Correspondence

Dear Editor,

I very much appreciated George Coghill's critical appreciation of Donald MacKay as scientist and accidental philosopher in volume 36 of *Science and Christian Belief* (2024, page 83-102). This, alongside Malcolm Jeeves' brief overview of MacKay's contribution to the early days of The Research Scientists Christian Fellowship, provided a fitting summary of his profound influence on the Christian/science scene in the UK and beyond. I would like to comment on one contribution that is rarely mentioned, namely, the article he wrote on 'The beginnings of personal life' in *In the Service of Medicine* (30:2, 9-13) in 1984. This was the journal of the Christian Medical Fellowship, and it was at the time of the Warnock Report into human fertilisation and embryology.

It is true that this was hardly central to MacKay's major contributions in the science and faith area, and it may have proved embarrassing to some in the evangelical community since it diverged from that community's dominant position on the status of the embryo. Interestingly, it was not included as one of MacKay's essays in Melvin Tinker's collection of his writings in *The Open Mind and other essays* (IVP 1988).

The only reason I raise this omission is that this short article is quintessentially Donald MacKay. He treads on toes by stating that the argumentation used by evangelicals is seriously confused and devoid of support either from Scripture or contemporary science. His basic question is whether the fetus from the moment of conception has the status of a person with the rights of a person. For MacKay there is no question that the fetus is human and alive, is a divine work of creative skill, with direct continuity between antenatal and postnatal being. What there is he writes 'is one of the most marvellous structures known to [us]; it is rich with deeply mysterious potentialities.' (p10)

But then MacKay's approach comes into its own. For him there is no logical basis in any of the usually quoted *biblical evidence* for the claim that what is there at, say, four days, is a person with the rights of a person. He fails to see how Psalm 139 says anything about spontaneously aborted embryos at too early a stage necessary for recognisably personal life (he calls these Xs). He asks by what *biblical authority* can we claim that there was someone there whom God knew as a person with the rights of a person.

For MacKay the issue comes down to one of commitment. He asks whether we are required to make a commitment to the very early fetus based on Scripture, science, or experience. He does not think we are required to do so, although he accepts that it may be necessary in practice to err on the safe side. He accepts that we have moral obligations towards God to deal responsibly

with any fertilised egg, but this is different from claiming on biblical grounds that the early fetus has the rights of a person. On what grounds can we say with complete assurance that God requires that every fertilised egg must be protected?

For MacKay the quality of the argumentation being used is crucial especially when, in his view, Scripture is being wrenched from its context and read to defend a case not based on Scripture. He concludes that 'there is nothing in science to rule out the possibility that there is a decisive stage before which personal categories are inapplicable to the early fetus.' (p13) A similar conclusion applies to the Scriptural evidence or lack of it.

The only reason I have raised this matter, contentious as it is in Christian bioethical circles, is because it highlights the very strong scientific and biblical drivers that MacKay evinced in all his thinking. In this case, it may have been an approach not warmly welcomed among some evangelicals, and yet it represents an unashamedly rigorous approach that deserves far more of a hearing than it has received up to this juncture.

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