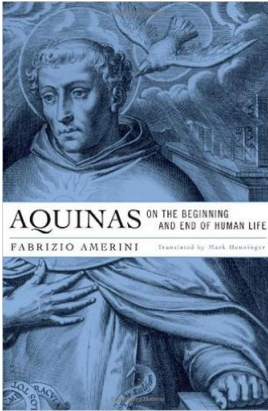


Fabrizio Amerini



Review:

## Aquinas on the Beginning and End of Human Life

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Reviewed by  
Cosmin Lazar

The publication of this book created a bit of a stir one restricted largely to the world of medieval metaphysics and Thomistic studies, perhaps but a stir nonetheless. The reason for this was two-fold. First, in this book, Fabrizio Amerini explicitly addresses *Thomas Aquinas's embryology* in the context of the Catholic Church's current teachings



Rev. Cosmin Lazar is PhD Candidate at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology of the "December 1<sup>st</sup> 1918" University of Alba-Iulia, Romania

on abortion and the beginning of human life. Despite the title, the book really only treats Aquinas's position on the beginning of human life. Aquinas's stance on the end of human life receives less than ten of the two hundred and forty total pages, and those ten pages contain some of the most convoluted and philosophically problematic material of the book. Second, Amerini avoids the easy answers in this polarized debate; his discussion is highly nuanced, exhaustively researched, and provides a sympathetic reading of both Aquinas's texts and contemporary Catholic teachings. Although I suspect the book will prove inaccessible to the non-specialist and fail to satisfy the specialist, Amerini should be commended for raising the bar in the debate. Any future discussion of Aquinas on this topic will need to address Amerini's treatment of the issue, and to take it seriously.

Aquinas's stance on the beginning of human life is a controversial topic especially in light of the modern abortion controversy and the corresponding importance many people attach to the question of when human life begins. Aquinas is a Doctor of the Catholic Church, but his position on this issue does not line up with the position of the contemporary church.

Aquinas holds that human life starts only with the infusion of the rational soul into the fetal body around forty days after conception, a position called "delayed hominization", while the Catholic Church teaches that human life begins at conception a position referred to as "immediate hominization". Scholarly discussions of this issue have tended to split into two camps. The first works to reconcile Aquinas's view with the official Catholic position, claiming that Aquinas's metaphysics should be read as compatible with immediate hominization, and or that Aquinas himself would accept immediate hominization if he had access to current scientific information regarding fetal development.

The second camp argues that Aquinas's metaphysics requires delayed hominization, and that attempts to bring his view in line with current Catholic teaching can be motivated

neither by a careful examination of the relevant texts nor by appeal to Aquinas's own metaphysical or theological principles. To say that these two camps have at times come into conflict would be to put things mildly.

Amerini's treatment of this topic is intentionally a bit non-standard. He describes his methodology as "aporematic", a conscious attempt to „bring out the complexity of Thomas's thought in a dialectical way, highlighting one aspect of his complex teaching before highlighting another that may or may not cohere with the former" (p. xxii). What this means in practical terms is that, instead of presenting and discussing relevant passages in the context of an explicit overall argument, the book moves back and forth within the topic, often drawing another set of distinctions or unearthing another guiding principle just as the reader expects a settlement of the question. Fabrizio Amerini expresses hope that his readers "will not be perplexed by this stylistic feature", but will be able to "follow patiently the thread through the argumentative labyrinth" (p. xii). He also stresses the modest scope of his study: it is not meant to offer answers to the pressing ethical questions in the debates surrounding abortion, but simply to offer "a philosophical reconstruction of Thomas Aquinas's teaching on embryology and an assessment of its possible bioethical implications" (p. xi).

The „argumentative labyrinth" in question which comes in at a relatively short 240 pages of text, is divided into eight chapters. The first four chapters establish the book's general tone and pattern of discussion, and are meant to set the reader up for the extensive treatment of the identity of the embryo that occurs in the fifth chapter. *The first chapter* presents and discusses central principles guiding Aquinas's embryology, including his general views on the process of generation; *the second chapter* focuses on the rational soul's nature as the substantial form of the human being. *The third chapter* addresses Aquinas's accounts of the origin of the human soul and the 'ensoulment'

of the embryo, and *the fourth chapter* focuses on three particular difficulties facing the account as laid out to that point. The topics addressed in these first four chapters are precisely the ones that need addressing: everyone who works on this topic acknowledges that Aquinas's embryology, which involves first the existence of a being with only "vegetative" powers, then the existence of a being with sensory as well as vegetative powers, and finally the generation of a human being via the infusion by God of a specially created rational soul, is complicated by his commitment to the unity of substantial form, "the theory that each substance has one and only one substantial form, and that this form makes the substance what it is".

The doctrine of the unity of substantial form entails that in the process of generation the vegetative being is a numerically distinct substance from the sensory being, which is in turn a numerically distinct substance from the human being. The questions this progression of substances raises for the diachronic identity of the embryo are vexed, to say the least, and Amerini does a good job laying out the difficulties involved. The real heart of the book is *chapter five*, in which "The Identity of the Embryo" receives over sixty of the book's two hundred and forty pages. The linchpin of this chapter is Amerini's conclusion that, while the embryo cannot be numerically identical to the human being, because of changes on the level of both matter and form, there is nonetheless continuity of subject between embryo and human being. The key here is a thesis of generation Amerini identified early in the first chapter namely, that "natural generation is a process and as such takes place over time and is brought to perfection only at the end of the process; hence, what is generated only exists at the end of the process of generation" (p. 18). *A human being only comes to existence, on this view, at the end of the process of generation.* What exists prior to this point is, at most, something that is *potentially* a human being. This is a familiar claim that has been used to various ends in previous discussions.

Amerini, however, imbues this claim with new significance. The fact that the embryo and the human being are the same subject, despite their lack of numerical identity, he believes, "can be derived from the fact that, metaphysically, the embryo is in potency to a human being so that a human being is what an embryo is in act(uality)" (p. 163). This non-numerical identity of subject "presupposed by the unity between potency and act" (p. 127), is what Amerini presents as the solution to the problem of the identity of the embryo.

It's clear that Amerini considers his discussion of identity to have done most of the heavy philosophical lifting for the book, for the final three chapters of the book together comprise only fifty pages, although they address "Bioethical Implications", "The Beginning and End of Human Life," and "The Contemporary Debate over the Hominization of the Embryo" respectively.

Amerini's conclusion regarding the bioethical consequences of Aquinas's position, ultimately, is that although "in the abstract" Aquinas's account is fully compatible "both with a position in favor of and against abortion", when it is looked at concretely, "Thomas's account provides certain philosophical reasons for taking up a position that is generally against abortion, even setting aside the question of when the hominization of the embryo takes place" (p. 167-168). These reasons are, according to Amerini, precisely the special status that the *pre-human embryo* has in virtue of existing in potency to an actual human being. As a result, he dismisses the effort of some scholars to reconcile Aquinas's account of embryology with the present position of the Catholic Church on abortion as not just "philosophically and philologically unsatisfying" but also "largely pointless" (p. 237). After tentatively suggesting a "gradual protection of human life" approach as the best reading of Aquinas's own view, Amerini discourages coming to any hard conclusion about the matter on the grounds that "as we have seen in this study no clear treatment of bioethical cases can be

found within Thomas's metaphysical investigation of embryogenesis" (p. 237-38).

I lack the space to address the specific issues I have with Amerini's exegesis of Aquinas and the philosophical conclusions drawn from that exegesis. On the general level it is worth noting, however, that one unfortunate result of the book's commitment to drawing out Aquinas's view from the texts without imposing any sort of external structure is that it involves rather more discussion of the role of menstrual blood and semen in the process of generation than one might expect, and rather less discussion of what a substance is, or even what it might mean for the rational soul to be the substantial form of a human being. It is also left quite unclear what it might mean for the embryo and the human being to be one and the same subject without being numerically the same subject, or even exactly what it means for the embryo to be in potency to the human being. I believe this is intentional on Amerini's part, since he explicitly wants to avoid "reading views into" Aquinas. Still, his restraint is rather unhelpful. Medieval texts and terminology are notoriously inscrutable to the contemporary eye, and Amerini never steps far enough away from his subject matter to draw the modern reader in. In this connection, many readers will find it especially frustrating that Amerini's close and extensive paraphrases of Aquinas's texts are footnoted with the relevant passages in the original Latin all of which are left untranslated.

Amerini is, nevertheless, meticulously even-handed in working his way through the relevant passages, and his command of the material is impressive. Mark Henninger also does an admirable job with the difficult task of translating Amerini's Italian into English while preserving his style and thought processes. The only real exception to this is chapter seven, which, unfortunately, also includes the only and extremely attenuated discussion of the end of human life. Scholars interested in Aquinas's account of embryology will find the book a valuable

resource for both the primary and secondary literature on this topic.

The amount of effort necessary to work through the book's dialectical twists and turns, however, makes it unlikely to gain a broad readership and that, in the end, is perhaps not as tragic as it might be. Central discussions are frequently so convoluted that it is difficult to determine what, exactly, is being claimed and it is sometimes unclear that the point made was significant enough to merit the effort. Take, for example, the following conclusion in the chapter on the bioethical implications of Aquinas's position:

„This can be admitted: an embryo and a human being are not exactly the same entity, for they are not numerically the same entity. But that does not change the fact that for Thomas there is continuity between that embryo and that human being, and that this continuity could be taken as a sufficient metaphysical basis for developing a bioethical theory that is not ready to accept in a generalized way, or at least in an unregulated way, human intervention on embryos that relies on the distinction between a prehuman phase and a properly human phase of the embryos”(p. 191).

within a basically aristotelian framework? Have they too casually accepted the view that when it comes to successful deliberation about what we should do in specific situations, Aristotelian virtue ethics entails that rules or principles do not have a particularly important role to play; that what is required is rather a well developed sensitivity, of a kind that is characteristic of the virtuous, which enables its possessors to appreciate reliably the morally salient features on a case by case basis? In *„Rethinking Virtue Ethics”*, Michael Winter, Professor of Philosophy at the University „St. Thomas”, Minnesota, USA, argues that these questions should be answered in the affirmative. The book has an introduction and five chapters concluding with an appendix and bibliography.

In the chapter entitled *„Moral Realism and Virtue Ethics”*, the author takes into account several types of objections against

aristotelian deductive paradigm, in terms of virtue ethics. Michael Winter objects against deductive interpretation that Aristotle states using the *Nicomachean Ethics* passages. It is noted that the features of Aristotle's ethics support the deductive model type in the understanding of ethical virtue. The author wants the reader to approach this book from the point of view of a non-deductive interpretation, which can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the following topics addressed in this paper.

Section 2.4 is more radical because it targets an important idea that relates to *quality theory* considered a plausible basis for moral theory and if someone might be skeptical about this theory, here is a reason for reading hereinafter the present work. Section 2.5 is a defense of virtue theory in a contemporary challenge against traditional understanding that assigns virtue from knowledge. For example, modesty which is based on the traditional understanding of the relationship between virtue and knowledge must be classified as moral virtue. In the end of the chapter it is mentioned that between the point of the theory of virtue in an ethically and teleology approach, there is a commitment that cannot be underestimated.

Next chapter entitled "*A Sketch of an Aristotelian Science of Ethics*", presents the basic forms which are deductive paradigm of Aristotelian ethics. In order to discuss ethics in the context of Aristotle's conception there are two types of approaches. First called TSP "The Two Science Proposal" which shows that there are two types of Aristotelian science, the first in a pure form and the second simple, reason that ethics must be considered in a simplified manner, and the second TDP called "The Two types of demonstration", which refers to a single type of thinking approach to Aristotle but two forms of demonstration. At the end of this chapter, PhD Michael Winter shows that deductive paradigm of Aristotelian theory must take consideration of ethics. Deductions from moral principles of moral rules must generate in terms of provisions and human actions and their



applicability must be accompanied by a correct moral judgment. Rethinking virtue ethics signify to think in a comprehensive way.

The chapter "*How are Ethical Principles Known?*" based on the general question "what are the prospects for armchair ethics?", in order to determine whether "ethics armchair" or ethics investigation carried out on the basis of conceptual analysis is possible. The author states that indeed the investigation on ethic has an empirical importance. If we as human beings say that moral principles can be gained from personal experience, however, we have no basis to say what standards are preferable to have. It is need a determinant of moral theory that provides a standard regarding the self-assessment. Aristotle emphasizes two aspects in this regard: that man possesses natural virtues and that it is naturally capable of recognizing virtue actions. Further the author analyzes Aristotle's doctrine of "νοῦς" in the sense of mind or intelligence. In the theoretical practice, inductive intelligence represents the last stage of the process that enables one to understand essentially the connections between topics and predicates of fundamental principles.

Last chapter entitled "*Some Challenges to the deductive Model*" follows as far as Aristotle's virtue ethics goes to demonstrate the idea that there are absolute human rights as for example in the case of suicide. Admitting that suicide may be rational in certain circumstances, Michael Winter wonders whether one can speak of absolute rights. Analyzing the concept of autonomy in Kant, he shows that it is not clear whether suicide can be justified ethically and morally, according to Aristotle's thought but his brilliant idea is quite suited to address human problems nowadays.

The whole chapter was written to emphasize some of the challenges it might face the deductive model of Aristotelian ethics. In this context the authors analyzes and present the idea of philosopher John McDowell according to Aristotle deductive model cannot be support, because of the role the virtue plays in ethics theory. In the final chapter, the author states that

Aristotle's virtue theory is an attractive model to justify an action in a detached manner of altruism issue, for example. On the other hand this is another reason to consider virtue as a sound basis for understanding moral theory. Nevertheless, to the Aristotelian deductive model the consideration of limitations is required to him, as there is a limit to demonstrate absolute justification of human rights.

Therefore, here are only a few important reasons for reading this very interesting philosophical work, of approaching the virtue in terms of ethics.