III: 3:5:2s. See also Quaest. Disp. III: 12.
that is human that is said about the Son of God did not precede the completion of the human nature.... Wherefore we must consider this conception to be instantaneous such that in one and the same moment there occurred a conversion of the material blood into the flesh and other parts of the body of Christ, as well as the formation of the organic members, and the besouling of the organic body, and the assumption of this besouled body into the unity of the Divine Person. In others, however, these [developments] take place successively." Furthermore, an important fact emerges from the last two statements: Even here, despite the insistence that the case of Christ is special, St. Thomas remains true to his schema of the metaphysics of human development indicated above. For, he insists explicitly that even in order for the assumption to be possible there must be a body that is "perfected in its species", and that the various "organic members" necessary for the existence of properly human function must be present and developed. Therefore not even here, where surely it would have been easy for him to do is, does St. Thomas deviate from his standard account. The special nature of the Incarnation, therefore, does not reside in its exemption from the usual schema with its various stages but in the fact that the stages are collapsed to one temporal instant.

A third possible objection seizes on the fact that the fetus is a potential person ob initio, and on this basis the claim that abortion is always murder. However, such reasoning also fails. It fails because it requires as a fundamental premise the thesis that potential human beings in the moral sense of that term - potential persons - have the same moral status as actual ones. This, however, presents problems. Within the thomistic framework something is called a potential x not because it has the nature of an x here and now, just not fully expressed, but because its present constitution will allow it to assume the form of an x in the normal course of events. Consequently a fetus counts as a potential person not because it already has the form of a person - an intellective soul - but because its present constitution will allow it to acquire one. Therefore the metaphysical natures of potential vs. actual persons are quite distinct. The moral status of a given entity, however, depends not on what it does not yet have, but what it has; not on the nature it can acquire but on the nature it has here and now. Therefore the fact that a fetus is a potential person does not in and by itself give it the moral status of an actual person. It lacks the metaphysical nature of the latter which would ground such a status. Consequently a thomistic metaphysics cannot countenance this particular line of reasoning.

107 Which is contributed by the mother.
The considerations just adduced apply, mutatis mutandis, to the problem of euthanasia as well, and therefore objections to the latter as based on an analogous reasoning would suffer a similar fate. However, there is an objection to euthanasia that avoids such pitfalls precisely because it is not metaphysical in nature but purely pragmatic. Thus, it could be argued that even if all the considerations adduced so far were correct, the conclusion that euthanasia is permissible under certain circumstances faces insuperable practical difficulties: Short of surgical exploration there is no way to tell in a given case whether an individual still retains the constitutional (neuro-physiological) capacity for intellective awareness. Such explorations, however, would have to examine the neural centres in detail – for which we lack the expertise and which in any case would be fatal. Consequently, we really have no choice but to proceed on the assumption that as long as there is functional integrity and indeed vital activity in a human body, it is still besouled. Anything else would be to run an unacceptable moral risk.

When all is said and done, this objection is nothing more than the plea to adopt the morally safer source of action. As such, however, it is open to refutation on the basis of fact. For instance, it is simply not true that we cannot tell without surgical exploration whether the necessary neurological capacity is still present in a given case. Brain scanning techniques, etc. give an unequivocal picture of the amount of cellular activity within a brain and can tell whether a specific brain area is metabolically still alive.\(^\text{108}\) Therefore when such techniques show that the higher brain centres are in fact dead, they thereby show that the capacity of the body to provide the neurological activity necessary for memory, imagination, etc. have been destroyed. Brain cells, once dead, cannot be regenerated. Consequently, in such cases, the functional basis of those activities which St. Thomas specified as necessary preconditions for the presence of a human soul is irreparably destroyed. Although otherwise alive (due to the functioning of the medulla, etc.) the individual no longer is and never again can be a besouled human being.\(^\text{109}\)

\(^{108}\)Cf. C. Radberg and S. Söderlundh, "Computer Tomography in Cerebral Death," Acta Radiologica Suppl. 346 (1975) p. 119; J. Korain et al., "Radioisotopic Bolus Technique as a Test to Detect Circulatory Deficit Associated with Cerebral Death", Circulation 51: 924 (1975), etc. See also Kluge, Ethics and Walton, On Defining.

\(^{109}\)Cf. Kluge, Ethics. p. 87.
The last objection that I want to consider is quite different from any of the preceding. It is simply this: All of the considerations adduced above ignore the fact that life is a gift from God. Therefore under no circumstances may we take it without incurring the charge of murder.

The premise of this objection is, of course, indubitable. That does not, however, validate the objection itself. In fact, there are at least two ways to meet it. One is to focus on the claim that life is a gift, and to argue that the notion of a gift here makes no sense. That, however, would be extremely legalistic, and in the end would reduce to a quibble over the proper use of language. A second reply, however, fares much better. It focuses on the fact that the term 'life' that occurs in the premise cannot be understood as encompassing all life: It is not all life that we are enjoined from taking. If it were, we should not be able to eat, breathe, drink, move, or do anything whatever without becoming guilty of murder, for in all of these activities we take some life - and frequently knowingly. Instead, the term 'life' must be intended in the sense of the life of a being that has a human soul: the life of a person, for only here can one commit murder. That being the case, however, one cannot be accused of murder simply on the basis of the fact that one has killed a certain kind of biological organism. Not even when the organism is biologically human. What is important, and what decides the issue of murder, is whether the organism was also human in the moral sense: whether it had a human soul. Therefore in any given case involving a living biologically human entity we must look and see whether the entity is more than that: Whether we are also faced with a person. If we are not, if the body is merely biologically human but no longer capable of being the proper substratum of an intellective soul, then to kill it will not be murder because the injunction not to take morally human life - not to kill besouled organisms - does not apply to it.

[6] With this, I come to the end of my discussion. Undoubtedly, much more could be said, not only about the details of St. Thomas' position but also with respect to how well (or ill) it agrees with the current official stance of the church. This last would be especially important, particularly vis-à-vis the latter's historical


111 In the sense of 'person' defined above.

112 Cf. Aquinas' position on the deliberate killing of an "unformed fetus" i.e., a non-besouled fetus, i.e. a non-person, indicated above. I forego any discussion of whether unjustified or gratuitous taking of non-personal life is also morally reprehensible, since this would transcend the present scope.
basis. However, leaving this issue to others who are more competent to decide it than I, I suggest that at least this much follows from what has been said: If my analysis is correct, then St. Thomas's metaphysics allows for abortion as well as euthanasia in all and only those cases where, respectively, the human body in question is not yet the proper substratum of a human soul or is such a substratum no longer. From this, in turn, it follows that the metaphysical framework of the Common Doctor can provide considerable support for those who, in spite of their otherwise avowed and obvious faith, nonetheless engage in abortion or euthanasia within the limits indicated: precisely because they, too, distinguish between the merely biologically and the properly human life; between what is merely "equivocally human" because it lacks the moral parameters, and what is "properly human" because of the presence of a soul. In other words, if what I have argued is correct, then the metaphysical framework of the Common Doctor provides a way in which the practical constraints of medical scarcity and finite resources can be reconciled with the demands of the moral life.