

Is the foetus a part of the mother's body?

1. How to understand the question

I've put my question in this form because it sounds like the most ordinary and naive question in the vicinity--the sort of thing a nonspecialist might ask. But we might also ask whether the foetus is a part of the mother. Or whether the foetus is a part of the maternal organism. It's not immediately obvious whether these are three different ways of asking the same question or whether they are three different questions. For that matter, we can ask whether the foetus's body is a part of the mother's body, or of the mother, or of the maternal organism; and we can ask analogous questions about the foetal organism. That makes nine questions that may or may not be different.

If the mother (the person), the mother's body, and the maternal organism are the same thing, then the foetus, the foetus' body, and the foetal organism will also be the same thing, and all nine questions will be equivalent (in the sense that they all ask whether the same relation holds between the same two entities). But most philosophers seem to think that human people are not organisms: the literature on personal identity is full of claims that are plainly inconsistent with this. If they're right, the mother is not the same entity as the maternal organism. And although it's not very clear what it means to say that a person is identical to her body, most philosophers seem to think the statement is false. (How widespread the belief is that someone's body is an organism--that the maternal organism is the mother's body--is hard to say.)

So according to the dominant view, the nine questions are not equivalent. It's not even clear whether they all have the same answer. Many philosophers take us to be things that couldn't possibly have a foetus (or a foetus' body, or a foetal organism) as a part. E.g. there is the Cartesian view that we are simple immaterial substances and the Humean view that we are bundles of perceptions--that is, things composed entirely of mental states and events. And there is the view that we are brains, or parts of brains, recently advocated by Parfit and others. Obviously a foetus could not be a part of a brain or a bundle of perceptions; and a simple immaterial substance has no parts at all. And if the mother is a bundle of perceptions or an immaterial substance, then so is the foetus--that is, the entity that stands to the foetal organism as the maternal person stands to the maternal organism. And a foetal bundle of perceptions or immaterial substance obviously could not be a part of any maternal entity. On these views, the question of whether the foetus (or any other foetal entity) is a part of the mother is uninteresting.

But even if the mother is an immaterial substance or a brain, and the foetus is too, we can ask whether the foetus' body is a part of the mother's body. That question remains interesting: the answer is not obvious. But the question is not very satisfactory, because it's not clear what it means. It's not clear until we know what it is for something to be someone's body. Until we know what object Agatha's

body is, we won't understand the question of whether, were Agatha to become pregnant, the foetus or anything else would be a part of her body. (Nor would we understand the question of whether the foetus' body would be a part of anything.)

Ideally, the way to find out what object someone's body is would be to deduce it from a definition of the phrase 'x is y's body': something analogous to the definition 'x is y's aunt =df x is a sister of a parent of y or x is a wife of sibling of a parent of y'. This is a very difficult task. I have never seen a definition of 'x is y's body' that is consistent with the things philosophers want to say about people and their bodies.

But maybe we can say something useful that falls short of a definition. Maybe a person's body is normally a biological organism. Or at any rate a person's body is the same size as a certain organism. We don't need to know whether my body is this organism, as long as neither is any larger than the other and they are composed of the same matter. We also don't need to know whether it's necessarily true, or even whether it is in fact always the case, that a person's body is the same size as the organism associated with that person. Maybe a prosthetic hand could be a part of someone's body. Philosophers often say that technological advances could enable a person to have a partly or even wholly inorganic body. I doubt whether a biological organism could be partly or wholly inorganic. But we can ignore this point in the present context: even if Agatha's prosthetic hand is a part of her body but not a part of any organism, the foetus' body will be a part of Agatha's body if and only if it is a part of the organism associated with her. And likewise, the foetal organism will be a part of the maternal organism (or the mother's body) if and only if the foetus' body is a part of the maternal organism (or the mother's body).

So I propose the following idealizing assumptions:

- The foetal organism is a part of the mother's body iff it is a part of the maternal organism.
- The foetus' body is a part of the maternal organism iff the foetal organism is a part of the maternal organism.

If these are true, we can ignore the difference, if there is any, between the mother's body and the maternal organism, and between the foetus's body and the foetal organism. The interesting question, then, is whether the foetal organism is a part of the maternal organism. Precisely analogous questions arise for other mammals. And I take it that all these questions have the same answer: a human foetal organism is a part of the maternal organism if and only if the same is true for other mammalian foetuses.

I will henceforth abbreviate 'the foetal organism' as 'the foetus'.

2. Does the question have a straightforward answer?

Does the question have an unequivocal answer? Is there, so to speak, a hard fact here to be discovered? Or is the answer relative to context in which the

question is asked? Could it be that the foetus is a part of the maternal organism in one sense not in some other, equally legitimate sense--and no 'privileged' sense trumps the others?

Well, what could these different senses be? Senses of what? I suppose they must be different senses of 'organism'. The thought is that there are two different concepts of organism, which differ over what makes something a part of an organism. (In my experience, the attempts to define 'organism' on the part of philosophers of biology typically tell us nothing about what determines an organism's spatial parts or boundaries. But suppose we had such an account.) One organism-concept entails looser and more inclusive standards for parthood than the other. So although both concepts count my left hand among the parts of this organism and neither counts my left shoe, they differ over whether a foetus can be a part of a pregnant organism. (Maybe the two criteria of organism-parthood agree in other cases; maybe they don't.) What's more, there are objects in the world satisfying each organism-concept: there are both 'large' organisms and 'small' ones.

So two different objects are equally good candidates for being the maternal organism, one having the foetus as a part and the other not. We might call them the large mother and the small mother. (There may be further candidates as well, but we can ignore them.) Is the foetus a part of the maternal organism, then? Well, if we mean the large mother, the answer is Yes; if we mean the small mother, the answer is No. It may be that when we speak of 'the mother' or 'the maternal organism' we sometimes mean the large mother and sometimes the small mother, depending on the context in which the discussion takes place. Or maybe the context doesn't usually suffice to disambiguate the terms and there is indeterminacy of reference. Call this the pluralist proposal.

(I don't think anyone would say that there is just one organism there, and the foetus is a part of it in one sense of the word 'part' and not a part of it in another sense of the word 'part'. Not, anyway, unless there is a single, 'absolute', broadest sense of parthood that includes a thing's parts in the other senses. No one would say that the mass and volume of a material object is relative to the context of utterance.)

The pluralist proposal is metaphysically controversial. It says there are two maternal organisms corresponding to each pregnant woman. Were there two such organisms before she got pregnant? Presumably so--unless one of them came into being (or changed from a nonorganism to an organism) when she got pregnant. So both the large mother and the small mother existed before the pregnancy. At that time they had all the same parts. Presumably they were then physically identical, though numerically distinct. So the same matter can compose distinct material things at the same time.

Further, when they got pregnant, the foetus became a part of one of them but not the other. One of them got bigger by acquiring another organism as a part; the

other one did not get bigger, but came to contain another organism in a cavity within it. This is a metaphysical claim of great interest. Suppose we ask why one of the two beings gets bigger and the other one not. No physical difference can account for this difference in their behaviour, as there is none. We have physically identical objects, in identical circumstances, behaving in different ways. And that they behave in different ways is no matter of chance. If it were a matter of chance which go bigger, then if the mother got pregnant a second time, it might be the small mother that got bigger and the big mother that stayed the same size. I don't suppose anyone would want to say that. Surely, in the second pregnancy the large mother would get bigger again and the small mother would not. For that matter, if it were a matter of chance whether an organism acquired the foetus as a part, it would be possible for both organisms to do so at once. The large mother has to have a dispositional property that the small mother lacks, namely the capacity to acquire a foetus as a part when pregnant. The two beings differed in this respect even before they got pregnant. Since they were physically identical then, their behaviour was affected by nonphysical properties. In fact they are properties that do not supervene even weakly on their physical properties: it's possible for beings with the same physical properties to differ in respect of their capacity to acquire parts.

Their getting pregnant later does not cause the two organisms to have or lack these dispositions at earlier times. So presumably they would differ in this way even if they never got pregnant, and remained physically identical and had the same proper parts throughout their existence: even then the 'large organism' would be distinct from the 'small organism,' and they would differ in their nonphysical properties. Why one of the two organisms has the capacity to acquire a foetus as a part and the other lacks this capacity would be a mystery.

They may also differ in other ways. For example, they might differ in their mental properties. Maybe the large mother is rational and intelligent and the small mother is not. Or vice versa. (This would be no more outrageous than the widely held view that a human person is rational and intelligent but a person's body is not, though the two objects are physically indistinguishable.) This could have ethical implications. One of the reasons we wanted to know whether the foetus is a part of the mother's body is the light this might shed on ethical questions about the moral status of the foetus and how bad it would be to kill it. A being without rationality or intelligence is not a moral agent. And maybe a moral agent has certain rights over parts of her that she doesn't have over things that are not parts of her. So if the large mother is a moral agent and the small mother is not, that might make abortion permissible in certain circumstances where it would not be permissible if the small mother were a moral agent. (This shows that the pluralist proposal need not make the question of whether the foetus is a part of the mother's body uninteresting or merely verbal.)

The pluralist proposal would be less interesting if it were combined with an

ontology of temporal parts. On that view, the large mother and the small one differ only in the extent of their temporal parts located during their pregnancy: the temporal parts of the foetus are parts of the large mother's temporal parts located then and not parts of the small mother's temporal parts located then. The large mother simply occupies a larger spacetime region than the small mother. This is not because they have different dispositional properties. If we ask why the foetus becomes a part of one of them but not the other--why one of them gets bigger and the other stays the same size--there is no answer. We simply use term 'the large mother' to refer to the larger aggregate of stages, and the term 'small mother' to refer to the smaller aggregate. Asking why the small mother doesn't gain a new part at conception is like asking why June has only 30 days and doesn't extend into July.

In this case, the question of whether the foetus is a part of the mother's body really is a verbal one. There are two candidates for being the mother's body, and they differ only in whether the foetus is a part of them (or more precisely whether the foetus's intrauterine stages are parts of the mother's pregnant stages) and the properties that follow from this. So it makes no difference to anything else which candidate we take to be the referent of the phrase 'the mother's body'. The question becomes metaphysically uninteresting. It also loses its ethical interest. Again, one of the reasons we wanted to know whether the foetus is a part of the mother's body is the light this might shed on ethical questions about the moral status of the foetus and how bad it would be to kill it. But the answer to a verbal question cannot help to answer something that is not a verbal question; and ethical questions about abortion are not verbal questions.

If anything, the temporal-parts ontology will make the ethical questions harder to answer. It says there are two candidates for being the mother's body that differ only in whether the foetus is a part of it. Both these candidates will presumably be rational and intelligent, and be moral agents. (I say 'presumably' because temporal-parts theorists may say that the only intelligent beings are brains or bundles of perceptions or even immaterial substances. This is the view of Hudson....) If the foetus's being a part of a moral agent gives her certain rights over it, then the 'large agent' will have these rights and the 'small agent' will not. Suppose, crudely, that it's morally permissible for an agent to have an abortion in certain circumstances if and only if the foetus is a part of her. Then it will be OK for the large agent to have an abortion but not OK for the small agent. Yet any action performed by the large agent must be performed by the small agent as well. They can't perform different actions. It looks as if the same action would be both right and wrong.

3. Where to look for an answer

What if the pluralist proposal is wrong, and there aren't two candidates for being the mother's body, one having the foetus as a part and the other not?

Again, the question of whether the foetus is a part of the maternal organism is a special case of the question of whether anything is a part of the maternal organism. It depends on what makes something a part of a female human organism. And I suppose this is the same as what makes something a part of any organism, or at least any higher animal. How should one go about trying to answer this question? What sort of considerations would bear on it?

As I said, the things philosophers of biology say about organisms are often unhelpful. Wilson, for instance, says that an organism is a material object that

- (a) is living during at least some of its existence,
- (b) is part of a reproductive lineage, some of whose members can have an intergenerational life cycle, and
- (c) has a certain sort of functional autonomy (while it's living).

Whatever its merits, this has no obvious implications about what determines the parts or boundaries of an organism.

Van Inwagen follows Locke (who is in turn influenced by Aristotle) in saying that an organism is something that has a life. And something is a part of an organism (at a time) just if its activity (at that time) is caught up in that organism's life. An organism extends just as far, in space, as its life extends. What is a life? It's a self-organizing biological event that maintains the organism's complex internal structure (Olson 2007: 28). The materials organisms are made up of are intrinsically unstable, and need constant repair and renewal, else the organism dies and its remains decay. A life constantly takes in new particles, reconfigures and assimilates them into the organism's living fabric, and expels those that are no longer useful to it. An organism's life enables it to persist and retain its characteristic structure despite constant material turnover.

This implies that the foetus is a part of the maternal organism just if it is caught up in the mother's biological life. That life extends outwards as far as the surface of the skin. The answer to our question depends on whether it extends inwards to incorporate the contents of the uterus.

I think this is all compatible with most of things philosophers of biology want to say. (Do correct me if I'm wrong.) The question, I suppose, is whether it's helpful. Does it provide any reason to suppose that the foetus is or is not a part of the mother? Or would it provide any such reason in conjunction with certain empirical facts from embryology? Does it tell us anything about where to look for the answer?

The foetus, of course, has a life of its own. It's an organism. It has its own closed circulatory system, its own metabolic rate, its own immune system, and so on. It can die at a different time from the mother. I don't think this is controversial. (Its life probably extends into the umbilical cord and those parts of the placenta that are served by the foetal blood supply--beyond what the layman would call 'the

foetus'--though the precise extent of its boundaries is not important in the present context.) But this fact is not decisive on its own. I can't see any good reason to suppose that one organism can never be a part of another organism. (Some people think it follows from Aristotle's claim that organisms are substances. This would be an important argument for a 'no' answer to our question. But both the inference and the premise are disputable.)

It's also clear that the foetus is located within the maternal organism, or at least within its outer boundary. But this fact is also not decisive. If I swallow a stone, it will lie within the organism's outer boundaries. Whether it lies properly within the organism depends on whether the organism is located where the stone is, or whether the organism has certain cavities within it where it's not located. Maybe the gut is such a cavity. A swallowed stone is, strictly speaking, a part of the organism's environment. Maybe the same is true for a bullet lodged within muscle tissue. In any event, being located within an organism's outer boundary does not suffice for it to be a part of the organism. The swallowed stone, the embedded bullet, and cosmic rays passing briefly through the organism are counterexamples.

An organism can also be located within a larger organism's outer boundaries without being a part of it: Jonah was never a part of the whale that swallowed him. Or think of a parasite: a tapeworm or a liver fluke. Or gut bacteria. (Maybe it's disputed whether gut bacteria are parts of the host organism.)

Van Inwagen says that a smaller organism is a part of a larger one if its life is subordinate to that of the larger one in something like the way that the Southampton city council is subordinate to the Government in Westminster. He says that the cells of a complex organism have lives of their own. Indeed, he thinks they are organisms. This further claim is controversial; but I don't think it's controversial that somatic cells have their own lives. Their lives are subordinate to the life of the organism of which they are parts. The activities that make up the life of an individual cell are directed by the larger organism's life, just as the activities of the organs are directed by the organism's life. The cells take their orders, so to speak, from the larger organism. They have some autonomy, just as the city council does, but they're not autonomous in the way that independent organisms are.

If this is right, it tells us something about where to look for an answer to our question. It says that the foetus is a part of the maternal organism just if the foetal life is subordinate to the maternal life: if the foetus takes its orders from the maternal organism in the way that the mother's cells and organs do. If the foetal life is not subordinate--if it's like a parasite or a gut bacterium--then the foetus is not a part of the maternal organism. It may not be obvious whether the foetal life is subordinate to the maternal life in this way. That may be because the interactions between foetus and mother are many and complex and it's not clear to what extent the foetal life is autonomous. Or it may be because the very idea of a biological life, or of one life's being subordinate to another, is not clear enough to enable us to

work out what embryological facts would bear on the question.

At any rate, van Inwagen's proposal implies that the foetus is a part of the maternal organism just if it relates physiologically to that organism like the maternal cells and organs do, and not like parasites and gut bacteria do. That sounds like progress, even if it doesn't settle the question.

If van Inwagen's proposal is unhelpful or even wrong, we will need to look elsewhere. What we need is another account of what makes something a part of an animal. I don't know of any such account. Or at least none that is helpful. Here is an example of an unhelpful account: something is a part of an organism just if its location is a subregion of the region occupied by the organism. Even if this is true, which is doubtful, it's unhelpful because it tells us nothing about what determines the region an organism occupies. It simply replaces a question about an organism's parts with a question about its location that is no easier to answer.