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Author(s): Lynne Rudder Baker

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# What Am I?

LYNNE RUDDER BAKER

*University of Massachusetts/Amherst*

Eric T. Olson has argued that any view of personal identity in terms of psychological continuity has a consequence that he considers untenable—namely, that he was never an early-term fetus. I have several replies. First, the psychological-continuity view of personal identity does not entail the putative consequence; the appearance to the contrary depends on not distinguishing between *de re* and *de dicto* theses. Second, the putative consequence is not untenable anyway; the appearance to the contrary depends on not taking seriously an idea that underlies a plausible view of persons that I call ‘the Constitution View.’ Finally, Olson’s own “Biological View of personal identity” has liabilities of its own.

In a recent article, “Was I Ever a Fetus?”, Eric T. Olson contends, “I started out as an unthinking embryo, and if things go badly I may end up as a human vegetable—as long as my biological life continues. We might call this the Biological View of personal identity.”<sup>1</sup> His Biological View is explicitly anti-psychological: “psychology is completely irrelevant to personal identity.” (97) To motivate his anti-psychological construal of personal identity, Olson attacks a psychological alternative that he calls ‘the Standard View of personal identity,’ a generic psychological account according to which

what it takes for us to persist through time is some sort of psychological continuity. I shall exist at some time in the future (the Standard View says) only if I can then remember some present experience of mine, or if I am then connected with myself as I am now by an overlapping chain of memories or by a chain of psychological connections of some other sort (or perhaps by continuity of mental capacities).<sup>2</sup>

Attributing this psychological-continuity view to Nagel, Unger, Grice, Lewis, Noonan, Parfit, Perry, Quinton, Shoemaker and Wiggins, Olson

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<sup>1</sup> Eric T. Olson, “Was I Ever a Fetus?” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 57 (1997): 106. Olson refers the reader to Peter van Inwagen, *Material Beings* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990) for a more detailed statement. Subsequent references to Olson’s article will be given in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Olson, 95. It is circular to refer to myself at a future time (“only if I can then remember...”) in the formulation of the criterion for my existing at that future time. But the reference to myself in the future can be eliminated.

attacks it as having an untenable consequence. The untenable consequence, he claims, is that I never was an early-term fetus.<sup>3</sup>

My argument has two parts. First, I shall argue that the psychological-continuity view does not entail that I never was an early-term fetus; hence Olson's arguments miss their mark. Second, I shall argue, more controversially, that the thesis that I never was an early-term fetus is not only benign, but also part of a plausible account of persons. Finally, I shall point out some liabilities of Olson's Biological View.

### Olson's Argument

Olson's argument that the Standard View implies that I was never a fetus may be reconstructed as follows:

- (1) If *x* is a person now, then anything in the past or future that is identical to *x* is psychologically continuous with *x* now. (Olson's construal of psychological-continuity views.)
  - (2) Anything that is psychologically continuous with *x* now has psychological contents or capacities.
  - (3) No early-term fetus has psychological contents or capacities.
- ∴ (4) If *x* is a person now, then nothing that was an early-term fetus is identical to *x*.

So, according to this argument, "no person was ever a fetus, and no fetus ever becomes a person."

But the argument misfires. For a psychological-continuity view of personal identity need not entail (1).<sup>4</sup> Olson assumes that his target philosophers hold that anything to which I am identical must at all times be psychologically continuous with me now. But Olson overlooks the possibility that I, who am now a person, may exist at some other time without being a person; in that case, even if the psychological-continuity view were correct, there would be no psychological continuity between me now (when I am a person) and me at some other time (when I am not a person).

The problem is apparent in premise (1). For the target philosophers are only committed to the *de dicto* thesis:

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<sup>3</sup> See Olson, 97, 98, notes 3 and 4. Olson's considerations only concern fetuses under six months.

<sup>4</sup> I say "need not entail," because the Standard View is a generic view that Olson attributes to a wide range of philosophers, who disagree among themselves in many ways. I am concerned with what the Standard View (as formulated by Olson) commits its proponents to, not with what they actually hold.

(A) Necessarily, if x is a person, then x has psychological properties.

But premise (1) would commit them to the *de re* thesis:

(B) If x is a person, then x necessarily has psychological properties.

Clearly one can be committed to (A) without being committed to (B). Proponents of psychological-continuity views need only the *de dicto* (A). In that case, being a person would be like being a wife. Necessarily, if x is a wife, then x is married. But the *de re* modality does not follow: it does not follow that if x is a wife, then x is necessarily married. I am a wife; but I could exist (in fact, I did so exist for over two decades) without being married. If proponents of the psychological-continuity view construe *being a person* as logically on a par with *being a wife*, then they would endorse (A) and reject (B). And if Olson's target philosophers rejected (B), then they would also reject (1).

The reason that philosophers who reject (B) would reject (1) is that (1) entails (B). If (1) is true, then x cannot exist without being a person. For if x could exist without being a person, then x (who is a person now) could be identical with something that at some other time is not a person. In that case, there need be no psychological continuity between x (who is a person now) and a future or past x (who at that time is not a person). So, if x could exist without being a person, then (1) would be false. That is, if (B) is false, then (1) is false.

In short, the target philosophers may hold that a person could not exist *as a person* without psychological properties (as (A) implies), without also holding that a person could not exist *simpliciter* without psychological properties (as (B) implies). In that case, they would not be committed to premise (1).

I think that Olson misconstrues his target because he does not distinguish between answers to two importantly different questions:

(a) What is a person?

(b) What am I most fundamentally?

A psychological criterion of personal identity is an answer to (a). But Olson assumes that a psychological criterion of personal identity is an answer to (b); otherwise, premise (1) is false. What I am most fundamentally determines the conditions for my future existence *simpliciter*; these conditions may or may not coincide with the conditions for my being a future person. For example, here is a theory that combines a psychological-continuity view of personal identity (answer to (a)) with the view that I am essentially an organism (answer to (b)):

(PI) (1) Necessarily, if  $t$  and  $t'$  are any two times at which I am a person, then my states at  $t$  are psychologically continuous with my states at  $t'$ ; and

(2) I am necessarily a human animal, but only contingently a person.

If a psychological-continuity view—such as (PI)(1)—is proposed as an answer only to (a) and not to (b), then its proponents will be committed to (A) but not (B). In that case, the psychological-continuity view will escape Olson's argument.

Moreover, when coupled with the fact that all human animals have early stages as fetuses that lack psychological properties, (PI) entails the *denial* of premise (1). So a psychological-continuity view of persons does not by itself commit its proponents to premise (1). Since premise (1) attributes to the target philosophers a view that they need not hold, Olson's argument misfires.

Although Olson's argument does not hit its intended target, I in fact do endorse the consequence that so alarms Olson: I never was an early-term fetus. So, I now want to defend the consequence that I was never an early-term fetus against Olson's arguments.

### The Constitution View

Elsewhere I defend what I call 'the Constitution View,' according to which persons are constituted by bodies without being identical to the bodies that constitute them.<sup>5</sup> (In the same way, a clay pot is constituted by a lump of clay but is not numerically identical to the lump of clay that constitutes it.)<sup>6</sup> Although the Constitution View is not a version of the psychological-continuity approach as Olson construes it, the Constitution View does hold that what makes a person a person are certain complex psychological properties that I call 'the first-person perspective.'<sup>7</sup> Thus, I am committed to (A). But also on the Constitution View, no person could exist without being a person.

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<sup>5</sup> An early version of the view appears in "Need a Christian Be a Mind/Body Dualist?" in *Faith and Philosophy* 12 (1995): 489–504. A fully developed view will be defended in a forthcoming book, tentatively entitled *What Am I? An Inquiry Concerning Persons and Bodies* (under contract with Cambridge University Press).

<sup>6</sup> There is a substantial body of literature on this issue. I defend my view on constitution in "Why Constitution is Not Identity" in *The Journal of Philosophy* 94 (1997): 599–621 and "Unity Without Identity: A New Look at Material Constitution" in *New Directions in Philosophy Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. 22, forthcoming. Versions of these will appear in *What Am I?*

<sup>7</sup> I spell this out in "The First-Person Perspective: A Test for Naturalism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1998): 327–48. The Constitution View does not construe personal identity as psychological continuity; hence it is not a species of the Standard View as Olson formulates it. However, on the Constitution View, I did not, and could not, exist without having psychological properties. Thus, the Constitution View is a rival to Olson's anti-psychological view of persons.

Thus, I am also committed to (B): I essentially have psychological properties. (So, I do not avail myself of the strategy suggested above for psychological-continuity views to elude Olson's arguments.)

That any person is essentially a person falls out of the idea of constitution. When a human organism develops to the point that it can support a first-person perspective, a new entity—a person—comes into existence. The human organism then constitutes the person. When the organism can no longer support a first-person perspective, then it no longer constitutes a person. And if something ceases to be a person, it ceases to be—even if the human organism that constituted the person continues to exist. So, on the Constitution View, what I am most fundamentally is a human person; and a human person is a being with a first-person perspective constituted (at least initially) by a human organism. That is, my answer to question (a) is also an answer to question (b).

Now Olson, in effect, argues for the following conditional:

If I essentially have psychological properties, then I am not numerically identical to something that ever was an early-term fetus.

I think that Olson's argument for the conditional is exactly right. But where he would perform a *modus tollens* on it, I would perform a *modus ponens*. For if I am not identical to my body, then from the fact that the organism that came to constitute me was once an early-term fetus, I need not—and do not—conclude that *I* was ever an early-term fetus. Indeed, on the Constitution View, if my mother had miscarried when she was five-months pregnant with the fetus that came to constitute me, I would never have existed. It's not that I would have had a brief life; rather, there would have been no *me* at all.

What the Constitution View denies is

(I) There is an *x* such that at *t* *x* was an embryo and now *x* is a developed human being and *I am identical to x*.

But there is no mystery on the Constitution View about the relation between me now and a certain embryo. For the Constitution View holds that

(II) There is an *x* such that at *t* *x* was an embryo and now *x* is a developed human being and *I am constituted by x* now,

where there is a detailed account of what the relation of constitution is.<sup>8</sup> The Constitution View has no "fetus problem," because it is perfectly clear what, on the Constitution View, the relation between me and a certain embryo is: I am constituted by something that was an embryo.

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<sup>8</sup> This account appears in "Unity Without Identity."

Olson takes denial of (I) to be lethal. He has three arguments for the claim that I am numerically identical to (not just constituted by) something that was once a fetus: an argument from embryology, an argument from common sense, and an argument from the “serious philosophical problems” with the thesis that I am not numerically identical to something that ever was an embryo. None of the arguments is persuasive.

*The Argument from Embryology:* According to Olson, we learn from embryology that I once had gill slits, which “entails that there was once something with gill slits and that I am (numerically identical with) that thing.”<sup>9</sup> Does embryology have any implications concerning the numerical identity of a person and something that once had gill slits? I do not think so. The domain of embryology is the human organism before birth; embryology says nothing about persons and entails nothing about the numerical identity of an embryo and me. It is equally consistent with embryology for me to be constituted by a human organism as it is for me to be identical to a human organism. Indeed, even substance dualism, according to which I never was a fetus, is consistent with embryology. Embryology is no help with the philosophical issue at hand.

*The Argument from Common Sense:* According to Olson common sense “tell[s] us quite plainly” that I am numerically identical with a fetus. (100) Of course it doesn’t. Common sense is not fined-grained enough to distinguish between x’s being identical to y and x’s being constituted by y. Olson says that “there does not *appear* to be any deep logical difference” between saying in the course of ordinary life that I was once an adolescent and saying in the ordinary course of life that I was once a fetus. (99–100) This assertion seems plainly false. We do, in the ordinary course of life, regard fetuses and adolescents as different kinds of things. From the point of view of common sense, there is a deep logical difference between being a fetus and being an adolescent. For example, in the late 17th century, Protestant Mary, wife of William of Orange, daughter of Catholic James II of England, and heir to the English throne, became pregnant. Many nonCatholics feared that she would finally have a son, who would be brought up as a Catholic. The birth of a son would alter the order of succession, and the temporary Catholic rule (of James II) might become permanent. Any male person of whom Mary was the mother would be a new heir. When Mary was five-months pregnant, there was no new heir, because there was at that time no new person. But if at the time that Mary was five-months pregnant, she had been the mother (and William the father) of an adolescent son, then there would have been a new person and a new heir; and the course of the British monarchy might well have taken a

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<sup>9</sup> Olson, 100.

different course.<sup>10</sup> So, I think that from the perspective of “common sense,” we do in fact regard a fetus as a different sort of entity from an adolescent.

*The Argument from “serious philosophical problems.”* Olson claims that there are serious philosophical problems with the thesis that I am not numerically identical to something that was ever an early-term fetus. (Indeed, Olson is so sure that this thesis is beset with difficulties that he labels the thesis “the fetus problem.”) Olson asks: If I am not numerically identical to something that was an early-term fetus, what happened to that early-term fetus when I came along? The answer of the Constitution View is: nothing; the organism continued to develop (and subsequently to decline) after it came to constitute a person. Here is a list of the alleged “serious philosophical problems” with this view, together with my replies:<sup>11</sup>

*Alleged problem #1:* “This [constitution] view entails that, although we are material beings, we are not human animals: we are not members of the species *Homo sapiens*.” (101) *Reply:* Of course, we are human animals. We are constituted by human animals, and when we say truly that we are human animals, we are using ‘is’ in the sense of constitution. We have our numerous biological properties in virtue of the fact that we are constituted by organisms.<sup>12</sup>

*Alleged problem #2:* The Constitution View makes it uncertain that you and I are people at all. “If you could be biologically indistinguishable from an organism without being an organism yourself, perhaps something could be psychologically just like a person without really being a person. If there are pseudo-organisms, indistinguishable from real organisms, there might also be pseudo-people, indistinguishable from real people.”<sup>13</sup> *Reply:* I am not a pseudo-organism; I am constituted by an organism. On the Constitution View, nothing could be “psychologically just like a person without being a person,” because to be psychologically just like a person is to be a person. When we say that an organism is a person, again, we are using the ‘is’ of constitution.

*Alleged problem #3:* “You think that you are a person. That animal thinks so too, and with the same justification; yet it is mistaken. In that case, how do you know *you* aren’t making the same mistake?” (102) *Reply:* Olson seems to think that if I am not numerically identical to my body, then my body and I are two wholly separate things. That is not my view. I, the per-

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<sup>10</sup> See Mark Kishlansky, *A Monarchy Transformed: Britain 1603–1714* (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Olson also mentions briefly an ontology of temporal parts, but I’ll leave four-dimensionalists to defend their own view.

<sup>12</sup> In “Unity Without Identity,” I work out the idea of borrowing properties in detail. A borrowed property is one that *x* has in virtue of its constitution-relations.

<sup>13</sup> Olson, 101. Olson says that if persons are distinct from organisms, then the human organism “appears to be just such a pseudo-person,” p. 102 This is an outrageous caricature: the organism constitutes a person.



son, am constituted by a certain animal. There are not two separate thoughts, by two separate thinkers, one of whom may be right and the other wrong. There is one thought—"I am a person"—by the person constituted by the organism.

*Alleged problem #4:* "You may doubt that the human animal that accompanies you, according to this [constitution] view, can think or speak English, even though it is a perfect duplicate of you as you are now. But no currently available theory of intentionality could accommodate this." (102) *Reply:* It is simply a caricature to saddle the Constitution View with speaking of "the human animal that accompanies you," or to say that it "is a perfect duplicate of you as you are now." My body is not a duplicate of me; it constitutes me—in as clear a sense as that in which a piece of granite constitutes the Vietnam Memorial in Washington. If that piece of granite had remained in the quarry, then it would not have constituted the Vietnam Memorial. Hence, constitution is not identity. Nonetheless, the Vietnam Memorial is not something separate from that piece of granite.

So, what Olson calls "the fetus problem" is, from the perspective of an independently-motivated Constitution View of persons, no problem at all. My not being identical to something that was a fetus follows from a central tenet of the Constitution View—namely, that I am not identical to the human organism that constitutes me.

### **The Biological View**

Whatever the merits of the Constitution View, I think that Olson's Biological View should be rejected. I have tried to show how there is no "fetus problem" on a number of views; and without "the fetus problem," Olson's view lacks motivation. Moreover, some philosophers will find the Biological View unacceptable in ruling out what many philosophers have supposed to be possibilities. For example, on the Biological View, my survival of replacement of my organic parts with nonorganic parts, or replacement of my whole body with a resurrection body, is a metaphysical impossibility.

The most serious difficulty, however, is that Olson's Biological View faces a dilemma. What is the relation between being a human organism and being a person? Olson does not say. But either to be a person simply *is* to be a human organism or to be a person is something more than simply to be a human organism. Suppose that Olson's view is that to be a person simply *is* to be a human organism. Considered as purely biological beings, human organisms are no more morally or ontologically significant than cockroaches or dinosaurs. To hold that to be a person simply is to be a human organism is to stipulate a meaning of 'person' that has no connection with the historical or contemporary use of the term.

On the other hand, suppose that Olson's view is that to be a person is something more than simply to be a human organism. In that case, the view

that he proposes is simply inadequate to the issue of personal identity. For since Olson says nothing about what it is to be a person, it is difficult to see how the Biological View is a view of *personal identity* at all (if being a person is more than just being a human organism). On this alternative, Olson's Biological View is a proposed answer to question (b). But since it is silent about question (a), it is not even in the running as a view of personal identity.

### **Conclusion**

I have argued for two conclusions: First, that Olson's arguments do not hit their intended targets; and second, that when an appropriate target (such as the Constitution View) is presented, the arguments have no force. I shall conclude simply by noting that the Constitution View gives a reason to regard human animals as morally significant in ways that other kinds of things are not: The moral significance of human animals is rooted in their ontological role of constituting persons.