

THE PERSONHOOD OF THE HUMAN EMBRYO

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1. Introduction

The most challenging argument against the personhood of the human embryo is, in my opinion, the one which grants all the biological facts about the embryo and its biological humanity, and yet contests its personhood. The facts about genes and chromosomes which we like to make use of in debate with pro-abortion-rights people are admitted by them in this argument; but instead of agreeing with us about the status of the embryo, they distinguish between the embryo as biologically human and the embryo as person, and they say that the facts which we invoke prove only the former but not the latter. They usually proceed to introduce some idea or other of personhood which implies that the embryo could not possibly be a person. Thus many of them say that to be a person means being consciously alive in a personal way, which implies that in the absence of consciousness there can be no person; this seems to imply in turn that the early embryo cannot be a person. They will usually also rub under our noses the fact that St. Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle, regards the very early embryo as a living being which is not yet a person, but which becomes a person only when the "intellectual soul" is infused, which occurs only some time after conception. From here they argue that abortion, since it destroys only a sub-personal human animal, entirely lacks the grave immorality of killing innocent human persons.

This argument has already been ably dealt with by various pro-life philosophers. Recently Stephen Schwarz has expressed the common wisdom by saying that it is one thing for a being to function as a person, it is another thing for it to be a person.ⁱ One typically tries to get this distinction out of the fact that, though my conscious functioning as a person comes and goes, my being a person cannot similarly come and go; this power of enduring as the same through time serves to distinguish my being from my conscious functioning, and thus to open the possibility that the human embryo, in advance of functioning as person, already is one. This is indeed an excellent refutation of the argument, and I entirely agree with it. In the present paper I attempt to develop it and to deepen it in various ways.

As I say, those who deny the personhood of the human embryo typically reduce the person to personal consciousness.ⁱⁱ They

argue that since there is no personal consciousness in the embryo, there can be no person. Their inference is irresistible if they are right in reducing the person to personal consciousness. I will try to show that they are not right, and will try to do this by bringing out the distinction between being and consciousness in ourselves as persons. I will try to show that as persons we are not all consciousness, or all self-consciousness, or self-presence, or conscious acting and experiencing, but that we have a personal being which has to be distinguished from personal consciousness, which can even exist apart from consciousness. Then I want to show how, given this distinction between being and consciousness, we have to think about the status of the human embryo.

I propose to look for this personal being in a place which at first seems very unpromising for my purposes, namely in my conscious experience of myself, in my subjectivity. It may seem that by probing my self-experience I will find only consciousness and not some being of the person irreducible to consciousness; it may seem that for attaining to the being of the person I would have to go outside of my subjectivity and attempt in some way or other to deduce the necessity of personal being underlying personal consciousness. But I will do without any such deductions; I will attempt to probe my subjectivity to the point where the being of the person subjectively shows itself. This "subjective" approach, demanding as it is, at least lets me join the argument with my interlocutors. They see nothing more in the person than conscious self-presence; since I want to engage them in discussion, and not talk past them, I take my point of departure from this very conscious self-presence and try to show why the evidence of precisely our conscious self-presence forces us to go beyond consciousness to being. My "subjective" approach also has the advantage of making more convincing the thesis that there is some being underlying the consciousness of persons, for rather than inferring that this being must be there in persons, I will try to make it a matter of direct self-experience.

2. Parallel between my argument and a well-known Socratic-Platonic argument

Much will be gained for the understanding of my argument if I begin by reminding the reader of a famous Socratic argument, to which my argument is in many ways directly parallel. In the Theaetetus Socrates is dealing with the Protagorean thesis that "man is the measure of all things, of the things that are, that they are, of the

things that are not, that they are not" (152a-183c), and he interprets this thesis to mean that things are nothing more than we think they are, that they exhaust themselves in being thought by us. Against Protagoras Socrates argues that we can err, and with the help of a teacher can correct our error and can enlarge and deepen our knowledge, and that this presupposes an object of thought which is not measured by our thinking but is the measure of our thinking. How can there be any inadequacy in our thinking, or any overcoming of the inadequacy, if the objects about which we think are nothing more than we think they are (161c-162c)?

Now I want to argue that the human being qua person is just as little reducible to consciousness, or to conscious self-presence, as the objects of our thinking are, for Socrates, reducible to their being thought by us. Just as Socrates distinguishes between the being of an object and its being thought by us and does so by arguing that the latter can fall short of the former, so I will distinguish between the being of ourselves as person and our being consciously present to ourselves, and will argue for this thesis by showing that the latter can fall short of the former.

One might at first think that what I want to show is simply a part of what Socrates wanted to show against Protagoras, and that I will be trying to defend the Socratic position with respect to our cognition of ourselves. One might think that I simply want to show that when we go to cognize ourselves we encounter in the object of our cognition a being which is not reducible to its being cognized by us. But this is not exactly what I want to show. It is one thing to cognize myself as object, from without, it is another to experience myself as subject, from within.

When I speak of being present to myself as I perform conscious acts, I do not mean putting myself in front of myself in the performing of those acts; these acts have their own object, and I who perform them am not another object of my acts. In the self-presence which we find on the subjective pole of all object-directed acts, I experience myself not objectively, but subjectively. Now it is in my subjectivity in the sense of this subjective self-experience that I will try to find a being of the person which is more than subjective self-experience. I want to probe my subjectivity to the point at which the distinction between being and consciousness appears, just as Socrates wanted to probe our experience of some object to the point at which the distinction between its being and its being cognized by us appears. We have, then, an instructive parallel between my thesis and the Socratic thesis against Protagoras, but not exactly a coinciding of mine with his.

Now we are in a position to make our argument for the distinction between personal being and personal consciousness.

3. The decisive point: the distinction between being and consciousness in the human person

We all know what it is to be in the following condition of weakened self-presence: we are distracted, preoccupied with many things; we are an easy prey for new distractions; we are buffeted back and forth by every influence which is brought to bear on us; we lack distance to the things we encounter, we are immersed in them, perhaps even "ecstatically lost in them," as Scheler once put it, and so are dominated by them. Is there anyone who will disagree that in this condition of reduced self-presence, of weakened self-consciousness, we fall short of what we really are as persons, that we live in a condition unworthy of ourselves as persons? Even before we try to define person, or develop criteria of personhood, we are fully aware of this discrepancy between the conscious condition of dispersion, and living fully as person. We can content ourselves with a vague understanding of the person as an "end in himself"; it is clear that when we are "ecstatically lost" in things and dominated by them, we do not live as a being which is an end in itself, or which belongs to itself. We need only the vaguest understanding of the person as a subject of freedom and responsibility in order to see the force of the question: how can our inner resources for acting through ourselves and for determining ourselves in freedom be as reduced as they are in this state of inner dispersion, without us thereby losing much of our actuality as persons? Is it not natural to say that in this state we are somehow outside of, or estranged from, our real being as persons? Can we not say that, though we experience ourselves as immersed in the things around us, perhaps even as "of one piece" with them, we as persons are in reality not of one piece with anything, but are rather incommunicably ourselves and not another, and that therefore the subjective self-experience which we have in the state of dispersion is at odds with what we really are as persons? But then we have our distinction between being and consciousness in the person, and have gained it, just as we proposed, from an examination of our subjective self-experience. The argument, however, is not yet finished.

When we emerge out of this state of dispersion, when we "come to ourselves," as one says so expressively, when we recover ourselves, "recollect ourselves," and re-new our inner resources for acting through ourselves in freedom, what exactly do we experience in

ourselves? Are we not aware of beginning to live consciously what we really are as persons? When we experience subjectively our being incommunicably ourselves and not being continuous with any thing other than ourselves, do we not subjectively experience more adequately our personhood? But how can there be a more and a less adequate subjective experience of ourselves as persons if there is nothing more to our personhood than subjective self-experience? Where is the measure of this "adequacy" if not in some being of the person which is now more, now less actualized, according to the condition of the self-presence of the person?

We can make the same argument by looking at our experience of personal development. Take the small child, who seems often to feel itself to be of one piece with its surroundings and with its social milieu. The opinions of the social groups in which the child lives flow through the mind of the child, who simply thinks with the group, or better, simply thinks as a part or extension of the group. But as the child grows it begins to experience itself as a being of its own, it begins to lead a life of its own, and to form judgments of its own, thereby falling out of the sheltering social cocoon. Of interest for us is the fact the child is aware that in developing towards this kind of independence it is growing as person; that it used to be immature as person, and that it would have become retarded as person if it had remained immersed in its social groups. But this seems to presuppose that a person cannot be reduced to its conscious condition, for how else can we explain the immaturity or retardation of a person except as a discrepancy between all that that person really is and the inadequate conscious condition in which he or she presently exists?

And the same argument can be made with regard to certain pathological conditions of persons, as for example with the crushing sense of isolation under which the schizophrenic suffers. We would all say that the schizophrenic is not really isolated from others as he or she feels himself to be, and that the schizophrenic recovers a truer self-experience in being healed of his or her psychotic sense of isolation: but how do we explain this except by recognizing some being in the person which is more than what the person experiences in himself or herself?

Just as Socrates claimed to find in the objects of our cognition the distinction between the being of the objects and their being cognized by us, and to find this distinction by showing the inadequacy, and the possibility of over-coming the inadequacy, of many of our attempts at cognizing them, so we claim to find in our subjective self-

ex-perience the distinction between the being of the person and the consciousness of the person, and we claim, in direct parallel to the Socratic argument, to find this distinction in the inadequacy with which our personal being is subjectively disclosed from within in the dispersed, or immature, or pathological forms of self-presence, and in the possibility of achieving a self-presence in which our personal being is subjectively disclosed in a more adequate way.

4. Developing the distinction in response to the main objection which can be raised against it

Of course those who would reduce the person to personal consciousness will be resourceful in trying to explain in their own way the facts of self-experience to which I appeal, that is, to explain them without going beyond personal consciousness to anything like a being of the person. The parallel to the debate between Socrates and Protagoras holds here too; for Socrates put into the mouth of Protagoras (who was not present in the discussion reported in the Theaetetus) a plausible way of explaining how we might correct our conceptions of things, yet without introducing any being of the objects of cognition which goes beyond their being cognized (166a-168c). Let us state as forcefully as possible the strongest objection which can be made to us, and then consider it fairly.

One will say that there are many ways of measuring the inadequacy of a thing without positing in the thing anything like the "being" which we just recognized in the person. For example, we say that the performance of a piece of music is deficient, that the piece ought to have been performed differently, and yet we do not dream of ascribing to the performance a mysterious "being" which was disfigured because of the defects of the performance. Or we say that a plane triangle is badly drawn, that the lines are crooked, and the inner angles more or less than 180 degrees. Here, too, it would be bizarre to assume a mysterious being in the drawn triangle which was obscured by the bad drawing. There is nothing more to the being of the bad performance than the bad performance, nor is there anything more to the being of the crooked triangle than the crooked triangle. The talk of adequacy and inadequacy in these things comes not from measuring them against a hidden being which they have, but from measuring them against standards which are in a sense external to them. We measure the performance against the score of the composer, or against other performances; we measure the triangle against the idea of the

triangle. Why should it be different with the human person? Why can we not recognize inadequate states of personal consciousness without assuming some partially hidden being of the person? Why can we not explain this inadequacy simply by referring to standards? Do we not all have some ideal of personal life, and do we not measure ourselves against this ideal and find ourselves wanting? The objection, then, comes to this: it is easier to replace the being of the person, which I tried to introduce above, with some ideal of personal life; this explains all the evidence to which I appeal, but explains it in an ontologically more economical way. One could say that the objector is opposed to my too Aristotelian interpretation of this evidence, and is arguing for a more Platonic interpretation of it.

We respond to the objection as follows.

a. Let us look at the examples on which the objection is based. Suppose the performance of the piece of music was poor one night, but better the next night: we would have here, not one performance which improves, but two performances one of which is better than the other. Or suppose the badly drawn triangle is improved by erasing the crooked lines and drawing straighter lines: we would have not one triangle which becomes more like a triangle, but rather two triangles one of which replaces the other. But with a person it is different: a state of more centered consciousness in myself and a state of less centered consciousness, or a state of greater or of lesser personal maturity, are not two distinct entities, but rather only two conscious states of the same person. With a person we have one being which is now dispersed, now recollected, or is now immature, now more mature. One cannot explain this oneness of being by referring different conscious states to the same ideal of personal consciousness; this reference to a common ideal is quite consistent with them being plural entities; it only unites them as members of one class, but not necessarily as modalities of one being. One must instead recognize what I have been calling the being of the person, which is that in virtue of which I am one throughout various conscious states. This being does not exhaust itself in consciousness, since it is, by its oneness, precisely to be distinguished from the plurality of conscious states in which it lives at different times.

b. We cannot say that the crooked triangle, in being improved and made straighter, actualizes itself. One reason for this has just been given: it is always one and the same being which actualizes itself, but we are dealing here with two entities one of which replaces the other.

And there is another reason.

In order for a being to actualize itself by straightening out, it would have to be, while it is still crooked, more than just crooked; it would have to have some being in addition to its being crooked, and indeed would have to be in some sense straight (though not in such a sense as to contradict its empirical crookedness); it would have to be potentially straight, as Western philosophers have put it ever since Aristotle (meaning of course with this something more than "possibly straight"). Whenever, then, we speak of a being actualizing itself, we recognize that there is more to it than its present factual condition, and that the being in some sense already is that which, once it is actualized, it will be fully.

We do not find this potentiality in the crooked triangle, or in the poor musical performance; we do not find enough being in these entities to allow of a dimension of potential being. But we do find it in the person. It is only natural for us when we come to ourselves (as by recollecting ourselves) to say that we actualize ourselves as persons, that we gain the actuality of that which we already somehow are. The alternative is to say that one posits oneself, constitutes oneself, creates oneself as person, simply replacing thereby one's previous conscious condition: but this is entirely foreign to the experience of emerging from dispersion and coming to oneself, which clearly shows itself to be the experience of reawakening, of recovering oneself, returning to oneself; it is the experience of actualizing oneself out of a potential condition, and not positing oneself out of nothing. When I am once again alive as person, I can only say that I have gained, not my very personhood, but the conscious actuality of it, and that as dispersed I had lost, not my very personhood, but the conscious actuality of it. What is this something which is not lost in the worst state of inner dispersion and heteronomy, and which is not gained when one achieves strong conscious self-presence? Is it perhaps some ideal of personal life? No, because it is something within me, which could have no existence apart from me; the ideal, by contrast, is not tied to my existence, and can perfectly well exist (in whatever way it can be said to exist) without me existing. It is, instead, the being of the person; in considering what is implied in actualizing ourselves as persons we find anew our fundamental distinction between being and consciousness in the person. The conscious life of the person is not the whole person; it is that in which the being of the person is actualized, and this implies that a person is more than consciousness, and that his being is to be distinguished from his consciousness.

5. Clearing away some misunderstandings

Nothing happens more commonly in these discussions than for my position to get wrongly associated with other positions taken to be unacceptable or at least unattractive. Herewith, then, a few observations on some of the things which my position does not commit me to.

a. We lay special stress on the fact that this being of the person is not a hidden "clump" of being which we have postulated in order to explain some fact about personal consciousness; it is rather being which is, at least in part, immediately disclosed from within in our subjective self-experiencing.

b. We do not regard this being of the person as a thing, as something which is there just like other non-personal things; we do not have to import a category of being entirely foreign to the subjectivity and interiority in which the person is actualized. We make a point of conceiving of the being of the person as related to consciousness not only as an object of consciousness, but also and above all as something which becomes conscious itself, which becomes subjective, present to itself. (One would indeed conceive of the self in an ontologically inappropriate category if one were to identify it without residue with the brain; for the brain can only be an object of consciousness, it cannot possibly become conscious – otherwise we would experience our brains from within in self-presence.)

c. This being of the person is in no way conceived by us as unchangeable throughout the life of the person, even though it is the ground of the oneness of a person throughout stronger and weaker conscious conditions, as we saw. The very fact that it is subject to being actualized already implies that it undergoes a certain kind of change.

d. We quite admit that for a human person there is, existentially, hardly any difference between being entirely annihilated, and being forever deprived of consciousness while remaining in existence with the being of the person. I would in a sense retain nothing by retaining my being, if I irretrievably lost all consciousness. Consider the self-possession of persons, which is an aspect of their being ends in themselves; it would remain utterly dormant if they never consciously exercised it, as by being consciously present to themselves and consciously disposing over themselves. It seems that conscious life is the principle of actualization for persons; without conscious experiencing and acting persons remain in an utterly dormant condition. And yet, important as it is to recognize the supreme impor-

tance of personal consciousness, without which there is no actualization of the person, it is no less important to recognize the being of the person, without which there is no person to actualize. The task is to understand the unity of being and consciousness in the person, not to take the easy way out and to assert the one at the expense of the other.

We have secured our distinction between the being and the conscious self-presence of the person. It remains to show in the next section that this distinction implies the possibility of the human embryo being a person, and in the section after that to defend the stronger claim that we have to assume that the embryo is indeed a person.

6. The possibility of the human embryo being a person

The argument for this possibility has two parts. We first argue for it ex parte personae humanae, and then complete the argument by proceeding ex parte conceptus humani.

a. Let us go back to our experience of our own personhood. We found in ourselves that we can exist as persons while having only very little of the actuality of personal life. Now why should we not be able to exist as persons while entirely lacking the actuality of personal life? There is fortunately no need to discuss this question in the abstract, for we in fact do sometimes exist as persons while entirely lacking the actuality of personal life: we exist this way in all dreamless sleep and in every dreamless coma. The being of the person which we know in ourselves before and after the dreamless sleep can only be assumed to continue in existence while we sleep. We cannot of course experience this continuing in ourselves, but once we have distinguished the being from the consciousness of the person, we understand that this being cannot come and go as consciousness comes and goes. It is, then, the only reasonable assumption we can make to assume that we continue to be a person throughout the time when we lack all consciousness.

And now I ask: if it happens again and again that I exist as person while deprived of all personal consciousness, why may it not be that I once existed as person even before personal consciousness had developed in me? Why may it not be that I was already present in my body as soon as it began to exist and to develop? This would be impossible if I as person were nothing but conscious self-presence; since the embryo, prior to the development of the brain, lacks conscious self-presence, it would have to lack personhood as well. But since I as person am being as well as consciousness, it is entirely

possible that my personal being was already embodied in the embryo, long before the awakening of personal consciousness. In the present debate about the status of the embryo it is no small thing to establish this possibility, and to establish it with arguments which cannot be reasonably written off as being "theological" or "ideological."

b. But on closer inspection it is only part of this possibility which has been established; I have only showed this possibility ex parte personae humanae. But what about ex parte conceptus humani? There may be nothing in the human person which prevents the embryo from being a person, but might there be something in the embryo which prevents it? It may seem that if Engelhardt is right in speaking of "a continuum beginning with the formation of the zygote at conception, progressing to the development of a rational human being,"^m then the human embryo and the adult human body are the same living being at different stages of development. And this seems to make it only natural to assume that the embryo is a person. But let us beware of reasoning too abstractly. There is a plausible objection against this presumption; it is the philosophically most challenging reason which can be advanced against the personhood of the embryo.

One says that the capacity of the embryo for twinning (or recombining) shows that it cannot possibly be the body of a person. We might of course simply bypass this whole issue by taking "embryo" in the narrow sense in which it is sometimes contrasted with pre-embryo (which comprises zygote, morula, blastocyst); for twinning is no longer possible in the embryo so understood. But we are willing to take "embryo" in the broader sense in which the zygote represents the first form of embryonic life, and to offer some remarks on the objection, even if we cannot deal with it here as fully as it deserves.

It is at first not quite clear what the argument here is. One possible reading of it is that if the zygote is a person, then twinning must involve the splitting of a person, which is impossible. This is indeed impossible, but it is far from clear why, on the assumption, twinning could only be the splitting of a person: why could it not be a form of asexual reproduction, such as would occur in a human female who would reproduce herself by cloning?

The argument seems to become stronger when taken in a more Aristotelian sense: as long as the zygote has a divisibility and a fusability which are entirely foreign to incommunicable persons, it is not suited to be the body of the person; only when it gains a greater stability and unity as this organism, or, in other words, a greater individuality, a stronger incommunicability, does it become matter

capable of being informed by a personal soul. To such an argument we respond that even the adult human body lags far behind the person with respect to indivisibility and unfusability. Consider the partially fused bodies of grown Siamese twins; there is no comparable partial fusion on the level of personhood; the bodies show a lack of inner unity which is impossible with persons. And yet no one doubts that the partially fused bodies are the bodies of persons who are not in the same way partially fused.

But we can make our point just as well by referring to completely normal human bodies. Every such body has a genetic "duplicability" and is in fact genetically duplicated whenever it has an identical twin; but each person is so incommunicably himself as to exclude absolutely any such duplication of himself. There cannot be two copies of the same person as there are two copies of the same body. If, then, the bodies of adult persons are, with respect to incommunicable being, much weaker than the persons themselves, why may not even the zygote be the body of a person? We grant that the discrepancy with respect to individuality is greater between zygote and person than between adult human body and person, but where is the evidence that this greater discrepancy is so great as to render the zygote strictly incapable of being the body of a person?

There is, then, nothing in the human person as person which prevents the zygote from being a person, nor is there anything in the zygote which prevents the zygote from being a person. In this double approach we claim to establish the possibility of the embryo being a person even in its earliest form.

7. The necessity of assuming that the human embryo is a person: the embodiment of the human person

The argument proceeds simply by recalling how the human embryo is related to the full-grown human body which develops from it; it becomes this body while remaining the same organism. Few deny that the zygote – in contrast to the haploid gametes from which the zygote derives – is, as organism, identical with the fully developed human body, differing only as to stage of development. Is it not natural to assume, and indeed to assume as the most natural assumption which we can make in this matter, that I, who now live and act as an incarnate person, began to exist when my body began to exist?

Let my discussion partner beware of making the so plausible objection based on the recent discussion of brain death; with such a

move he is likely to commit a *petitio principii*. I refer to the objection that when the physical basis for consciousness has been irreversibly destroyed, the person must be gone, even if the body remains alive; and that if bodily death and personal death do not coincide, then neither must conception and the beginning of a new person coincide. But at the beginning of this argument one commonly assumes the very reduction of the person to personal consciousness which I have been arguing against. For why does one see evidence of the death of the person in the destruction of the organ on which consciousness is based? Commonly for no other reason than that one sees nothing more in the person than consciousness. Current opinions on brain death, then, which posit living human bodies which are not persons, far from constituting an objection to my position, are (many of them, at least) called into question if my argument is successful.

The most serious challenge to assuming that the embryo is a person does not come from the discussion on brain death; it comes, instead, from a certain dualism of person and body, which I would characterize as follows.

Those who make much of the personhood of human beings often see the body as something purely biological, they see it as purely factual, devoid of values and immanent norms, and they are quick to decry the "physicalism" or the "biologism" of those who claim to find such values and norms. They see the body as raw material whose only reason for being is to serve the intentions and projects of the person who owns it. Of course it need not serve only as an instrument, it can also serve by embodying meanings which persons confer on it. Thus for example sexual union may mean committed love, or it may mean light entertainment; it means just as much, neither more nor less, than consenting men and women make it to mean. Sometimes one adds that this work of subjecting the body to the person is important not only for executing the intentions of persons but also for developing the freedom of the person. One says that the "resistance" which the body offers to the person provides exactly the frame of reference which human freedom needs in order to exercise itself. But even here the body remains an object for the person, and it is not thought to participate in any way in the subjectivity of the person. What we have here is a new kind of dualism, entirely different from the Platonic or the Cartesian dualism of soul and body; it is a dualism which in no way needs a metaphysics of a substantial spirit, it can perfectly well thrive as dualism on a materialistic basis.

It seems to me that Engelhardt consistently holds, not indeed

other dualisms, but something like this dualism. He certainly knows nothing of a substantial spirit, and could hardly be suspected of a Platonic dualism; what he says about the relation of consciousness and the brain would not usually be called dualistic in any sense of the term; many of his best insights into mind-body would be called anti-dualistic in various senses. And yet a recent author, referring explicitly to Engelhardt's understanding of personhood, has good reason for saying: "Perhaps we have not fully exorcised from our thinking the ghost in the machine – the idea that the body is only a vehicle for what really counts, the free, rational spirit."⁶ If the reader will bear in mind the sense of dualism just sketched out, he will, I think, find it in the following words of Engelhardt, as well as in many other places in his writings:

Human reproduction becomes the object of the intervention of persons because human biology imposes mere factual constraints while persons plan and aspire to goals and purposes that may be realizable only in part through the biological means at hand. There is a recurring tension between humans as persons, as planning, aspiring entities, and humans as bodies, as individuals possessing the idiosyncratic deliverances of a particular biological past. Self-conscious, rational reflection thus engenders an instructive dualism of object and subject. The human body is experienced as an object that only imperfectly embodies the goals of persons.⁷

What concerns us in the present study is that, on this dualist view, one finds little reason to suppose that the person is present in his or her body before we are forced to recognize the person acting in it. For before he or she begins acting, what sense or meaning is there in the person being present in that which is nothing but raw material for his or her acting?⁸

But not all philosophers of the human person hold this dualism. Even when one thinks that personhood is the most important thing about human beings, one still some-times finds, as I find, that the person lives in his body in such a way as to make the dualism untenable. One begins by distinguishing between the relation of the person to his or her brain, and the relation of the person to his or her "lived body." One admits that it is a largely instrumental relation which the person has to this brain, and that the person cannot well be said to "dwell" in his brain, to be embodied in it, to incorporate it into

his or her subjectivity. But one says that these very things can be affirmed of the person in his relation to the lived body, which is an entirely different relation. One observes that the lived body of the person can, in the most various ways, become transparent to the inner life of the person, become a kind of medium in which the stances and attitudes of the person appear, as when the despair or peace which lives in the person is expressed bodily. In all such expressions the body ceases to be a mere object for the person; it is so drawn into subjectivity as to become subjectivized, personalized.

One also observes that there are many aspects of the lived body which cannot even be understood for what they are without constant reference to the existence of the person. Thus the sexuality of the person is so closely linked with all that is intimate in the person that it is distorted if treated as if it were something only physical; it is what it is only in relation to the most intimate existence of the person. When one goes to try to find "natural" norms for sexual behavior, one need not be committing the naturalistic fallacy; one may be performing the eminently "personalist" task of trying to understand the way in which the subjectivity of the person sinks roots into the bodily being of the person, or, as we could as well say, of the way in which the intimate existence of the person is embodied in his sexuality, rendered concrete by it, and in fact enriched with a fullness which it would have otherwise lacked. And there are many other ways of approaching the unity of the person with his body,^{vi} as by showing how sense perception can function as a kind of medium (and hence as more than an instrument) in which various forms of intellectual understanding can be actualized.

But perhaps I have said enough to convey an idea of the alternative to dualism which many personalist philosophers hold, myself included, even though I cannot explain and defend it adequately in the present essay.

In my opinion one has neglected this whole issue in discussions of the status of the human embryo. One has overlooked what a large role one's position on the relation of the person to his or her body plays in one's interpretation of the embryo. If the awakened and self-possessing person really is embodied in the lived body, so that the body becomes a kind of extension of the person's subjectivity and an expression of it; if the person not only incorporates his body into his or her personal existence, but is already incorporated into it, then it may well be (indeed, it would make eminent human sense if it were so) that the person was already present in his or her body from its beginning and throughout all the stages of its development. The

personhood of the human embryo, then, and indeed of the human zygote, is far more than an abstract possibility; and while I do not claim to be able to prove it strictly, I do claim that, given an adequate personalism, it is a very reasonable assumption to make about the status of the embryo, and in fact more reasonable than any other assumption which we might make.^{vii}

The fact that my analysis falls short of a proof is more noticeable in our theoretical than in our moral reasoning. Though the knowledge which we can in fact gain is only partial, our duty to respect the embryo and to abstain from violence against it, is not similarly partial. We can know, not indeed all that we want to know about the embryo, but enough to have the same strong duties towards it which we have towards other human beings whose personhood is self-evident. One would think that if "the most reasonable assumption which we can make" is that the embryo is a person, then we have almost the same duties towards it which we would have had if we had been able to gain the most perfect knowledge about the personhood of the embryo.

8. Conclusion

Since an analysis like the present one inevitably takes on a considerable complexity, I want to conclude by trying to display the simplicity of my argument. I claim that my analysis just articulates what every plain human being instinctively thinks about the embryo as long as he or she fulfills certain conditions. One has to think about it sine ira et studio and be free of the pressure of any particular interest in having an abortion, or providing one, or performing experimentation on embryos; one must also not be corrupted by a certain subjectivism, and must not be estranged from one's body in the sense of the dualism just discussed. Then it comes natural to say: "I am at present embodied in my body in such a way that I have to assume that I was present in it from its very beginning, even before I awoke to consciousness; for I know that there is more to myself as person than my consciousness."

NOTES

i. Stephen Schwarz, The Moral Question of Abortion (Chicago: Loyola UP, 1990) 94.

ii. E.g., H. T. Engelhardt, The Foundations of Bioethics (NY & Oxford; Oxford UP, 1986) 109: "Persons are persons when they have the characteristics of persons, when they are self-conscious, rational, and in possession of a minimal moral sense." Another example, R. Pucetti, "The Life of a Person" in W. B. Bondeson et al. (eds.), Abortion and the Status of the Fetus (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1984), 169-182 at 170: "How vain it seems to extend personhood beyond the loss of a capacity for conscious experience, and equally so to thrust it back in time to a stage of organic life before that capacity existed." It is easy to multiply examples from the literature; the difficulty is to find authors who dissent from this thesis.

iii. H. T. Engelhardt, "The Ontology of Abortion" in Ethics (1974) 217-234 at 228. See also his "Ontology and Ontogeny" in The Monist (January 1977) 16-28.

iv. Gilbert Meilaender, "Abortion: the Right to an Argument" in Hastings Center Report (Nov.-Dec. 1988) 13-16 at 15.

v. H. T. Engelhardt (1986) 239. See ch. 9 passim. The onesidedly male character of this dualism has often been noticed, as by Max Scheler [in "Zum Sinn der Frauenbewegung" in Vom Umsturz der Werte (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1955) 205-6, my translation] when he says: "Compared to the way in which a woman experiences her own body -- how she experiences herself in it -- a man keeps his body at such a distance as to treat it as a dog on a leash." This is not a bad image for Engelhardt's understanding of the relation of the person to his body. Feminist philosophers who want to gain the insights which are as it were "connatural" to them as women (though valid for all human beings), should treat this dualism with suspicion and rethink the whole question of the embodiment of the human person. Sometimes they are so eager, under the pressure of certain feminist agendas, to justify ethical positions which in fact presuppose this dualism, that they remain oblivious to the way in which they thereby take over and perpetuate a fragmented understanding of human nature which is profoundly foreign to their womanhood.

vi. On some of these others see J. Seifert, Leib und Seele (Salzburg: Pustet Verlag, 1973), Ch. 2, esp. pp. 233-47, 251-56, 313-323.

vii. To the extent that thinkers succeed in doing greater justice to this unity of the person and his or her body, they will, I think, find it difficult to separate the death of the human organism from personal death. In other words, further investigation would show that it is not only my discussion of the irreducibility of the person to consciousness but also my discussion of the unity of person and body which challenges the dominant opinion on brain death in relation to personal death.