

Introduction — The Question about the Beginning of Life

Human beings have always been drawn to questions about origin and destiny. We have asked how the cosmos, life, and consciousness began to understand our place in reality. Alongside these grand questions stands another: *when does human life begin?* This question is both personal and consequential. It reaches the core of what we are, and no culture has been able to avoid it. Every civilization that has reflected seriously on the human condition has had to answer it. The answer each society gives reveals how it defines moral structure, how it treats the vulnerable, and how it values life itself.

Historically, people sought the answer at the intersection of observation, philosophy, and ethics. Thinkers have long debated whether human life begins with physical form, consciousness, social recognition, or some combination of these factors. Modern science has clarified much of this. Biology now shows that a new human life begins when two parental gametes fuse to form a new organism.

Molecular biology, genetics, and developmental science provide detailed causal explanations for this process. Yet, despite this knowledge, moral confusion has increased. The debate has shifted from *when life begins* to *which kinds of life* deserve protection.

1.1 Civilizational lesson

Every civilization can be judged by how it treats the defenseless. The greatest ones protect their weakest members. Their moral codes and institutions reflect this concern. The Hippocratic Oath, major religious traditions, and Enlightenment moral philosophy all affirm that human life has intrinsic value, independent of function or utility. Modern voices echo this same conviction. Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote, *“The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons.”* Hubert Humphrey said, *“The moral test of government is how that government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the aged; and those who are in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy, and the handicapped.”*

In contrast, societies that valued life by utility, intelligence, or physical perfection produced the opposite outcome. The Spartan practice of exposing infants, the Roman *patria potestas*, and twentieth-century eugenics all followed this logic. Although they differed in time and culture, they shared the belief that some lives are worth more than others. Modern societies also apply similar distinctions, now masked by medical or social language and enabled by technology. What was once done by states is now done by individuals.

This handbook is based on the conviction that such a division between lives worthy and unworthy of protection is unsustainable for a moral civilization. The ethical principle that human life has intrinsic moral worth must either hold universally or collapse entirely. There is no stable middle ground.

1.2 The Aim of This Work

This handbook seeks to clarify, not to preach. It aims to examine what science and philosophy can say about the beginning of human life. Its goal is coherence, not victory in debate.

It takes a definite position: a new human organism comes into existence at fertilization. This position is not asserted by authority but shown through evidence and reasoning. If, after considering these arguments, a reader concludes otherwise, that conclusion should rest on clear premises, not on confusion or avoidance.

Therefore, the book is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 explains the biological basis of the zygote as a self-regulating organism and shows its independence in development from maternal control.
- Chapter 3 explores the philosophical meaning of potentiality and moral worth, and argues why these cannot be reduced to functions or suspended for claims of bodily autonomy.
- Chapter 4 examines how legal systems have defined personhood and treated the unborn, and the moral principles behind these definitions.
- The concluding chapter integrates these insights and addresses the human complexities that arise when moral principle meets difficult circumstances.

1.3 The Biological Grounding of Individuality

Human life begins with a biological event: the fusion of a sperm and an oocyte forms a zygote. Each parent contributes half the genetic material, producing a diploid genome that has never existed before and will never exist again.

This genome encodes an integrated, self-organizing organism. From that moment, a continuous, self-directed, and goal-oriented developmental process begins.

During the first cell divisions, the zygote uses maternal RNAs and proteins stored in the oocyte. Within hours, control shifts from maternal to embryonic. The embryo's genome activates, and it directs its own metabolism, replication, and differentiation. It is not passive; it regulates and repairs itself with remarkable precision.

By these criteria, the zygote qualifies as a living organism. It shows integration, autonomy, and identity. Denying this requires adopting a non-biological definition of life. That divide between biological fact and moral interpretation lies at the heart of modern confusion, and the following chapter deals with what "ought" to be done with "is" from the biology.

1.4 From Biology to Philosophy

The step from biology to ethics is delicate but necessary. Science can describe what the zygote is, but it cannot prescribe what ought to be done about it. The transition from biology to ethics is necessary. Science can describe what the zygote *is*, but it cannot decide what *ought* to be done. Ethical reasoning, however, must start from factual reality. If the embryo is a living human organism, discussions about rights and moral status must acknowledge that fact.

Philosophical traditions approach this differently. The Aristotelian-Thomistic view holds that from the moment of substantial unity, the embryo possesses the human form in potency; its moral worth follows from its nature, not its function. Modern secular thought, following Kant, reaches a parallel conclusion: every rational being has dignity and must not be treated merely as a means. The embryo, as a member of the rational species, falls within that moral protection even before rationality appears.

Functionalist and utilitarian frameworks tie moral status to capacities like consciousness or autonomy. Applied consistently, these views would remove moral equality from infants, the disabled, and the comatose. They make dignity conditional on performance. If personhood depends on function, every decline becomes a moral downgrade.

To destroy what naturally tends toward flourishing is to act against the order built into reality. Moral worth belongs to being human, not to behaving humanly. That principle alone sustains universal human rights. If it is removed, the idea of human dignity loses coherence.

1.5 Historical Continuity and Modern Amnesia

Long before modern science, people recognized continuity between conception and adulthood. Greek and Christian thinkers, medieval theologians, and early scientists understood the embryo as the beginning of an individual life, even as they debated when the soul entered. Embryology and genetics have now erased the old uncertainties. The embryo does not change from non-human to human at a later stage; it develops according to its own intrinsic program from the beginning.

Modern culture, despite having more biological knowledge, often denies this continuity. The denial arises from social and psychological pressures, not science. The pursuit of autonomy and privacy in reaction to past injustices has led to rejecting the idea of continuity. To acknowledge the embryo as human is to accept obligations many find uncomfortable, so reality is redefined to avoid them. But moral progress never came from redefining inconvenience. The abolition of slavery, protection of the disabled, and recognition of universal rights came when societies refused to base moral worth on circumstance. The question of the unborn belongs to the same moral lineage.

1.6 The Role of Law and the State

The state expresses moral conscience through law, and law requires definitions. Historically, legal systems have varied in recognizing the unborn—sometimes granting rights of inheritance, sometimes denying personhood altogether. These differences reflect not scientific uncertainty but competing moral philosophies.

In modern law, defining personhood carries immense consequences. If the unborn is a person, the state must protect it; if not, the state cannot intervene. Legal neutrality is an illusion. Denying protection already declares that the being in question has no moral standing.

The legal question mirrors the moral one and cannot be resolved by compromise alone. This book will show how various legal traditions have approached the connection between biological humanity and legal personhood.

1.7 Conscience

At its core, this debate asks what kind of civilization we want to be. A society that treats early human life as disposable will extend that logic to other vulnerable lives. Defending the unborn is not only about protecting those who cannot speak for themselves but about preserving moral consistency within the human community.

This stance does not require religious belief. It only requires recognizing that human life deserves protection because it is the basis of all other rights. Affirming this principle secures the equal dignity of every person.

But conviction must also include compassion. Defending life is not condemning those who faced tragic decisions. Every moral truth must include mercy. To uphold the sanctity of life is not to weaponize it against suffering but to affirm that even in suffering, life retains meaning.

1.8 Closing Reflection

The question of when life begins is not abstract. It reflects how humanity sees itself. Our answer shows what kind of civilization we are. If we regard human life as sacred beyond calculation, then we stand on solid ground. If we treat it as negotiable, no principle remains safe. The goal of this work is not only to defend a view but to restore clarity. The beginning of life is not a belief; it is a recognition. The zygote does not *become* human; it *is* human from the moment it exists. The first step toward moral sanity and scientific honesty is to admit that fact.

In that spirit, the chapters that follow aim to reunite fact and value, reason and compassion. Only by holding them together can we speak truthfully about the beginning of life.

This work proceeds from three propositions:

1. Scientifically: The human embryo from fertilization is an integrated organism of the human species.
2. Philosophically: Its membership in that species is sufficient for intrinsic moral worth.
3. Legally: A just state must recognize that worth if it wishes to remain consistent with its principles of human rights.

The book stands on two axioms:

1. Every human life possesses equal dignity.
2. Killing is permissible only in self-defense