

Does Personhood Begin at Conception?

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Preliminary Metaphysical Concepts

What is it that enables an entity to persist, or maintain numerical identity, through a change in its component parts? For example, why am I the same person I was ten years ago even though virtually all of my cells from ten years back have died and been replaced by others? This is an important question in the debate over whether or not personhood begins at conception.¹ In his book *Defending Life*, Francis Beckwith, following philosopher J. P. Moreland, points out that to say that an entity can persist through change is to say that it is ontologically prior to its parts.² This has nothing to do with temporal order, for the parts may exist temporally before the entity begins to exist. But the point is, in order for an entity to persist through a change in its parts, or to be what I will call a *persistent entity*, its nature or essence must involve something more basic than just a particular composition of parts.

Just what kind of basic “something” a persistent entity’s essence must involve is debatable, of course. Consider a data storage system consisting of a networked array of hard drives. Some may view this system as having an essence defined in functional terms, enabling it to persist through the addition and subtraction of drives as long as it retains the function of storing data at a certain network address. Others may postulate an essence defined in physical and temporal terms that could allow for persistence through a gradual replacement of its drives but not the replacement of a majority all at once. These two views give different answers to the question of where the entity persists if it is broken into two separate systems, one retaining the original network address and the other retaining a majority of the drives.

This leads to a crucial question: Do the different and possibly conflicting persistent entities defined by such views actually exist “in the real world” in any true and meaningful sense, or do they exist only as circumstantially useful concepts in the mind? A major distinction here is that persistent entities as nominal concepts can be defined in arbitrary and mutually conflicting ways, whereas in order for a persistent entity to possibly exist in the real world, or to be what I will call a *persistent being*, an arbitrary

¹I use the word *conception* in this paper as a synonym for fertilization, as is usually done in the context of the abortion debate. (In other contexts, it is often used as a synonym for implantation.)

²Beckwith, Francis, *Defending Life: A Moral and Legal Case Against Abortion Choice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 50

or conflicting definition would not suffice. We may not know exactly what a persistent being's essence involves, but we can agree that there *is* a correct view of the situation, a view that would give a definitive, reasonable, non-arbitrary answer as to whether the being persists in one situation versus another. Entities for which no such non-arbitrary views are plausible cannot consistently be considered persistent beings.

Application to Personhood: The Twinning Argument

For the debate over the beginning of personhood, by which I mean whatever is involved in being a full-fledged member of the human community,³ I will presuppose that the property of personhood is exemplified by every individual human being. This is admittedly questionable, but in this paper we are looking for the earliest possible exemplification of personhood, not the latest or even the most likely. The question that concerns us, therefore, is simply when a human being begins to exist.

By a human being I mean a certain kind of persistent being. When we talk about the existence of a human being, we are not talking about a mere configuration of cells, but about a meaningfully defined entity that persists through changes in that configuration of cells. In order for a human being to exist, therefore, there must be involved some essence beyond the mere existence of parts, something that defines the human being in a non-arbitrary way to give it ontological priority over those parts, so that it can plausibly exist as a persistent being right through to adulthood. Substance dualists (including most Christians) may hold that this essence that identifies a human being is also correlated with the presence of an immaterial soul, but my argument does not depend on whether or not that correlation holds.

The basic model of early human embryology is reasonably well established. From fertilization to normally about four days later, the embryo is in the zygote stage. A zygote is a cluster of up to about 16 cells, all qualitatively undifferentiated from one another, though each acts in concert with the others. Twinning and recombination can occur in this zygote stage or later, up to about two weeks after fertilization. For simplicity we will focus on the zygote stage only. Twinning in the zygote stage occurs when a zygote separates, either naturally or forcibly, into two clusters of at least one cell each. Each

³This phrase is borrowed from *ibid.*, p. xii.

resulting cluster then comprises an independent zygote that is capable of developing without the other. Recombination occurs when two such clusters (i.e., zygotes) are physically joined together. In practice, the two zygotes are usually from one original that had previously twinned, but this is not required.⁴

The twinning argument is perhaps most clearly stated as a *reductio ad absurdum*. Assume for the moment the truth of the thesis defended by Beckwith that every zygote is a human being in the sense previously defined. This would imply, of course, that the human being persists as the zygote grows from a single cell all the way up to 16 cells. It would presumably also imply that the human being persists if one cell out of the 16 is then destroyed, leaving the zygote to shrink from 16 cells to 15. So if instead of being destroyed, the one cell is separated from the other 15 in an act of twinning, the original human being would have to persist in the 15-cell cluster and a new human being would have to come into existence in the 1-cell cluster. Thus, it would seem the persistent entity called a human being must in some way involve the non-arbitrary concept of where a majority of cells are retained when a zygote is divided.

But what if the separation is symmetrical, as in the case of an 8-8 split instead of a 15-1 split? Here we have two choices: 1) Postulate that one of the twins is selected arbitrarily as the zygote in which the original human being persists. But then we no longer have a non-arbitrary concept of what our persistent human being is. 2) Postulate that the original human being is destroyed. But if a 15-1 split leaves the original human being to persist in the 15-cell zygote, and a subsequent 8-7 split of that 15-cell zygote leaves the original human being to persist in the 8-cell zygote, it seems unreasonable to say the original human being does not persist in an 8-8 split which leaves as one of its products the qualitatively exact same 8-cell zygote that the sequential 15-1 and 8-7 splits would leave. How could the nature of the 8-cell zygote depend on the sequence of splits? Therefore, since neither choice is consistent with any candidate view of what it means to be a persistent human being by the previously-argued requirements, the twinning argument shows the implausibility of our original assumption that every zygote is a human being.

⁴Though rare, two genetically distinct zygotes can combine and develop into a fully functional human being with a mixture of genetic sequences, known as a *chimera* or *mosaic*. (This illustrates that numerical identity is not fundamentally determined by genetic sequence. A particular genetic sequence is therefore an accidental property of a human being, not an essential one.)

This implausibility is further illustrated by the possibility of recombination. When two 8-cell zygotes combine into a 16-cell zygote, which of the two human beings persists and which ceases to exist? There is no non-arbitrary view of the nature of a persistent being that can answer this question. Additionally, even in asymmetric cases like a 15-1 split and subsequent recombination, it seems highly unnatural to hold that a new human being is created and immediately destroyed, given that the end result is qualitatively the same 16-cell zygote that existed before the split and recombination. Once again, therefore, the thesis that a human being comes into existence at the moment of conception is shown to be implausible.

Beckwith's Response⁵

Beckwith's response to the twinning argument is fundamentally based on his claim, following Moreland again, that all organisms are ontologically prior to their parts.⁶ Unfortunately, he gives no clear reason for why we should accept this claim. Furthermore, the claim is ambiguous to begin with, for he gives no clear definition of what he means by an organism. (Does a white blood cell qualify? How about a virus? Why or why not?) But in his response to his stated form of the twinning argument he relies on several lines of evidence that the zygote is not just an aggregate of independent cells, but that the conjoined cells function in concert, with some form of communication and interaction between them. If this is what he means by an organism, then it is strange that he does not view objects like cars and computers as organisms, for this is clearly true of their parts as well.⁷ More importantly, his claim that a zygote is an organism does not really address the fundamental force of the twinning argument at all. For the twinning argument need not deny that a zygote is an organism in this sense that Beckwith seems to defend. Rather, if the twinning argument shows the implausibility that this organism called a zygote is a persistent being, then the claim of Beckwith and Moreland that an organism is ontologically prior to its parts in any meaningful sense that could apply to real human beings (as opposed to arbitrary nominal

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 77-81

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 50

⁷Beckwith follows Moreland's thesis of mereological essentialism with respect to objects like cars and computers, implying they do not maintain identity through any change in their parts. See *ibid.*, p. 50.

concepts) is just shown to be implausible. Merely asserting ontological priority to be the case for all organisms in the face of an argument that it is not plausibly the case in any non-arbitrary sense for some organisms is not a reasonable objection to the argument.

Beckwith's confusion over the twinning scenario is further revealed in the flatworm analogy to which he appeals. This flatworm analogy certainly shows that the parts of a persistent being like a flatworm or human can have the property of totipotence, the potential to develop into a new flatworm or human. But this in no way implies that the severed parts of a flatworm are themselves independent flatworms. It is entirely more reasonable to think of the original flatworm as a persistent being and yet hold that the severed parts are not persistent beings until they undergo further development. Beckwith's position is almost grotesquely unintuitive, for are we really to imagine that if we sever a flatworm's tail and then immediately reattach it we have created and subsequently destroyed a new flatworm? The fact that the severed tail can develop into a new flatworm is irrelevant, for even if a severed human finger could develop into a new human being (and it is not difficult to imagine a possible world where it could, given the science of cloning), that would not imply that a severed finger already is a new human being.

It may seem on the surface that my understanding of the flatworm analogy still supports Beckwith's case in that I am conceding that the original flatworm is a persistent being even though the severed parts are not. Wouldn't this be parallel to a concession that the original zygote is also a persistent being? The answer is *no*. The reason is that the cells of a zygote are undifferentiated, so that a separated part of a zygote is qualitatively like the zygote itself, whereas a separated part of a flatworm is not qualitatively like the original flatworm. This means the zygote is not comparable to a flatworm, but rather much more directly comparable to a severed tail of a flatworm. The zygote can develop into a human being, just as the severed tail can develop into a flatworm. And the zygote can be divided into parts that can each develop into a separate human being, just as the severed tail can be divided into smaller parts that can each develop into a separate flatworm. So the flatworm analogy does not point to the proposition that a zygote is a persistent human being at all; it rather points ostensibly away from that proposition.

Supplemental Argument from Conscience

Many who hold the thesis that personhood begins at conception rightly realize that their position also militates against the use of hormonal contraceptives such as “the pill.” For even though these hormonal methods normally work by preventing ovulation, and therefore fertilization, there can be no guarantee that ovulation will not occasionally still occur. And when ovulation and fertilization do occur, the resulting zygote will almost always be aborted, because the same hormones that were intended to prevent ovulation also control the uterine cycle such that it will not support the implantation of the zygote.

The reason this is significant is that these same hormonal effects are produced naturally when a mother breastfeeds her baby. This means that a sexually active breastfeeding mother is essentially just as likely to cause an abortion as a woman on the pill. In fact, this likelihood is significantly increased when the baby is weaned, while the normal hormonal balance is in the process of being restored. Studies have shown that ovulation frequently resumes prior to the ability of the uterus to support implantation in this process, thus resulting in abortions.⁸

These facts are relevant to the debate over the beginning of personhood when considered from the usual Christian position that God has given us a basic knowledge of good and evil in the form of conscience. While conscience is not perfect, it seems implausible to suggest it would be so universally off-base as to completely fail to warn against the moral evil of a breastfeeding mother having natural sex with her husband, if this really is a moral evil. Can we honestly believe that the vast majority of mothers throughout history have directly jeopardized or killed their babies in this way without having any clue they were doing anything wrong? Is it not much more likely that God would have given people some kind of conscience against a breastfeeding mother having sex, if He truly regarded it as an act of jeopardizing or killing an unborn person? This is admittedly not an absolute proof, but I suggest the more natural conclusion is that God does not consider the embryos aborted by this behavior to be human beings.

⁸Probably the most frequently cited study is Diaz, S. et al., “Relative contributions of anovulation and luteal phase defect to the reduced pregnancy rate of breastfeeding women,” *Fertility and Sterility*, Sept. 1992.