

# The Linacre Quarterly

---

Volume 72 | Number 4

Article 8

---

November 2005

## Reflections on Conception

Theodore Gillian

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq>

---

### Recommended Citation

Gillian, Theodore (2005) "Reflections on Conception," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 72 : No. 4 , Article 8.  
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol72/iss4/8>

# Reflections on Conception

by

Theodore Gillian, OFM

*The author is a priest of the Franciscan Friars Star of the Sea, Australia*

---

This paper intends to show how human conception introduces us to a world in which each of us plays a leading part in knowing and being known. It further leads to our realisation that we are loved and need to love in return for our betterment. Our interactions, being carried out in freedom, involve choices that are both intuitive and determined by deliberation. It is necessary that we intra-act in self-realisation, self-knowledge and self-loving. We also must interact with our fellow human beings. While each of us lives in an autonomous state, we discover personal self-responsibility and the need to respect the autonomy of others of our ilk. We make mistakes. We also experience both positive and negative reactions. The decision and determination to be loving people is a life-long challenge.

Our autonomous state is our rational freedom, the state of *liberum arbitrium*. We are in touch with creation with our spirit which extends as if window shopping our world and beyond. Then the decisions of our rational will determine our choices (Bernard, 42-44). So from the beginning our intuitive capacity is activated spiritually.

## The Beginning of Life

The moment of conception is recognizable as the moment when the gametes meet in fusion and are integrated by and to the newly created human soul. We can investigate an ongoing relationship to the Creation in which the human being exists. That the newly created soul is itself integrated and has the power to integrate to itself is clearly demonstrated by our psychiatric medical ability to treat mental illness. Ultimately, the immortal power of the loving, moral soul survives the loss of "somatic, integrative unity". This unity is necessary for human life and living, and its loss indicates death and our passing to eternity (Shewman, 320). Justice and love demand this after-life (I. Gillian, 45).

## Reflection on Early Life

Our experiences are rich in content, though experience is itself passive (McDowell,10). He expounds this later when he clarifies his position of spontaneity. The capacities belonging to spontaneity are able to be exercised in ongoing human life. This enables us to reflect in later life on the experience of our conception that memory supplies. The necessary inclusion of the activities of conceptualization in spontaneity enables us to be in living contact with our beginnings. The later development of concepts of our beginning are thus not just some way of putting our mind onto the world. Our past and present experiences enmesh what we have retained from both our inter and intra relationships which we have established within the self.

They enable us to know, from our developing second nature, things which would otherwise hang in space, as it were, in our own minds (Ibid., 111). McDowell uses the Sellarsian term "logical space" to delineate our differentiated thinking (Ibid, xx). Second nature is part of the logical space of nature, which is of us and our world. This space differs from that of the logical space of reasons, which itself is *sui generis* (Ibid, xx). This itself differs again from the logical space in which our talent in natural science renders to us scientific intelligibility (Ibid., xix). The logical space of law is also different, as is the logical space of grace, especially the actual grace which actualizes our human potentiality.

However, we develop second nature only partly by our introduction into our capacity to discover and use concepts, whose inter-relationships belong in the "logical space of reasons" (Ibid., xx). Our thoughts are substantiated with intuitions, which same are "bits of experiential intake" (Ibid, 4). Thus our relational rationality enables us to see our beginning from our memory and the light upon it (2.Gillian, 209-210). This moment of conception is the "memorized actuality" of each human beginning , which is an awesome recall. (Ibid., 206). To be consistent, the intuitive truth of existence would be at the instant of conception. Later development builds on this.

### God's Self-Revelation

Bonaventure's thesis, that God reveals God, may sound simplistic and obvious, but it is the obvious that is often overlooked in human living and even in intellectual work. He develops this theme in his treatise of *The Soul's Journey to God*. How God does this revealing is an ongoing and engaging subject.

Though Bonaventure lacked our modern biological knowledge and the science of bioethics, he did uncover, from our basic memory, a light being upon the memory (Bonaventure, 79-80). We retain "the present by

reception" which means memory must operate prior to intellect and will or there would be nothing upon which these two could act (Ibid., 80).

According to Gilson, Bonaventure traced the innateness of the soul's knowledge of God's existence through traditional authors by an inverted concept: "it is impossible to love that of which one is absolutely ignorant"(Gilson, 111). Whether we desire wisdom, happiness or love itself, the desire is drawn to the innate source that generates our desire. Especially does this apply for the supreme experience of wisdom, happiness or love itself. Most especially love, because it includes loving and being loved supremely without end (Ibid., 110-111). Errors abound in the human development of this theme of life, as is found in various pagan ways. Usually lacking is a slick and easy means to achieve the ultimate. Thus disappointment leads to indifference, or substitutes temporal pleasure. Sometimes ultimate despair ensues. Unless, of course, persistence in truth is followed.

### **Created Time and Uncreated Time**

It is difficult for us humans to imagine life that is timeless, though we do use the expression "timeless" to describe certain experiences, such as love, or some art that never seems to age, be it music, painting, poetry, literature or even sculpture. But the very notion of timelessness is foreign to our corporeal experiences. Any quantity is numerical and obviously subject to a mathematical sense of infinity. But this concept of infinity is not helpful when discussing quality, especially life quality.

When we consider quality as such, and not mathematical degrees of quality, we use indicative, comparative and superlative as in the case of good, better and best. When we consider the immeasurable infinity of God we use the superlative since it does ring true. It also seems acceptable to use the superlative qualitative sense to apply this to the Infinite that is God. To do this, the concept that applies the "best" to God and time is the Instantaneous. Thus we can image ourselves as finite creatures being in touch with our Creator Who is the Instantaneous One by whom we are created. The moment of our creation, and successive moments of life, are contiguous with each following moment. These succeeding moments are always contiguous with the Instantaneous. This follows from creation's dependence on the Creator, and creation's need for dependable continuity. Science makes this assumption. The sun will come up tomorrow.

In our experience of life we measure past, present and future. Within the present there is the instant. As we speak it is succeeded by the next instant. However, what it gives is a manner of presentation where the instant of our experience touches the instantaneous life of our Creator. In our last instant of this life we pass, hopefully

successfully, into the instantaneous life of God where Christ has already gone. In this way there is a resonance, as far as I can describe it, between the eternal and the temporal. In terms of quality, which we measure in our speech as good, better and best, the eternal instant is the best. In this context of time, this does offer a differentiation and a contact which does no disservice to the Almighty. It also expresses the creation's relationship, that is our world in all its temporal extent and need, being in touch with the Creator.

It is not far-fetched to state that most common thinking about time is that it is linear and, in the Aristotelian sense, simply a measure of change. This tends to limit our vision of a connected world with an eternal future fulfilled in Christ. However, when we consider time as the vehicle of existence we conceptualise more easily. The difference between God and creation is one of quality, not that of a living and quantitative comparison. God is altogether other than creation. Hence created time and uncreated time must also be clearly distinguished one from another. The uncreated time of God is also altogether other than linear time.

If we wish to use some analogy, it may be helpful to consider a funnel. The large end is the input and the outflow is narrow. By holding the funnel above the eye, and looking up through the narrow outflow aperture, the view opens up to an expanse above us. So eternity as instantaneous appears from the view of the passing time that is quantitative as past, present and future. Its instant is small and passing, while the eternal instant is immeasurable. Thus, created time and uncreated time, while clearly distinct from one another, are seen as co-relevant. This view inspires confidence in the relationship of the uncreated/created that exists between God and the entire creation.

Especially is this true for the human connection with God, and this is underpinned by the connaturality of the human and divine natures in Christ (VS.64. cfr. Aquinas ST, II-II,q.45,a.2). The experience of human conception is the connection of ourselves with God and may be referred to as "the moment of our creation in its memorized actuality" (2.Gillian,206). This memorized moment is indicated to us by the light that we find on our memory, when we gently permit our memory to run back to it.

### **Life's Journey**

One of the obvious spiritual capacities that we have is our memory. While memory is associated with our brain activities, old age reminds us that this factor slows down. Our spiritual capacity is still extant even in dementia, where we know ourselves, but our ability to communicate is limited. Bonaventure simply points out that memory must be first, otherwise we would never recognize even our own image in a mirror when

at the top of our powers. Without memory we would not know what we had just seen (Bonaventure,81).

Bonaventure's gentle observation is that our memory has a light shining on it. This is distinct from the light of memory itself by which we "see" in recall. This recall of the light on our memory offers us the opportunity to reflect on a common experience of conception and find a link amongst all humanity. This includes, in a very special way, parents and children with their common Creator, God, with whom we are always in a relationship. Our memory enables us to measure to some extent our passage in life and to rest assured of truth in our common ancestral humanity.

This would be consistent with Bonaventure's thesis on his major work, *The Journey of the Soul into God*. This work sees a pattern in creation which is recognizable in the experience of our living. He examines our interaction with creation and the Creator in seven steps that provide the context for reflection. He asks us to reflect on God, creation and ourselves. These steps are the Chapters of his work, *The Soul's Journey into God*. Bonaventure asks for humility in our approach and advises us to journey as companions of Christ, crucified and risen. These are the seven steps the Seraphic Doctor recommends for our reflection:

- 1.The inanimate creation and indications of God at work.
- 2.The sensible world of creation as signs of God and sensory life.
- 3.The natural attributes of humanity as images of God.
- 4.The Christian gifts of Baptism.
- 5.The recognition of God named as Supreme Being.
- 6.The recognition of God named Good, the supreme Good.
- 7.The contemplation of God as Three and One and One and Three, always.

This leads to ecstasy (Bonaventure, 113).

## Second Nature

### A. Corporeal

The term, second nature, reflects our reality as growing, learning and changing persons and yet always retaining the one, central identity that is the true self. Simple matters like learning to swim or riding a bicycle remain learned once we have attained them. Ways of thinking, learning to develop our talents, apprenticeships in life and living, all reflect our abilities to learn and be changed by our interactions in life. Children growing and learning

display this to their families. Education develops this capacity in differing cultures. Children are pre-schoolers, kinders, first graders and so on through life, all of which demonstrate this human activity. As McDowell put it, "the very idea of experience is the idea of something natural and that empirical thinking is answerable to experience" (McDowell, xix). Life is ongoing, even to eternity, where all the mysteries of our personal lives will be revealed by the Creator in our final self-reflection. In our final and instantaneous experience of the loving God, and being judged and loved forever, we hope we will not be disappointed in our own accomplishments.

## **B. Spiritual**

The soul's intellect is intuitive and seeks truth. While life in the womb is contained and confined physically, our spirits are active and in contact with humanity in its spiritual domain. Twins are indicative of this when, in later life, it becomes clear that they have known no other existence than each other's company within and from the womb. The autonomous state of each is preserved, as it is for all humanity though we need to struggle for "our place in the sun."

As the body, with brain and nervous systems growing, develops, we form habits automatically from our activities as any human does. In the womb we feel the physical boundary of the confinement, hear sounds and become spiritually involved with the family, especially the mother. Modern technology and developmental psychology, especially that of women, gives us the view that babies are computational. Learning of babies tells us a lot about our own selves, and, as Gopnik et al point out, "we are only babies that have been around for a while" (Gopnik et al, 20-22). Babies are well able to pursue their own vision of reality and use the adult world from which to learn (Ibid). Computers, as an analogy, need a power source and so do the babies. Their power source is made immediately available at conception, and is each babies' soul.

## **Innate Knowledge**

The basic problem in identifying innate knowledge is that all knowledge is relational from experience. Even self-knowledge, which is immediate of one person knowing her own self, has the instant of recognition. Then all other relationships flow from our experiencing existence as human beings in a community. Each of us being an autonomous person does not deliver us from the difficulties of communal life. Rather each human being needs the support of our fellows as they need ours.

Autonomy is a state, a fact of human existence in which we exercise our self-responsibility, and give space to others to do the same. Free choice,

a spiritual necessity, is like window shopping creation. Free will is the rational movement wherein we self-govern (2.Gillian, 211) and make decisions for life and living.

**The First Innate knowledge** is of our conception, our very beginning. The only exclusively instant knowledge is the moment of our existence in its beginning. It is intuitive naturally. However, it can be checked. The light on our memory, when re-discovered later in life, pinpoints this instant. There is an innate joy in coming to be. This is the first memory, the moment of each conception. This may be buried deeply in the psyche and yet will respond to reflection by the self on the self.

**Knowledge as if Innate:** Bonaventure holds some principles as though they were recognized "as innate and familiar" (Bonaventure, 80). Such as the principle of contradiction where something cannot exist and not exist at the same time, or the whole being greater than the part. However, he says that whenever we use our reasoning powers, such principles cannot be fully forgotten. He or she would in no way lose sight of these principles to the extent that approval of them and assent to them would be withheld "once they are heard, not as if he perceives them anew, but rather as if he recognizes them as innate and familiar"(Ibid).

This remains a puzzle. However, it could be linked to the context of our earliest memory, at conception, as an obvious matter for consideration. It could even be included incoherently as a necessity in our intuitive processes as rational human beings. McDowell sees spontaneity to be "the understanding, our capacity to bring into being the kind of intelligibility that is proper to meaning"(McDowell,71). Though hundreds of years apart and of different schools of thought, the underlying concept of the necessary seems to be in concert, as with Bonaventure, as with McDowell, one with the other.

How could recognition and assent be given, in such primitive intuition, unless there is a note of necessity? Such a necessity would flow from obvious truth and the need to have certain principles operative as part of the thinking process, even their intuitive beginnings. It could well appear as necessary in an early intuitive process, even included in spontaneity. It definitely seems so to myself.

**Development of the human person.** Human beings at conception are gifted with their human soul and the gametic material which the soul integrates to itself to become the somatic, integrative unity which is a growing human being. The gametic material brings with it the genetic system which carries the characteristics of the new human person.

The living activity of the reduction meiotic division and the following mitotic division is alive and acting. It interacts with the rational soul and the soul faculties are focused on the material. However this primitive condition behaves, it must leave its effect upon the conceptus, the growing child and



later adult. Certainly a malfunction would be to leave a damaged person. There must, therefore, be some normal interaction from the beginning that would affect not just the bodily material but also the soul's own development. While this is shrouded in mystery it cannot be denied.

### **From Conception to Autonomy Maturing**

Tantalisingly close to us, a complex answer unfolds. A much more broad view of the innate world, which we suspect exists, is given by Gopnik et al.

**a.** Nobody, since Socrates in Meno's house, thought to examine what was available from children by having them open their mouths. Nobody for 2,500 years (Gopnik et al,14).

**b.** Piaget wanted to find a link between epistemology and biology, which he found in studying children's development (Ibid.15).

**c.** Piaget, by eliminating himself from the picture and letting the child's mind's development be seen, found a clear path. However, in this method there is missing the necessary interaction of childhood with the adult world (Ibid,18). Piaget reckoned that "learning was just as rooted in biology as any innate idea in the genetic code" (Ibid, 17).

**d.** Vygotsky recognized the instrumental role for which children used adults. Adults automatically adjust their activities to children. Thus children may draw from adults what they require to solve puzzles met in their living. In this way children find solutions to the difficulties that children find most compelling. (Ibid, 18).

"Just as Piaget saw that learning was innate, Vygotsky saw that culture was natural" (Ibid,19). Mothers carrying their children are not only in touch with them physically but also spiritually. To speculate, and wonder, at the life, physical activity and spirituality of the unborn requires aptitude. We need to encompass a pathway that will be consistent with our knowledge of postnatal infants and also ourselves.

Modern research in developmental psychology, shows that at birth we "see people as people" (the authors' emphasis). This is a quite "literal" claim. Furthermore, the conclusion offered shows us, at birth, to be equipped "with a set of profound assumptions" that are about us being "like other people and how other people are like us" (Ibid, 24).

Gopnik et al commit to seeing the natural answer to the question that seeks to understand knowing and knowledge, as being "innate knowledge,

powerful learning abilities and unconscious tuition from adults". Further than this, these three aspects are involved in finding solutions to "the Other Minds problem" (Ibid, 25). We bear in mind that it is the rational, volitional soul that gives substantive reality to the genetic interchange at conception. Hence it is that the somatic, integrative unity required for viable human life must indeed activate the capacities of spontaneity.

### Conclusion

Spiritual development accompanies biological growth in the integrative unity that is a human being and person. We live in a learning and loving world in concert with our Creator, from conception to death and beyond. The more we investigate ourselves the more mysterious we can appear. However, if we govern our activities and respect the boundaries in which we are confined by our very created nature we are enabled to grow in wisdom. The "vestiges" of God's wisdom that we find in nature (Bonaventure, Ch.I-II) could well be in concert with McDowell's observations of intuitions as experiential and formational activity. It is wisdom that puts all things together from beginning to end in good order and sweetly.

---

### Bibliography.

Aquinas, St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q 45, a.2

St. Bernard of Clairvaux. *The Love of God*. Abridged. Ed, James P. Houston. Basingstoke: Pickering and Inglis.1983.

St. Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey to God . The Tree of Life. The Life of St. Francis. The Classics of Western Spirituality*. Trans and Introduction, Ewert Cousins. SPCK London 1978.

1.Gillian, Theodore. "Brain Death and the Philosophical Significance of the Process of Development of and Cessation of, Consciousness in Arousal and Awareness in the Human Person." In *Linacre Quarterly* 68. Feb. 2001. Vol.68. No.1. 32-48.

2.— "Memory in St. Bonaventure and the Moment of Coming to be as a Human Being." In *Linacre Quarterly*. August 2004. Vol. 71. No.3. 203-216.

Gilson, Etienne . *The Philosophy of St. Bonaventure*. Trans. Dom Illtyd Trethowan and Frank J. Sheed, (St. Anthony Guild Press, Patterson N.J. 1965).

Gopnik, Alison, Andrew Meltzoff, Patricia Kuhl, *How Babies Think*, 1999, (A Phoenix Paperback. Orion Books Ltd. London 2001).

John Paul II. *Veritatis Splendor*, (St. Paul's, Homebush, Sydney 2140. 1993).

McDowell, John. *Mind and World* With a New Introduction by the Author. 1994,1996. 4th Printing. Harvard University Press, Massachussets, 1998