

On abortion “as” homicide

Antonis Tsolomitis
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First of all, we must distinguish between what the law considers homicide and what the philosophical tradition or the theological tradition considers. The joke is well known: “One and one make two, unless the law provides otherwise.” Here we will address the issue from a philosophical and theological (within Christianity) perspective. Also, we will not be concerned with the prejudices of the faithful, but with the theological framework as shaped by the “Church Fathers.” The question, therefore, is not legal or political, but whether the identification “abortion = homicide” holds conceptually within the traditions usually invoked to support it.

In the philosophical and theological tradition, homicide is not defined merely as the biological destruction of tissue, but as the removal of the life of a subject. Thus the term “homicide” **presupposes a subject**. For abortion to be “homicide” (especially in the early stages of pregnancy), it must be established philosophically/metaphysically or theologically, not rhetorically. For homicide to exist, we need

- a subject with individual existence,
- a soul in active relation to a body,
- the removal of an existing life.

Let us briefly examine the views that were developed.

Plato: In the Platonic tradition, the soul is not conceived as an individual object created in a body at a specific moment in time. Rather, it pre-exists as part of the universal order of the world. In the *Republic* and the *Meno*, Plato considers that the soul’s entry into the body occurs at birth, while before that the embryo is vegetative (*Timaeus* 91d or also 90a–92c). Moreover, upon entering the body, the soul forgets everything it knew while living in the world of Forms. This means that, not only in the early but in all stages of gestation, the concept of a subject does not exist.

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Therefore, if a child is stillborn or removed by abortion, it never actually died, because it was never a child.

Aristotle: soul = *entelecheia* of a natural body that potentially has life (*De Anima* II.1). That is, the soul is not something that “enters” the body; it is the form, the organizing principle of the living body. Wherever there is actual life, there is soul, but it is distinguished into three kinds:

- **Nutritive soul** – plants, embryos
- **Sensitive soul** – animals
- **Rational soul** – humans

Animals (except humans) have a sensitive soul, but humans have a rational soul. However, this does not exist from the very moment of conception. In *De Generatione Animalium*, the soul is formed gradually. First it appears as nutritive, then as sensitive, and finally, for humans, as rational. The human embryo is not actually a human being, but an animal with a nutritive soul in actuality, potentially directed toward the human species.

The crucial point for Aristotle is when the embryo has an internally complete vital organization conforming to the human species. When do we have the actualization of its vital functions, those that define it as belonging to its species? That is, for a human, the embryo must acquire those vital functions that allow it to have an internally organized and complete vital organization **as a human**. Only then can it be said that the rational soul is actualized. But with the completion of vital functions, the next natural stage is birth.

Consequently, even if one considers that the embryo has a nutritive soul, and therefore a soul, one cannot claim that it is a human being, but rather something that can develop into a human being.

Thus, according to Aristotle, even in the later stages of pregnancy – let alone the early stages, when abortion usually takes place – abortion cannot be considered homicide.

Stoics: Here we have a radical break. Aristotle’s gradual ensoulment is rejected. The soul is corporeal (*pneuma*). The embryo does not have a soul. The soul is constituted with the first breath. This is an instantaneous event for both humans and other animals. Life begins with birth. It is preserved in Galen and Plutarch that for the Stoics the embryo is vegetative. The soul is constituted instantaneously with the entry of air into the lungs. Therefore, for the Stoics, abortion cannot be understood as homicide.

While Aristotle places ensoulment on a developmental path, the Stoics link it to a clear physiological event: birth.

Neoplatonists: The Neoplatonists (Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Proclus) attempt a systematic synthesis of Platonic metaphysics with Aristotelian physics. From Plato they retain the pre-existence and self-sufficiency of the soul as an intelligible reality; from Aristotle they adopt the idea of the gradual organization of the body and the close connection between soul and vital functions. The union of soul and body is no longer conceived as a purely instantaneous descent at birth (as in a strict Platonic reading), nor as a purely biological gradual ensoulment without a pre-existing soul. Instead, the soul is considered to relate to the body in a gradual and hierarchical way: it pre-exists intelligibly, but it activates its functions in the sensible world as the body becomes a suitable instrument. Thus, fetal life is conceived as a process of preparation for incarnation, without a clear temporal point of full ensoulment. From this perspective, abortion is not established as homicide in the strict sense, but as the frustration of an ongoing teleological course toward the full realization of the human soul.

Church Fathers: They often adopt Aristotelian and Neoplatonic gradualism, not always with philosophical consistency, but systematically as a basic interpretative scheme.

Middle Ages (Thomas Aquinas): full acceptance of successive ensoulment; the rational soul is given when the body is a suitable instrument.

Consequently, even for the theoreticians of Christianity, the equation “abortion = homicide” does not hold, at least in the early stages of pregnancy. For the Aristotelian gradualism they accept requires the formation of the “totality of vital functions.” Pay attention to the word “totality.”

Modern biology: The question is now not posed as “when do we have a soul?” but “when do we have an organism?” and not just biological material. This corresponds exactly to the ancient question: when is something an actual living being (*zōon kat' energeian*) and not merely a potential one? Modern theoretical biologists (Oyama, Dupré, et al.) seem to accept Aristotelian entelechy.

The ancient Greek discussion about the soul, when translated carefully, does not conflict with modern biology, but warns precisely against the search for a magical moment where only developmental continuity exists.

Why then do the Church Fathers and Thomas Aquinas oppose abortions?

For them, the issue is NOT that a murder is taking place. Rather, it is that the potential is interrupted. That is, if we did not intervene, a new ensouled life would come into being. That is the intended “end” by nature. Abortion (even in early stages) **frustrates** a natural teleological course. It is *contra naturam*. They are not saying “it is already a human being and you are killing it.” They are saying “it can become a human being and you are not allowing it.” The moral weight is derived not from the current status but from the natural prospect of realization, and therefore it is not equated with homicide, which concerns an already existing subject.

Do the Church Fathers agree among themselves? No. There are various opinions. But the more philosophical among them agree on the above. Others, e.g., Basil, frame the issue in terms of fornication.

Conclusions:

- *contra naturam* **does not imply homicide**,
- it does not even necessarily imply serious moral guilt **equivalent to manslaughter**,
- it is an **ontological/teleological** category, not a penal one.
- the leap from *contra naturam* to “murder” is **philosophically unjustified**.
- The problem is not when “life begins”, but when the subject begins.

What is really happening in the public sphere, then, is that philosophical terms are being used detached from their conceptual depth to support **preconceived conclusions**.