

Was I Ever a Fetus?

ERIC T. OLSON

It is obviously true that the normal foetus is at least a potential person: it is an entity which will, barring abnormal circumstances or intervention, develop into something incontestably a person. The only question is what moral claim upon us this gives it.

J. Glover, Causing Death and Saving Lives

1. The Standard View of Personal Identity

Was I ever a fetus? Is it possible for a human fetus to become you or me or some other person? It would certainly seem so. Both folk wisdom and biological science tell us that each of us spent several months in the womb before we were born. How could anyone think otherwise? But many philosophers do think otherwise. At any rate, most recent thinking about personal identity clearly entails that no person was ever a five-month-old fetus, and that no such fetus ever comes to be a person.

By 'personal identity' I mean the question of personal identity over time: what it takes for a person to persist from one time to another. What sorts of adventures is it possible for you to survive, in the broadest sense of the word 'possible'? And what sort of thing would necessarily bring your existence to an end? What is necessary, and what suffices, for a past or future being to be you? Suppose you point to a little boy or girl in an old class photograph and say, "That's me." What makes you that boy or girl, and not, say, one of the others? What is it about the way she relates to you as you are now that makes it the case that she is you--that you and she are one rather than two?

By far the most popular answer to this question is that we people persist by virtue of some sort of psychological continuity. You are that future being that in some sense inherits your

current psychological features: that being whose memories, beliefs, preferences, capacity for thought and consciousness, and so on are for the most part caused, in a certain way, by yours. That is what it is for something existing in the future to be you. Likewise, you are that past being whose mental properties you have inherited in this way. There is disagreement about just what sort of “inheritance” this has to be: about how your past or future mental properties need to cause or be caused by your current ones, for instance. But most philosophers agree that some psychological relation is both necessary and sufficient for us to persist. Call this the Standard View of personal identity.

Why accept the Standard View? Imagine that your cerebrum--the upper part of the brain that is primarily responsible for your psychology--is cut out of your head and implanted into another. The one who ends up with that organ will be psychologically continuous with you on any account of what psychological continuity amounts to. She will have your memories, your plans for the future, your likes and dislikes, and so on; and these features would have been continuously physically realized throughout the process. She will believe that she is you, and it would take some doing to persuade her that she is wrong about this. It is easy to conclude from this that she is you, and that the empty-headed being left behind after your cerebrum is removed is not you. (They couldn't both be you, for one thing cannot be two things.) Why is she you? Because she has inherited your psychology in the appropriate way. The empty-headed being is not you because it has inherited no psychology at all from you. If this is right, it suggests that for a past or future being to be you is for it to be appropriately psychologically continuous with you.

Here is another argument, this time not involving science fiction. Suppose you have an accident that destroys your cerebrum but leaves the rest of you intact. All your psychological properties are completely destroyed--even the most basic, such as the capacity to feel pain. Your circulation, breathing, digestion, immune system, and other vital functions, however, are preserved. Clinicians call this a “persistent vegetative state”. The resulting being is alive in the biological sense: it can sneeze, cough, swallow, and even thrash about. It can be kept alive indefinitely with only a feeding tube. But it has no psychology whatever, and cannot regain

any (the cerebrum, once destroyed, cannot grow back). To many philosophers it seems that this “human vegetable” is not you. Why not? Because there is no psychological continuity of any sort between you and it. When your psychology is destroyed, you cease to exist. (Or if there were someone in the next world who, by some divine miracle, was psychologically continuous with you, then he or she would be you. In any case, you are no longer there in this world.) So you cannot survive without some sort of psychological continuity, just as the Standard View tells us.

2. How the Standard View Implies that I was Never a Fetus

How does the Standard View rule out my having once been a fetus? Well, embryologists tell us that a human fetus less than about six months old has no more psychology than a human vegetable has. That is because the cerebrum does not begin to function as an organ of thought and experience until synapses begin to connect up its neurons; and embryologists tell us that this does not take place until some twenty-five to thirty-two weeks after fertilization. Before that time the cerebrum is simply not "wired up", and there is no capacity for mental activity. A five-month-old fetus is probably not even minimally sentient (and a two-month-old fetus certainly is not): it cannot have even the most basic sort of experience, such as feeling pain. The fetus may be unlike the human vegetable in that it can acquire mental capacities. But for as long as it is a fetus, it lacks mental properties for the same reason as the human vegetable lacks them: the relevant neural structures are simply not there.

If the embryologists are right, then I cannot relate to a five-month-old fetus in any psychological way. The fetus has no psychology at all; and my current psychology could not be continuous in any way with that of a being with no psychology. There is no more psychological continuity between me as I am now and any early fetus than there would be between you as you are now and a human vegetable, or between you and the being who would stay behind with an empty head if your cerebrum were transplanted. In all three cases there is complete psychological discontinuity. And this is precisely what the Standard View says we cannot survive. So it follows from the Standard View that I could no more have been a five-

month-old fetus than you could one day be a human vegetable. Nothing could be a five-month-old fetus at one time and a person later on. No person was ever a fetus, and no fetus ever comes to be a person.

In fact some versions of the Standard View imply not only that no person was ever a fetus, but that none of us was ever a newborn infant either. As I mentioned earlier, advocates of the Standard View disagree about what sort of psychological continuity is necessary for us to persist. Some say that we survive if and only if our basic psychological capacities are preserved: the capacity for rational thought and self-consciousness, for instance. (To have the capacity for self-consciousness is to be able to think about oneself as oneself, a being different from others, as in the thought, "I wish I hadn't told her about that." You retain this capacity even when you are fast asleep and not exercising it.) When does one acquire the capacity for rational thought and self-consciousness? Probably not at birth. These capacities appear to develop only gradually during the first year of life. If their existence is necessary for you to persist, it follows that you were not present at your birth. You did not come into being until several months later.

Because I am concerned with the Standard View in its full generality, however, I will set aside the question of whether we were once infants. The important point for us is that every version of the Standard View rules out my having once been a fetus--at any rate a fetus less than about five months old and lacking in psychological features.

3. The Fetus Problem

Judging from the published debate on personal identity in recent decades, most philosophers seem confident that some version of the Standard View is right. If so, most philosophers are committed to the claim that nothing is ever first a fetus and later a person. This would be surprising enough were it not for the fact that most philosophers also say the opposite. In discussing the moral status of the unborn, philosophers may disagree about whether an unthinking human fetus is a person; but they almost always assume that it is at least a potential person: something that might later become a person. Nearly everyone agrees that it

is possible for something to be an unthinking fetus at one time and a person later on. Almost all sides to the debate over the morality of abortion agree that abortion prevents an embryo or fetus from becoming a full-fledged person, even if they disagree about how bad this is. (The epigraph at the beginning of the paper is typical.) This is taken to be just as obviously true as the Standard View. Yet it is plainly incompatible with the Standard View. Call this conflict the fetus problem.

Why has no one worried about the fetus problem?

It may be that the problem has not occurred to anyone. Personal identity is typically discussed in a way that discourages us from asking whether we were once fetuses. Philosophers who think about personal identity--about what it takes for us to persist through time--invariably ask what it takes for a person picked out at one time to be identical with a person picked out at another time. Or they ask under what circumstances someone who exists now is the same person as someone who exists earlier or later. The question of our identity over time, they say, is the question of what past or future person is you or I.

What is a person? The usual answer is that to be a person is to have certain mental capacities, such as rationality or self-consciousness. You are a person, and a dog is not, because you have the psychological properties that constitute personhood and a dog hasn't. But a fetus hasn't got those properties either: it is no more rational or self-conscious than a dog is. It follows that a fetus is not a person--not yet, anyway.

If the question of personal identity is the question of what makes a past or future person the same person as you or I, and if a fetus is not a person, then whether I was once a fetus is not a question about personal identity. It is not a question about which past or future person I am. The fact that philosophers thinking about our identity over time think only about what it takes for a past or future person to be you or I may lead them never to ask whether any of us was ever a fetus. It may even seem obviously false that I was ever a fetus: how can someone be the same person as a thing that is not a person at all? How can a person be identical with a non-person?

But even if a fetus is not a person, this does not prevent me from having been a fetus, any

more than the fact that a boy is not a man prevents me from having been a boy. It is perfectly legitimate to ask whether I was once a fetus. As we have seen, most ethicists assume that the answer is yes. It follows that we hadn't better ask only what it takes for a past or future person to be me. We need to ask what it takes for any past or future being, person or not, to be me. Asking whether any person at some past time is me and ignoring the possibility that I might have been a non-person then is like asking which man committed the crime and ignoring the possibility that it might be a woman.

So the fetus problem may have been overlooked because philosophers have inquired about personal identity in way that made them blind to it.

4. Is It Really a Problem?

Here is another possible explanation of why the fetus problem has been ignored. Perhaps some friends of the Standard View have thought about the problem--only they don't see it as a problem. They might say something like this:

"It may be surprising, at first, to be told that none of us came into the world as a microscopic embryo, but rather as a well-developed fetus or infant at least six months after conception. But this is not as implausible as it seems. It is not even clear whether it conflicts with any of our ordinary beliefs.

"When we learned at our mother's knee that each of us was once a fetus in the womb, or that human fetuses become infants and later adults, we may not have learned that each of us was once a fetus in the strictest sense of the word 'was'. Perhaps our mothers didn't mean that each of us is numerically identical with a fetus--that you and a certain fetus are one, like Clark Kent and Superman are one. They may have meant only that a fetus, as it develops, gives rise to or produces a person.

"Here is an example to illustrate this point. When we say that Slovakia and the Czech Republic were once a single country, we are not saying that two things are numerically identical with one thing. We are not saying that Slovakia is Czechoslovakia, and that the Czech Republic is Czechoslovakia. That would imply that Slovakia is the Czech Republic: if Slovakia and

Czechoslovakia are one, and the Czech Republic and Czechoslovakia are one, Slovakia and the Czech Republic cannot be two. Of course, Slovakia is not the Czech Republic. There are three different countries, and one of them ceased to exist when it gave rise to the other two. So when we say that Slovakia and the Czech Republic were once the same country, we mean only that they in some sense grew out of the same country, not that each of them is that country. We are not talking about numerical identity over time at all in this case. This shows that there is a sense in which one thing can 'become', or 'once have been' something else--something numerically different from it.

"The Standard View is an account of our numerical identity over time. It implies that none of us is numerically identical with a fetus--that no one thing is ever first a fetus and later a person. But this is perfectly consistent with the claim that each of us 'was once' a fetus in the sense that Slovakia was once Czechoslovakia. The Standard View does not deny that each of us 'once once' a fetus in the sense of having developed from a fetus. It is still true that a fetus 'becomes' a person in the sense that there is a continuous process of self-directed growth that begins with a fetus and ends with a person. And that may be all we mean when we say that each of us was once a fetus. If so, then the implications of Standard View do not conflict with anything that every enlightened person believes."

This ingenious reply seems to me entirely unpersuasive. There may well be a loose sense of "becoming" and of "having once been" according to which an F's becoming a G, or a G's having once been an F, does not imply that any one thing is first an F and later a G, but only that an F in some sense engenders a G. But this loose sense does not appear to be the one that figures in folk wisdom about how we came to be.

Consider the fact (surely it is a fact) that I, the author of this paper, was once a boy. This does not mean merely that a boy engendered me, or that I developed from a boy. It means that some one thing--I--was first a boy and later wrote this paper. Or suppose a five-year-old child finds her baby brother disgusting, and you remind her that she too was once an infant. You do not mean merely that she developed from an infant. You mean that she herself, not some other thing, once weighed twenty pounds, nursed at her mother's breast, and kept everyone awake at

night. At any rate this is so if it is possible for any ordinary thing to persist from one time to another--and the Standard View implies that it is possible. And is it not evident that you were once a fetus in the same sense as you were once a boy or a girl? Isn't that what your mother meant when she told you that you weren't brought by a stork? Surely there is no deep logical difference between saying that I was once a boy and saying that I was once a fetus. It would be absurdly implausible to suppose that when we say that I was once a boy we mean that I am numerically identical with a boy, but when we say that I was once a fetus we mean something entirely different.

So folk wisdom seems to tell us plainly that each of really us was once a fetus, in the sense of being numerically identical with one--contrary to Standard View.

5. The Termination View

As we have seen, the claim that nothing is ever a fetus at one time and a person later on is profoundly counterintuitive. It also raises serious philosophical problems.

Suppose, as the Standard View would have it, that I came into being six or seven months after I was conceived, when the normal course of fetal development produced the first mental capacities (or several months after my birth, when the normal course of infantile development produced the capacity for rationality and self-consciousness). Suppose that the fetus my mother bore during that period (or the infant she nursed) is numerically different from me. This raises an awkward question: what became of that fetus or infant?

One thing, on the Standard View, is certain: it did not come to be a person. Nothing started out as a microscopic embryo with no brain, no nerve cells, and no psychology, began to acquire its first crude mental features several months into its life, and went on to study philosophy. Rather, at some point, perhaps some six or seven months after the fetus was conceived, a person came into being that did not exist before. What happened to the fetus then? What happened to it when I stepped onto the stage? The Standard View allows for two possibilities: either (1) the fetus ceased to exist, and I took its place; or (2) the fetus survived, but never came to be a person: it merely came to share the stage with another being, namely

me. There does not appear to be any third possibility. Call option 1 the Termination View and option 2 the Co-location View.

I don't think anyone will find the Termination View attractive. It tells us that it is absolutely impossible for a human fetus to come to be a normal, adult human being: the fetus necessarily ceases to exist as soon as its nervous system develops to the point where it can support thought, or consciousness, or whatever mental properties it is that figure in the Standard View. In other words, a human fetus (or infant) must perish in the act of bringing forth a human being. This would be one of the most remarkable facts in all of natural history--assuming, anyway, that embryos of other mammal species are capable of surviving to adulthood. Why should a human fetus die simply because, in the course of carrying out the program encoded in its genes, it (or rather its successor) came to be able to think? This is not the sort of thing that typically causes an organism's demise. We can understand the view that one necessarily ceases to exist if one loses one's capacity to think; but that one should perish by virtue of gaining that ability is absurd. It would leave us wondering what sort of changes a living thing can survive, for it would show our ordinary thinking on this subject to be wholly misguided.

6. The Co-Location View

The Co-location View is more interesting. It says that a human fetus does survive the normal development of its nervous system and grows into an adult human animal, just as we thought. But in spite of that development it never comes to be a person. No human fetus ever comes to be one of us. Rather, at a certain point in a fetus's development, the atoms that make it up begin to compose something else as well--a second being--and that thing is the person. (I am assuming, as most friends of the Standard View believe, that you and I are material things. But almost nothing in this paper turns on this assumption, and the Co-location View could be modified to accommodate the view that we are not material.) Presumably the fetus still exists now, even though it is no longer a fetus, but a full-grown human organism. And we should expect it to be the same size, now, as you are, and located in the same place. So you--a person--now share your space and your matter with a biological organism, and it is the organism, not

you, that started out as a fetus. The organism is numerically different from you because it began to exist before you did, and because unlike you it can survive without psychological continuity--or at least it could, and did, at one time.

This entails that even if we are material beings, we are not human animals: we are not members of the species Homo sapiens. Apparently we are not organisms at all, despite appearances--even though we are alive and are composed entirely of living tissues arranged in just the way that the tissues of a living human organism are arranged. Not, at any rate, unless two organisms could be composed of the same matter at the same time, living together in a sort of intimate symbiosis; and no one believes that.

The claim that you and I are material things but not animals is more than simply odd. It threatens to undermine the Standard View itself by depriving us of any grounds for accepting it. Consider the human animal that now coincides with you, on the Co-location View. The Standard View implies that it is not a person, for it could survive without any sort of psychological continuity--as it did during the first months of its life. Still, we should expect that animal to be conscious and intelligent, just as you are. It has the same brain and nervous system as you have, and the same surroundings. It shows the same behavioral evidence of intelligence as you do. What could prevent it from thinking just like you?

Suppose the animal does think just like you. Now you believe you are a person. Presumably the animal believes that it is a person. It has the same reason for believing that it is a person as you have for believing that you are. Yet it is mistaken. But then how do you know you aren't making this mistake? For all you could ever know, it seems, you might be the animal--the former fetus--rather than the person. If you were, you would never know the difference. Even if the Standard View were true, it seems, we could never have any grounds for supposing that it applied to us. That is, even if there are beings that persist by virtue of psychological continuity, we could never have any reason to suppose that we are such beings, rather than rational, intelligent animals that don't persist by virtue of psychological continuity. I take that to be absurd.

Friends of the Co-location View will want to deny that the human animals accompanying

us can think. (That would enable us to know that we are not those animals.) But they will find it hard to explain why not--why a living human organism with a normal nervous system and showing every sign of intelligence should nonetheless be no cleverer than a stone. And what will they tell their colleagues in the life sciences? That Homo sapiens, despite appearances, are in fact less intelligent than their evolutionary cousins? That a human fetus, although it can engender a highly intelligent being, can itself only develop into a singularly stupid adult primate?

7. The Biological View

I propose a simpler response to the fetus problem. I say that we are animals. Human animals, like other organisms, do not persist by virtue of psychological continuity. Each human animal starts out as an unthinking embryo, and could survive the destruction of its cerebrum in a vegetative state. The lack of psychological continuity in these cases does not prevent the animal from persisting. No one would say that a human organism ceases to exist and is replaced by a new animal when it lapses into a persistent vegetative state. A human animal persists not by virtue of any psychological relation, but by virtue of some sort of physical or biological continuity that does not require anything psychological.

If we are human animals, and human animals persist by virtue of some brute physical continuity that does not involve anything psychological, then we persist by virtue of some brute physical continuity that does not involve anything psychological. Each of us was once a fetus, and may end up as a human vegetable. Call this the Biological View of personal identity.

The fetus problem does not arise on this view. A human fetus or infant does not cease to be when it acquires the capacity to think; nor is there any reason to say that it comes to share its matter with a thinking being numerically different from it. The fetus or infant simply comes to be a person (if it wasn't a person already)--just as it may later come to be a musician or a philosopher. And as a person it continues to survive for as long as the appropriate biological processes continue, just as it did when it was a fetus. A person may cease to be a person and still exist by losing her mental capacities--that is what happens in the "vegetable case"--just as a

musician may cease to be a musician and still exist by losing her musical abilities or habits. This means that we are only temporarily people: we start out and may end up as non-people. At least this is so if you need mental properties to count as a person.

According to the Biological View, I started out as an embryo. Does that mean that I came into existence at the moment of conception? Not necessarily. The Biological View implies that I came into being whenever this human organism did. But it is unlikely that this human organism came into being at conception--that is, that it started out as a fertilized egg. When a fertilized egg cleaves into two, then four, then eight cells, it does not appear to become a multicellular organism--any more than an amoeba comes to be a multicellular organism when it divides. The resulting cells adhere only loosely, and their growth and other activities are not, at first anyway, coordinated in a way that would make them parts of a multicellular organism. The embryological facts suggest that a human organism comes into being around sixteen days after fertilization.

The Biological View is of course incompatible with the Standard View. The Biological View implies that one can survive without any mental features at all. It says that no sort of psychological continuity is either necessary or sufficient for us to persist. It makes psychology completely irrelevant to our identity over time.

8. The Hybrid Proposal

The Biological View solves the fetus problem by implying that each of us was once a fetus, just as most of us were always inclined to suppose. On the other hand, it flies in the face of most philosophical thinking about personal identity. It implies, for instance, that you would not go along with your transplanted cerebrum. If your cerebrum were moved to another head, the one who ended up with that organ would believe that she was you. But according to the Biological View she would be wrong about this. She would not be you, but rather the person whose cerebrum was removed to make way for yours--a person whose life she has no memory of. You would be the empty-headed vegetable left behind.

Why? Because you are an animal, and an animal would not go along with its transplanted

cerebrum. The surgeons in our story move an organ from one animal to another, just as they might do with a liver or a kidney. They don't pare an animal down to a naked cerebrum, remove it from what was once its own head, and then graft a new head, arms, legs, and other parts onto it. The empty-headed animal left behind is not a new human animal. It is the very animal that your cerebrum starts out as a part of. So the human animal stays behind with an empty head in the transplant story. It simply loses its cerebrum and its mental capacities. If you are that animal, as the Biological View implies, then that is what happens to you. Some find this deeply counterintuitive. The Biological View solves the fetus problem, but at considerable cost.

You might wonder whether we could solve the fetus problem at a lower cost: without going so far as accepting the Biological View. Do we really need to say that psychological continuity is completely irrelevant to our identity? Why can't we say that each of us was once a fetus, but also that you would go along with your transplanted cerebrum? This would not be the Standard View, for it denies that any sort of psychological continuity is necessary for us to persist. But neither is it the Biological View, for it does not say that our persistence consists in brute biological continuity. It would be a sort of hybrid.

The suggestion is that psychological continuity of some sort is sufficient for us to persist, as the transplant story suggests, but not necessary. We survive as fetuses (and might one day survive as vegetables) by virtue of brute biological continuity; but if your cerebrum were transplanted, you would survive as the one who ended up with that organ because of her psychological continuity with you, even though there would not be biological continuity of the relevant sort here. Our identity over time does not consist in biological continuity or in psychological continuity alone, but sometimes in one and sometimes in the other.

This proposal raises large metaphysical issues that I cannot go into here. I will make just two remarks.

First, the hybrid proposal is difficult to state. It denies that psychological continuity is necessary for us to persist, because we once persisted without it as fetuses (and may one day do so again as vegetables). It also denies that biological continuity of the sort we have been

considering is either necessary or sufficient for us to persist: not necessary because you don't need it to survive in the transplant case, and not sufficient because the empty-headed being left behind in the transplant case, though biologically continuous with you, would not be you. But then what is necessary and sufficient for us to persist? What does it take, in general, for a past or future being to be you? How does the hybrid proposal answer the question of personal identity over time? Nothing in our informal description of the hybrid proposal tells us how to answer these questions. It is not clear what the hybrid proposal actually says.

Here is a specific example of the problem. If a certain past fetus is you, what makes it you, according to the hybrid view? Not its being psychologically continuous with you: it isn't. Not its being biologically continuous with you, for something could be biologically continuous with you without being you, as in the transplant case. What, then? You relate to a certain past fetus, and may relate to a certain future vegetable, in just the way that you would relate to the being left behind with an empty head after your cerebrum is transplanted. So what makes it the case, according to the hybrid proposal, that you are the fetus and the vegetable but not the empty-headed being?

Even if this worry were answered, the hybrid proposal would share the philosophical problems of the Standard View. Like the Standard View, it implies that you are not a human animal. Remember, the animal stays behind in the transplant story. If you would not stay behind, but would go along with your cerebrum, then you cannot be that animal: a thing and itself cannot go their separate ways. This seems to imply that you now share your space and your matter with a human organism that is not you. That is, the hybrid proposal leads to the Co-location View we considered in §6. And this, as we saw, raises makes it hard to see how you could ever know that you are not that animal, which presumably thinks your thoughts. Even if the hybrid proposal were true, it is hard to see how we could ever have any reason to believe that it is. For all we could ever know, it seems, we might be animals, in which case the Biological View would be true.

There does not appear to be any hybrid of the Standard and Biological Views that has the virtue of both and the vices of neither. It looks as if the only sound solution to the fetus

problem is to give up traditional thinking about personal identity and accept the Biological View.