

§ 10. Doctrine of Man
Lecture 12
The Origin of the Soul

Welcome to Defenders. If you weren't with us last Sunday, let me explain that because of the coronavirus we are unable to meet together as a class or even video record the class at the church where we normally convene. So we are instead video recording the Defenders lesson from the sanctuary of my home office and podcasting it to you worldwide. We are all of us in this together. This is a global pandemic that we face, and so I am glad that as you join our Defenders podcast all around the world you are tuning in with us to keep the continuity of our class going and to not allow it to be interrupted because of the threat of this virus.

The last time we talked about the nature of the soul. Today we want to turn to the subject of the origin of the soul.

There are classically three, but now really four, views that present themselves as possibilities with respect to this question.

First is the pre-existence of the soul. This was the view held by the early church father Origen. It is essentially a Platonic doctrine; Origen held that souls exist with God prior to His creation of the physical body and even of the physical world. Then once God creates the world He sends these souls into the world – He incarnates them in particular bodies. This view brought upon Origen the condemnation of the early church. He was condemned as a heretic because, among other things, of his view of the pre-existence of the soul.

A second view is the Creationist view. This is the view that God creates each individual soul *ex nihilo*. Clement of Alexandria would be an example of a church father who espoused this view. So, on this view when the sperm and the egg unite to form the body of a new human being, at some point in the process God creates a soul and incarnates it in the organism that has been conceived.

Third is the Traducian view. The North African church father Tertullian is a representative of this position. According to Traducianism, just as the physical body is the causal product of the parents through the union of the sperm and the egg, so the child's soul is produced by the souls of the parents. Since the souls of the parents engender the soul of the offspring, the new soul doesn't require an immediate, miraculous creative act of God or intervention of God. Rather just as the body of the child is produced by the parents, so the soul is produced by the souls of the parents.

Finally, fourth, I should mention another view which is not a classical view but is very recently coming on the scene. It is what we might call Emergentism. This is the view that

is propounded, for example, by the contemporary Christian philosopher William Hasker. Emergentism is often associated with non-reductive physicalism – that is to say, the view that the mind is an epiphenomenon of the brain. You will remember that we saw that non-reductive materialists say that the brain is the only thing there really is but that it has these sorts of mental states or mental properties associated with it. But on this view the mind is not an actual thing; rather, there isn't really a soul. Hasker, however, wants to push Emergentism further to say that when the central nervous system attains a certain sort of complexity, then the soul will naturally emerge, and then there will be a new thing – a new mental substance – that will come into existence at that point. So this is a dualistic view, but it regards the mental substance as something that emerges from a physical system when that physical system reaches a certain level of complexity that is sufficient to serve as an instrument of the soul to think.

Which of these four views is the best? Well, that is difficult to say! I don't have a brief to carry on behalf of any of them. Origen's pre-creationist view seems to be biblically excluded because the Scripture never contemplates that human beings somehow preexist as souls before their bodies exist. Creationism, on the other hand, seems to be a view that is both biblical and plausible. It raises the question however, "When does God create the soul in the body?" We cannot be sure; but it would seem natural to say that this would occur at the moment of conception. When the sperm and the egg unite and a new organism comes into being, then God simultaneously creates the soul.

This question has obvious ethical implications for the practice of abortion. If the soul is placed in the body at some later point, then the destruction of the embryo or fetus would not be killing a human being. Given our uncertainty, it is surely prudent to err on the side of caution by taking conception to be the moment at which the soul is created. One misgiving that does arise with respect to the Creationist scenario concerns the practice of biologists or fertility doctors of mass-fertilizing eggs and producing embryos in the laboratory or even splitting cells after conception. Are we to think that by so doing, they force God's hand, so to speak, to start creating souls and attaching them to all of these embryos? In a sense God seems to become trapped by the medical proliferation of these cells and gets stuck creating all these souls. Somehow that just doesn't seem right. Now, perhaps one might say, "God doesn't create souls just because doctors proliferate fertilized eggs; He will only provide a soul to one that He knows will actually grow up and become a more mature human being." But such a response might look a little bit *ad hoc*. I am not sharing here a decisive objection to the Creationist view but just a sense of discomfort that one might well feel about it.

Traducianism seems, however, even more implausible to me because it seems inconceivable how all of the millions and millions of sperm could be carrying the soul of the father to the egg, where it would somehow, with the soul of the mother, produce the

soul of the offspring. The egg and the sperm after all are not human beings – they don't have souls. They are not complete human beings. Since the sperm and the egg don't have souls, how is it that they are the vehicle that would carry the souls of the parents along so that somehow when they unite, another soul is produced as a result? Perhaps the Traducianist might say that the sperm and egg do not carry the souls of the parents but rather bear certain properties which when united form a new soul. The souls of the parents do not immediately cause the soul of the offspring; rather they are the remote cause – they are the source – of the soulish properties which, when combined, are sufficient for the coming into being of a new soul at conception.

Finally, as to Emergentism, I think the fear here is that one would lapse back into some kind of non-reductive materialism rather than a real dualism. I think we need to hear more from thinkers like Hasker exactly how it is that the complexity of a biological system would produce an immaterial substance like the soul.

So all of these views have their difficulties. As I confessed earlier, philosophy of mind is not my area of specialization, and so I have not delved into any of these sorts of questions in a deep way. So I have no strong opinions as to any of these options but retain an open mind. I find Creationism or Emergentism to be the most attractive of the four views, and I hope that the feelings of discomfort that one has about these views can be resolved.

One issue that all of these views raise that I want to return to is, when does the soul attach to the body? Until the soul is present, you don't really have a human being – you just have a body, an organism, but not a full human being. This was the question, you will remember, that Rick Warren put to candidate Barack Obama with respect to abortion – when does the fertilized embryo or fetus become a human being? And Obama said, “That is above my theological pay grade.” Well, if that is correct, then it seems to me that caution would counsel you consider the embryo or fetus to be human right from the moment of conception. So for safety's sake, one would not allow abortion to take place without overriding moral justification, such as saving the mother's life. Someone once gave the following illustration: Suppose you were sitting at your desk and your little son came up behind you and said, “Hey Dad, can I kill it?” You would obviously need to ask what it was that he was talking about – was it the cockroach on the floor or was it his little sister? If you don't know the answer, you would caution, “No!” You would always go with the safe answer. So similarly here, even if we don't know on some of these views exactly when the soul attaches to the body, caution would advise that in cases of uncertainty you should assume that it is present. We know that already at 43 days after conception there is brain wave activity, so even at that point the soul is present and so abortion would be killing a human person. So on that basis I would say that one ought to err on the side of caution when it comes to the ethics of aborting fertilized embryos.

The next time we meet we are going to move to the second section of our course on the doctrine of man which is man as a sinner. We talked about man in the image of God, but of course we are now fallen humanity. So the next portion of our study of the doctrine of man will deal with that subject: man as sinner. I hope you'll be able to join me then. Until then, stay safe.¹

¹ ?Total Running Time: 15:26 (Copyright © 2020 William Lane Craig)