

Grace for the Day

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Origin of the Soul

By Rev. Peter Eng

What is the origin of the soul? When do we have a soul?

This is not a frivolous question. This rather speculative sounding question has direct impact on practices like abortion, IVF, stem cell research, etc.

For Christians, moral culpability in relation to these topics is linked to the soul, which is presumably linked to personhood.

Secular ethicists would tend to agree that there is moral culpability when a person is killed. But Christian theologians tend to define that personhood with the question of the existence of the soul.

There are three views to the origin of the soul. They are: (1) pre-existence, (2) creationism, and (3) propagation.

PRE-EXISTENCE

The pre-existence of the soul has two tracks: the pagan and the Christian interpretations. The pagan understanding of the pre-existence of the soul from the Platonic and Aristotelian thought is that ideas or concepts are not mere thoughts but are living entities. The present world which exists in time derives its reality from the dimension of the thought world. Indian religions also teach the pre-existence of people and animals using different models. The more well known is the model of reincarnation. An existence is recycled until nirvana is attained.

Logically, reincarnation views, abortion or the destruction of human embryos, or the taking of a human life, is not any more or less of a moral than slaughtering an animal or swatting a mosquito.

A Christian view of pre-existence was suggested by the church father Origen, but this view was never widely adopted. He suggested that the souls of beings have different existences and what we see is but one of many. These persons sinned in the pre-existent state and were condemned to life in a physical body.

There is a total lack of Scriptural support for this view. Origen should be credited with trying to explain spiritual things in his own cultural milieu. (Like what we are trying to do here.) Unfortunately, his explanation is strictly speculative. The strength of his argument is that people of that time would have found that explanation acceptable on account of the Platonic and Aristotelian influence.

If a person accepts the pre-existent view of the soul, the tendency is to say that the soul enters the body at birth, though this is not a logical necessity. If such were the case, pre-natal destruction of the foetus is not an issue. If it is suggested that the pre-existent soul enters the person at conception, it would suggest human value at the pre-natal stage of development.

CREATIONISM

The real debate among Christians is whether souls are individually created at some point in time during gestation or birth, or that the soul is part of the propagation process.

Before we enter into detailed discussion, we need to first understand that the terms: "breath," "spirit" and "soul" can mean a variety of things. They can refer to our mental and emotional state, as we would say, "He is in low spirit." They can refer to the person himself, as when we say, "The ship sank and all souls perished." They can also refer to the soul as opposed to the body of a person, that is, the immaterial constituent part of a person. There is no rule how these words are used. The context determines the usage.

Argument from Concepts

This view states that each soul is individually created. The first argument is from creation. When God created Adam, he gave Adam a soul, so likewise we are conferred a soul.

This argument is weak because Adam was the first human and the dynamics governing the imputation of a soul to Adam may not apply to us. We note that Eve was made from Adam. Females today do not come from males (to state the obvious)! What it shows is that Adam's case is unique.

The creation of Eve suggests the opposite of creationism. God did not have to impute a human soul for Eve. She just had it. This point is an argument from silence. But the argument that the imputation of a soul to Adam suggests we also have imputed souls is a great leap in analogy.

We are not told Adam was actually given a soul. We are simply told God imputed life into him. Life and soul are related, but they need not be equated. This is seen in the case when a person dies. The life is gone, but the soul lives on.

It is also significant that the creation account tells us God ceased from creation after the sixth day. This would suggest souls are not being created. Humans have a mandate to procreate, suggesting the whole person is complete and procreation is all it takes to generate a human soul which is not separable from the body.

Argument from the Bible

One proof text used to demonstrate the view that souls are created is "and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it" (Eccl 12:7). This means God creates and gives each of us a soul.

Rebuttal. This does not prove the creation of the individual soul. The individual does not come from dust. He came from his mother's womb. This is a general statement using the image of the creation of man. It is no more than a general statement that we go back to our Maker. And by this statement, we do not suggest God made us individually, but that God made Adam, and so he is our Maker.

"The LORD, who stretches out the heavens, who lays the foundation of the earth, and who forms the spirit of man within him, declares..." (Zech 12:1). This shows us that God forms the soul of a person within a person.

Rebuttal. Like the earlier verse, the image used is creation. God is telling Israel that he, the creator of man, will also bring something about.

"For I will not contend forever, neither will I be always wrath: for the spirit should fail before me, and the souls *which* I have made" (KJV Isa 57:16). This verse says that God made the souls of man.

*"I will not accuse forever,
nor will I always be angry,
for then the spirit of man would grow faint
before me—
the breath / soul of man that I have
created."*

This is typical parallelism in Hebrew poetry where one line parallels or reinforces the idea of another. The breath / soul (Heb: *nephesh*) of man is parallel to the spirit of man.

God is saying he will not retain his anger at the people because they would otherwise become discouraged. The spirit / soul of man here refers simply to his mental state, not the immaterial part of the body we often call the "soul."

PROPAGATION (TRADUCIANISM)

The propagation (traducian) view says there is no dichotomy between body and soul, until death. This means that upon conception, humanness, both body and soul, are procreated. There is no point in time when the conceived is without a soul. Personhood and existence are not separable.

The Issue

In the context of our discussion in which we are trying to determine the morality of action taken on the unborn child, it is more important for us to ask when the soul comes into our body. The traducian view will naturally exclude any violence to the unborn at any stage in the conception. The creation view that regards the inception of the soul at conception will take a similar position. The pre-existent view that regards the inception of the soul at birth will allow for any violence to the unborn since there is no soul or personhood in the unborn.

In terms of the morality of violence against the unborn, both the traducian view and the creation view that sees the inception of the soul at conception are in effect the same position.

I shall advocate the personhood of the unborn. That is, I will attempt to answer the question when the unborn has a soul or when the unborn has personhood.

Argument from the Bible

The lex talionis. Many people do not realize that the lex talionis (law of retaliation) was given in the context of injury to an unborn child.

If men who are fighting hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman's husband demands and the court allows. But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise (Exod 21:22-25ff).

The issue is that if a person strikes a woman and she gives birth prematurely, but there is no injury (that is to the baby), the person who caused the injury is fined a sum of money. But "if there is serious injury" the case is different.

There is injury to the child regardless of the injury to the mother. The issue here is the extent of injury to the child. In the first instance, there is no serious injury to the child, and in the second instance there is serious injury to the child. It is clear that the discussion here concerns the child.

It is really quite remarkable that *the worth of the unborn child was placed at the same level as an adult in the law of retaliation.* Ancient Israel had a divine law on the unborn that was totally different from anything ancient or modern. There was no relevance as to the stage of pregnancy. If it can be proven that the man who struck the pregnant woman caused her to lose her child regardless of how old the foetus, he had taken a life and had to pay for it with his life.

It can be argued that the loss of a child at the earliest stages of pregnancy would not be apparent. That may be true. But what we are addressing here is the principle. The principle is that injury to the unborn child carries the same penalty as injury to a person. The value or personhood of the unborn is no different from the born.

Job 10:8-12.

⁸ *"Your hands shaped me and made me.*

Will you now turn and destroy me?

⁹ *Remember that you molded me like clay.*

Will you now turn me to dust again?

¹⁰ *Did you not pour me out like milk*

and curdle me like cheese,

¹¹ *clothe me with skin and flesh*

and knit me together with bones

and sinews?

¹² *You gave me life and showed me kindness,*

and in your providence watched over my spirit.

The message is that God took a very keen interest in Job even before he was born. God

knew Job while he was still in his mother's womb. Job considers himself to be alive, to be able to receive God's kindness, and to have a spirit while he was yet unborn. Technically, this "spirit:" can refer to either the soul or consciousness. Either way, personhood is strongly presumed by the author.

Psalm 139: 13-16.

- ¹³ *For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my
mother's womb.*
- ¹⁴ *I praise you because I am fearfully and
wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.*
- ¹⁵ *My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place.
When I was woven together in the
depths of the earth,*
- ¹⁶ *your eyes saw my unformed body.
All the days ordained for me
were written in your book
before one of them came to be.*

The psalmist made it clear that God saw his unformed body even when the naked eye was unable to recognise the foetus. Like Job, there was a distinct "me" for the unborn child.

The psalmist takes great comfort and delight that God knew him and watched over him throughout his conception.

Jeremiah 1:5

*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
before you were born I set you apart;*

This verse is interesting because it tells us that even before we were conceived, God knew us. God set aside Jeremiah for a special task even before he was conceived.

Hebrew poetic parallelism is again at play. The two thoughts taken literally, are (1) God knew Jeremiah before he was conceived, and (2) God knew Jeremiah before he was born.

God was saying to Jeremiah that his life has a purpose even before he was born and God did not make a mistake with Jeremiah. While this is not a distinct assertion concerning the state

of the unborn child, it strongly suggests to us that individuals are not accidents, and the conception and development of the unborn child receive God's superintendence.

Luke 1:39-25. In this passage, we read that Elizabeth was six months pregnant carrying John the Baptist. Mary who had just conceived through the Holy Spirit visited her. John the Baptist, still a foetus, leaped in Elizabeth's womb in response to the presence of the Lord's mother.

John the Baptist was a foetus and had a spiritual response to Mary's visit. This is remarkable because Elizabeth's filling by the Holy Spirit was through John's activity in the womb. At the same time, we note that Mary's pregnancy was certainly not noticeable. She had only just conceived. Yet Mary was called the mother of the Lord. That is to say, while Jesus was yet the smallest possible embryo, Elizabeth called him 'Lord'.

Here we see the personhood of Jesus when he was conceived. It may be argued that Jesus is unique, and that may indeed be true. But the generally accepted position is that Jesus is truly man and truly God, and his humanity is the issue here. His personhood and humanity is indicated at conception and not at birth.

Argument from Concept

Our humanity comes from the process of procreation. There is nothing to suggest an additional process to make us human. God's creative work is completed on the sixth day and there is no suggestion of additional creative work with reference to who we are.

If our souls are individually created, we end up having to ask if God created a sinful soul or a sinless soul. It would be exceeding strange to say God continually creates sinful souls. Yet if the souls are sinless, what happens when these sinless souls are placed into the bodies of the child. Does it become sinful? What does Christ redeem, our bodies or our souls?

The suggestion that souls are individually created poses all types of problems with regard to sin and redemption.

The Judeo-Christian concept does not see the soul as inherently good and the body as inherently evil. God created both body and soul, and both aspects are good. Both aspects are fallen with regard to sin, and one cannot be divorced from the other. Redemption is for both body and soul. This is why Christian theology teaches not only the salvation of the soul, but also the resurrection of the body to be transformed to incorruption. This is entirely consistent with the propagation view of the soul. Conversely, the creation view of the soul creates contradictions in other aspects of theology.

CONCLUSION

I am of the opinion that the Bible indicates to us that the soul is by propagation and not by creation (and certainly not by pre-existence). A child is human at onception, not at birth or during gestation.

The ramifications of this position is that the unborn child should be accorded the value of a human life.

This view has a practical question that is hard to answer. We know today that about one-third of all human zygotes suffer spontaneous abortion. Does that mean there are millions upon millions of little souls in heaven?

I confess I am unable to provide an adequate explanation of what happens to fertilized eggs not brought to full term. The Bible does not address this question. I have neither biblical inferences nor theological necessities to which I can draw to answer this question. It remains unanswered in my mind.

What I can say is that the Bible does advocate a clear position on the value of the unborn child, and it is our duty as Christians to embrace each unborn child with the same value and dignity God has assigned him or her. We are precious in his eyes even before we are born.

Praise the Lord!

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Rev. Peter Eng is an ordained minister from the Reformed Tradition, but he is truly global in perspective. He served the Lord in various capacities starting from his teenage years in the 70s. His undergrad studies were done in Singapore, his grad studies in the USA, and post-grad studies in the United Kingdom, with additional post-grad research in Germany.