

## Second Reply to Fr. Chaberek: On Why Merely Biological Humans Can Survive, and on When Merely Traditional Doctrine Can Be Abandoned

*Kenneth Kemp*

I do not want to repeat what I have already said in response to Fr Chaberek's critique of the articles in which I argued that recent scientific work, even if sound, does not constitute a challenge to theological monogenism. I think that he continues to misread the relevant texts and that his arguments generally do not get him where he needs them to go, but whether this is so can be evaluated without much further comment from me. Why, for example, he does not see that showing that a term has two slightly different meanings is making a distinction, not committing an equivocation (Chaberek 2025, 281), or why he thinks that two different beings with different powers due to one having only a corporeal and the other a spiritual substantial form show only an accidental difference (ibid., 283–84), can be left as exercises for the reader.

I do think that there might be some value in a response to two points new to his latest article—first, the alleged impossibility of what it is (*pace* Chaberek), for reasons I have already explained, perfectly reasonable to call merely biologically human beings and, second, his overly restrictive conditions for when merely traditional theological beliefs<sup>1</sup> may be modified or abandoned.

1. In a sense, all revealed truths, in virtue of having been passed on to us, are “traditional.” By “merely traditional” I mean ideas not revealed, but nevertheless of long standing: for example, ideas originating in a too literal interpretation of “simple and metaphorical language adapted to the mentality of a people but little cultured” (Pius XII 1950, 38), or of passages in which Scripture “described and dealt with things in more or less figurative language, or in terms which were commonly used at the time” (Leo XIII 1893, 18).

Polygenism did not begin with the theory of evolution (see La Peyrère 1655; Agassiz 1850), but Darwin's version of that theory gave it more scientific respectability than it had previously had, an acceptability only reinforced by later discoveries in genetics (Ayala 1998). The scientific thesis, as usually presented, contradicts Catholic doctrine. What should a Catholic scholar do? St. Augustine's advice is this: "When [critics] are able, from reliable evidence, to prove [*veracibus documentis demonstrare*] some fact of physical science, we shall show that it is not contrary to our Scripture" (Augustine [415] 1982, 1.21.41). So, following Augustine's advice, I wrote several articles (Kemp 2011, 2020, 2023) in which I offered, as a consistency proof, a four-point scenario demonstrating that what science actually shows (thought not necessarily all that some scientists think it shows) is not contrary to our Scripture (or to doctrine). Central to the proof were four theses:

- T1. Adam and Eve were the first rational beings.
- T2. All other rational beings were descendants of Adam and Eve.
- T3. The body of Adam was a product of evolution.
- T4. Some of the descendants of Adam and Eve interbred with the not-fully-human beings in the population from which fully human beings emerged.

The first three, I think, are true. The fourth is possible, which is all that my consistency proof requires.

T1 and T2 are a statement (a complete statement) of theological monogenism.<sup>2</sup> Pope Pius XII rightly said that "it is in no way apparent how such an opinion can be reconciled with [Church teaching on] original sin" (Pius XII 1950, 37). I made the same point (e.g., Kemp 2024, 393). I did not anywhere say, despite what Chaberek (2024, 274) implies, that the truth of these is an open question. Indeed, I have published my reasons for thinking that various proposed versions of theological polygenism fail to resolve the problem articulated by Pope Pius (see Kemp 2011, 229).

T3, although contrary to a traditional belief, was recognized as theologically acceptable both by Pius XII (1950, 36) and by St. John Paul II ([1986] 1996a, 1996b).<sup>3</sup> It was included in the scenario because it is presupposed by the genetics-based argument for scientific polygenism that I had considered (as well as by others). It is logically independent of the doctrine

2. Pius (1950, 37) formulated this as the rejection of two ideas—"[that] after Adam there existed on this earth true men who did not take their origin through natural generation from him as from the first parent of all" and "that Adam represents a certain number of first parents."

3. Statements, one might add, that have at least as much theological weight as Chaberek attributes to Pope Pelagius I's sixth-century letter to King Childebert.

of original sin. Indeed Pius said that accepting it was not forbidden immediately before his rejection of polygenism.

T4 is what is most important here. My scenario includes T4 as its explanation of the genetic variability on the basis of which scientific polygenists make their case. I say about it that “[T4] being scientifically possible and theologically orthodox, any scientific arguments over polygenism are theologically irrelevant” (Kemp 2024, 393).

T4 presupposes a distinction between rational beings (Pius’ “true humans,” which I called “philosophically, and theologically, human beings”) and what I called “merely biologically human beings,” beings like us with respect to reproductive and sensory powers” but lacking rational souls. The existence of something like such beings is at least suggested by T3, even if reproductive compatibility across the transition to rationality (at infusion of a rational soul), crucial to T4, is not guaranteed by it.

It is this distinction which requires greater clarity about Chaberek’s assertion that Adam and Eve are “the exclusive origin of humanity” (2024, 159 and 164) than his article provides. He says that that means “there were no ‘pre-Adamites,’ ‘co-Adamites,’ and ‘post-Adamites,’ i.e. that all people that are alive and ever lived, or will ever live, descended from a single pair of Adam and Eve” (Chaberek 2025, 278). I presume that his “post-Adamites” and “people” are to be understood to be rational animals. The ambiguity centers on “descended from a single pair.” Does it mean only (T2) that Adam and Eve were among the ancestors of all other rational beings, or does it mean, in addition, that (T2\*) all the biological ancestors of rational beings going back to Adam and Eve (other than Adam and Eve themselves) were descendants of Adam and Eve (i.e., *contra* T4, every biological ancestor of rational beings in every post-Adamic generation was a descendant of Adam and Eve)? The sources he cited do not get him beyond T2, but Chaberek’s rejection of T4 requires T2\*.

Chaberek seems to think that T4 constitutes polygenism. It could be called a merely biological polygenism, but it does not challenge theological monogenism, T1 and T2, which are sufficient to ensure consistency with the doctrine of original sin, Pius’ ground for rejecting polygenism. So in a theological context, it should be recognized as a form of monogenism.

Chaberek raises three objections to T4.

First, he argues that the beings that T4 presupposes could not have existed. He seems to think that human beings have no adaptations conducive to survival and therefore depend entirely on their rationality (2025, 284). It is not, however, clear why the merely biological human beings would have had any more trouble surviving in their ecological niche than do, say, vervet monkeys or baboons in theirs. Chaberek has made two mistakes here.

His first is his paying exclusive attention to “adaptations in . . . bodily structure,” as though nothing in an animal’s behavioral repertoire could contribute to survivability. In fact, some of the very features which zoologists would list as adaptations in the primates I just mentioned are features that we human beings also have—sociability, resilience in the face of environmental variation, and complex communication patterns. Since those traits (at the animal level) are not dependent on rationality, there is no reason to doubt that merely biological human beings had them as well.

In addition, it is important to note that non-rational animals vary in intelligence (e.g., in learning and in problem-solving). Merely biologically human beings were surely very intelligent in the sense just specified. Although knowledge of God, and even language, would have been beyond their reach, applying these skills in ways conducive to survival would not have been.

Chaberek’s second mistake is his claim that the human body has no physiological adaptations that contribute to survivability. The idea that human beings have “unadapted, unspecialized” bodies is a product of Chaberek’s imagination, not of the close look at reality that he rightly says is important. If it is something like “natural weapons” that Chaberek wants, here are two—those that make it possible for us to make fists (Morgan: 2013) and to throw things (Darlington: 1975): “fists increase the peak stresses that are imposed on the target and, therefore, the potential for injury [to the target]” (Morgan 2013, 241); “the human arm [is] an efficient unique sling. No other animal can throw as man does. . . . A skillful man has a good chance to break the skull of another with one stone at 30 meters” (Darlington 1975, 3750). Neither fist-making nor stone-throwing require reason. Virgil may never have said “Beware of merely biological human beings bearing stones,” but if he had thought of it, he probably would have.

Second, Chaberek objects that the difference between merely biologically human beings and fully human beings is scientifically undetectable (Chaberek 2025, 286). Of course there are important differences that are scientifically undetectable, such as between the baptized and the unbaptized. This, for the most part, is not one. Rational beings can generally be distinguished from non-rational beings by their behavior (e.g., use of language). The fact that this is not yet true in infancy (or perhaps not at all in other cases of severe cognitive disability) just shows that not everything of importance can be established by science. Since the merely biological human beings are long gone, it is not entirely clear what moral problems he thinks come with my ideas; he does not say. The only thing I can think of is the level of respect due to fossil bones.

Third, he claims their existence is contrary to Church teaching. It is not. The documents Chaberek cites affirm T1 and T2, points included in the scenario. Earlier ones denied T3, but nothing he cites shows that T4 is contrary to Church teaching. The most he can say is that, T4 being motivated by T3 plus something like the very recent genetic evidence of trans-specific polymorphisms, no one who did not already accept those two points would have any reason to think T4 was true. But even the idea that T4 might have been an implicit merely traditional belief will not help Chaberek here.

Chaberek concedes that sometimes “a given interpretation of Scripture or Catholic belief . . . should be abandoned,” but wrongly says that this may be done only when “a certain claim (i.e., proven beyond any doubt) about nature would oppose [it]” (2024, 274), or “when things that contradict our belief are ‘certain from reason and experience’” (2025, 275). The criterion “proven beyond any doubt” is too strong, as will be shown from Church practice below. The phrase “certain from reason and experience” he found in St. Augustine ([415] 1982, 1.19.39<sup>4</sup>), but in Augustine’s text it does not play the role in the justification of revision that Chaberek gives it.<sup>5</sup>

Chaberek’s argument seems to depend on first distinguishing observable, and therefore allegedly certain, facts from allegedly uncertain theories, and then emphasizing (by italicization) the word “theory” in a quotation from St. Augustine (Chaberek 2025, 277), despite the fact that neither that word nor anything like it occurs at all in the original text.<sup>6</sup> St. Augustine distinguishes what is asserted to be contrary to faith but can be shown not to be so from what really is contrary to faith. In any case, the “reason and experience” (emphasis mine) of Chaberek’s criterion includes more than the “direct observation” to which Chaberek reduces it.

Chaberek cites as an example of a justifiable abandonment of a merely traditional belief the acceptance of heliocentric astronomy, which, he says, is “directly observed in real-time” (275). This he contrasts with claims about the origin of the human race, which, he says, are not. What these direct astronomical observations were or who made them he never says. He cannot, because there never were any such observations. The certainty of heliocentrism is based not on direct observation of the motion of the

4. Chaberek’s citation, “1.19.3,” is a typographical error.

5. The context is a characterization of certain matters as ideas which a non-Christian would “hold to as being certain from reason and experience.”

6. “*Quidquid autem de quibuslibet suis voluminibus . . .*” (Augustine, [415] 1982, 1.21.41). Taylor did add the word “theory” in his translation of the passage in question, but its absence in the original is sufficient to make Chaberek’s italicization, and reliance on it in connection with his fact-theory contrast, misleading.

Earth, but on inference. It is the best explanation of the retrograde motion of the superior planets (Copernicus [before 1514] 1959, Ass. 7), of stellar aberration (Bradley 1728, 646–49), and of stellar parallax (Bessel, 1838). It is, that is to say, inferred, not directly observed.

Merely traditional beliefs can be called into question, indeed sometimes be modified or even abandoned, in the face of sufficiently convincing inference, even if only under the guidance of the Church's Magisterium (*Catechism* ¶183). One can see this in the history of T3, which, unlike T4, does challenge a merely traditional belief. Pius XII allowed discussion of "the origin of the human body as coming from pre-existent and living matter" even while asserting that there were reasons both for that opinion and for its contrary (Pius XII 1950, 36)—so, in his judgment, before it met Chaberek's condition of having been "proven beyond any doubt." Thirty six years later, John Paul said that "there is no apparent difficulty in explaining the origin of man, as far as concerns the body, by the hypothesis of evolutionism," even though "that hypothesis puts forward only a probability, not a scientific certainty" (John Paul II [1986] 1996a).

In conclusion: magisterial documents show that scientific arguments in favor of animal origins of the human body (T3) have at least opened up the question of, if not forced a revision of, a traditional theological belief connected with anthropogenesis. My consistency proof shows that scientific arguments for biological polygenism would not, no matter how strong they might be, require any revision of the Church doctrine of theological monogenism (T1 and T2), which (though Chaberek does not always seem willing to acknowledge this point) I have consistently affirmed as true. The distinctive thesis of the consistency proof (T4) is inconsistent neither with the doctrine of original sin as traditionally understood, nor with theological monogenism, nor with anything that can be found in magisterial documents.

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