

Personal Survival, Community, and Abortion

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Abstract

Even if one allows that a fetus is not a person one can still make a compelling argument against the morality of abortion. Though many arguments against abortion rely upon identifying the fetus as a person, there are serious reasons to think abortion immoral even if this identification is rejected. In this paper I explain the argument for concerning ourselves with personal survival rather than personal identity. I then show that the qualities this account recognizes as valuable in persons are qualities that are unlikely to be formed in those persons raised in communities that endorse abortion as an acceptable practice. Though it has been argued that furthering the ideal of individual autonomy requires, among other things, the acceptance of abortion, such acceptance actually works against this project. Building on accounts of self-consciousness developed by Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre, I argue that abortion as an accepted practice is wrong because of the effect such community acceptance has on those that are allowed to be born into a community.

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Even if one allows that a fetus is not a person one can still make a powerful argument against the morality of abortion. Though many arguments against abortion rely upon identifying a fetus as a person, there are serious reasons to think abortion immoral even if this identification is rejected.

It is now widely accepted that the solution to questions of personal identity through time has really to do with personal survival, not strict identity. This conclusion has, and ought to have, implications for our thinking about moral questions surrounding the beginning and end of life. I argue that though it may at first look as if having concluded that what matters to us in considering the morality of killing is personal survival, not personal identity, we should also conclude that abortion is permissible, the opposite is actually true. That is, even if we conclude that the fetus is not a person and does not have plans and goals for the future, a strong argument can be made against the morality of abortion.

In this paper I explain the argument for concerning ourselves with personal survival rather than personal identity. I then show that the qualities that this argument recognizes as valuable in persons are qualities that are unlikely to be formed in those persons raised in communities who endorse abortion as an acceptable practice. Though it has been argued that the furthering the ideal of individual autonomy requires, among other things, the acceptance of abortion, such acceptance actually works against this project.

In an essay titled “Identity, Killing, and the Boundaries of Our Existence,”¹ David DeGrazia addresses the problem of explaining personal identity across time and discusses

the relevance of potential solutions to this problem to the debate over the morality of abortion. DeGrazia follows Marya Schectman in building on Derek Parfit's influential work, Reasons and Persons², which in turn builds upon the Lockean tradition of tying personal identity to psychological, as opposed to physical, features of the self.

In the second book of his Essay³, Locke argues that personal identity through time is a matter of "nothing but the same continued life."⁴ Instead of explaining personal identity in terms of physical continuity, Locke explains personal identity in terms of what has been called "psychological continuity." He writes, "For it is by the consciousness it has of its present thoughts and Actions, that it is itself to itself now, and so will be the same self as far as the same consciousness can extend to Actions past or to come."⁵

In Reasons and Persons Parfit agrees that physical continuity is not necessary for personal survival.⁶ However, he suggests, contra Locke, that what really matters is not personal identity through time, but personal survival, and what accounts for this is not psychological *continuity*, as Locke posited, but psychological *connectedness*.⁷ Parfit argues that to say a person survives through time is not to say that a person maintains identity through time. The problem with Locke's view, as Parfit sees it, is that, strictly speaking, persons do not maintain psychological continuity through time. Accurately, Parfit notes that the "same consciousness" does not "extend to Actions past or to come." Memories of the past have different content than did our consciousness when the past was present. Simply put, we forget; our memories do not retain all of which we are conscious. Personal identity is "not always determinate."⁸ If psychological continuity were necessary for personal identity through time, none of us could truly claim to be the same person we were a year ago, or even yesterday.

However, if psychological connectedness is what is necessary for maintaining personal identity through time, many of us can claim accurately to be the same person we were last year. To be psychologically connected to past selves is to understand oneself in the present as sharing a history with past selves and as pursuing the goals and intentions of past selves. Parfit argues that our interest in survival is not a concern for remaining identical to one's present self but a concern for the realization of present intentions. The series of selves that make up a single life are not identical to each other, but are psychologically connected through time; they share history and projects and desires and intentions.

Marya Schechtman builds on Parfit's work by proposing that part of what is involved in being psychologically connected to a past or future self is understanding one's life as a story.⁹ This story requires other characters in order to be intelligible. "Our relationships contribute to the stability of our personalities and projects, and our projects and relationships can be as they are only because of our ability to evaluate and reflect upon ourselves."¹⁰ Just as the location of any point can only be understood in reference to other points, who we are to ourselves can only be understood in reference to others. That is, we understand our projects and ourselves in terms of our relation to others, i.e., those whom we love, those upon whom we depend, or who depend upon us, those with whom we interact and are committed. These people are the characters in the autobiographical narratives that are our lives.

David DeGrazia also recognizes the role of narrative in personal survival, writing, "My narrative identity is largely determined by my self-told story about my life (though other people figure in the story and shape the way I tell it to myself).¹¹ This narrative

includes projects for the future, projects DeGrazia calls “projects of self-creation.”¹² Our projects of self-creation are the foundation of our concern for the future. “Much of what matters (to most of us anyway) is our continuing existence as *persons*- beings with the capacity for complex forms of consciousness- with unfolding self-narratives and, if possible, success in self-creation.”¹³ Our interest and concern for the future and for our survival consists then, not simply in the preservation of our bodies, nor in the continued existence of some “further fact,” (i.e. a soul or spirit the existence of which is denied) as Parfit would call it, but in our goals for the future.

Having endorsed this explanation of personal survival, DeGrazia asks whether this theory can “illuminate the morality of abortion.”¹⁴ He thinks it can and he argues that it seems to entail the defeat of two of the stronger arguments against abortion. The first of these arguments concludes that abortion is immoral because the fetus is a person. Arguments to this end either rely on the premise that personal identity consists in physical continuity or the premise that there is some “further fact” (such as a soul) that explains personal identity, both of which are denied by the above account. According to the theory of personal survival DeGrazia endorses, though the fetus does have physical continuity with the person it later becomes, this continuity is not sufficient for considering the fetus a person and the existence of some further fact is denied.

However, a second persuasive argument, defended by Don Marquis, does not appeal to the personhood of the fetus, but rather to the value of the fetus’ possible futures. Marquis argues that the wrongness of killing a person lies in denying this person his/her future and that therefore killing a fetus is wrong because, even if a fetus is not a person, it will become a person and therefore has valuable possible futures. Yet, if it is not merely

the having of a future that is morally significant, but rather having concern and plans for this future that is morally significant, as DeGrazia contends, then Marquis' argument is defeated.

DeGrazia is concerned that, if Marquis' argument were true, it would follow that a greater wrong would be done in aborting a fetus than in taking the life of a healthy 20-year old because a fetus has a greater (in the sense of duration) possible future than the 20-year old. DeGrazia argues that a fetus may have a future with which it is connected physically, but not psychologically; therefore, abortion should be permitted, at least early in pregnancy.

I want to argue, however, that the account of personal identity defended by DeGrazia does not entail the permissibility of abortion. I do not disagree with the contention that this account of personal survival denies the personhood of a fetus. Nor do I want to deny that at least part of what makes killing a person wrong is that killing thwarts a person's project of self-creation. DeGrazia is right to follow Parfit and Schechtman in locating personal identity through time in psychological connectedness and personal narrative. However, I think DeGrazia does not give adequate attention to the givenness of narrative and the role of community in the formation of a personal narrative. Though he recognizes that "other people figure in [my self-told] story and shape the way I tell it to myself," he does not appreciate the full significance of the influence of these people on our self-told stories. Because of this he mistakenly concludes that accepting this theory of personal survival entails finding abortion to be morally permissible.

Initially it looks as if the value we place on individual autonomy and the projects and goals of the individual, in conjunction with the conclusion that the fetus is not person, should lead us to conclude that abortion is morally acceptable. Abortion allows a woman to have control over her life and to pursue the course she chooses. However, if we think carefully about the necessary conditions for individual autonomy, which according to John Rawls include things such as self-respect and a sense of self-worth, we can see that the practice of abortion actually works against our interests.

DeGrazia writes, “much of what matters (to most of us anyway) is our continuing existence *as persons* –beings with the capacity for complex forms of consciousness— with unfolding self-narratives and, if possible success in self-creation. But we cannot continue to exist as persons of any kind unless we continue to exist.”¹⁵ I understand DeGrazia to be similar in this respect to John Rawls who finds the right to life to be connected to the capacity for personal autonomy.¹⁶ Assuming this account of the wrongness of killing, DeGrazia is right to suspect that abortion, at least early in pregnancy, is not a violation of the rights of a fetus. However, given the significance of autonomy and possibility of success in self-creation in this account, the rights of the fetus, or lack thereof, are not all that must be considered in the discussion of the morality of abortion.

Building on accounts of self-consciousness developed by Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre, I will argue that abortion as an accepted practice is wrong because of the effect such community acceptance has on those that are allowed to be born into a community. This is because such a community would not foster the growth of autonomous selves. The language and practices of the community into which a person

emerges shape the self-conception of this emerging person. The practice of abortion and the language used to describe and justify this practice would affect negatively the development of autonomous persons with understandings of their own self-worth and inviolability as following from their status as rational autonomous beings.

Understanding oneself as an individual with the possibility of a project of self-creation is only made possible within the given context each person finds him/herself. Though it may be that a fetus is not conscious and has no plans for the future, it is nevertheless the case that, as MacIntyre has said, “we are all born with a past.”¹⁷ That is, however and whenever self-consciousness emerges in an individual, this individual can only understand him/herself within the context of the community or communities into which the individual is born. The individual becomes conscious of him/herself as a character in a story that precedes this particular individual’s existence.

Another way to understand this is to recognize that the “self-told story about my life” that determines my narrative identity, according to DeGrazia, must have some beginning, some starting place, and that though I might be able to tell my own story, and thus determine my own narrative identity, I cannot choose how and where the story begins. I am not responsible for the character that is me at the beginning of the story. This is relevant to the question of the morality of abortion because it raises concern for individuals born into communities in which abortion is a legitimate, serious option for pregnant women. In other words, we must consider how the recognition and promotion of abortion as a legitimate, serious option for pregnant women affects a community’s understanding and acceptance of those children born into the community.

Upon reaching maturity and an age of self-reflection, a person born into such a community can only understand his/her existence as being contingent upon the choice of his/her mother. Though we all may understand our existence to be contingent, there is a difference between understanding one's existence to be contingent upon biological chance and understanding one's existence to be contingent upon the choice of an individual or community. This difference has to do with how one understands oneself as a member of one's community. The former type of contingency is compatible with being welcomed unconditionally into one's community as a particular person, while the latter type of contingency entails being welcomed not as a particular, but rather for one's particular qualities or characteristics.¹⁸ This type of contingency, I will argue, would affect the individual's conception of self as such, that is, as an autonomous subject, instead of as object. It also undermines the recognition of value and moral worth of projects of self-creation as such.

The recognition of autonomy and self-creation as goods in and of themselves is not inevitable; that is, it is not something that can be expected to emerge in all persons, a coming of age of sorts.¹⁹ Rather, such a recognition requires a certain type of community narrative to be intelligible. As I will now argue, an understanding of the nature of the self, as well as a conception of the good, precede recognition of the self as such and are always already built into a person's narrative.

One essential component of psychological connectedness is intention and intention is necessary for self-creation. We are connected to our future selves through our intentions; part of what it means to recognize oneself as an individual self is to form and be conscious of our intentions for the future. However, the emergence of a self with

intentions entails a social setting. “We cannot... characterize behavior independently of intentions, and we cannot characterize intentions independently of the setting which makes those intentions intelligible both to agents themselves and others.”²⁰ We cannot understand actions as actions, as opposed to events, without attributing intention. That is, to describe something as an action is to describe it as being chosen by some agent. But there is no way for an action to be understood as the product of choice without some context within which the action is taken. “There is no such thing as ‘behavior’ to be identified prior to and independently of intentions, beliefs, and settings.”²¹

In order to choose one must have some basis for judging one alternative over another. Another way of saying this is that to be able to choose one must have some concept of the good. If intention is a necessary feature of a self, and if ability to choose is necessary for intention, then it follows that some having some concept of the good is necessary for self-hood. This is why Charles Taylor writes, “to know who you are is to be oriented in moral space,”²² and “we are selves only insofar as we have an orientation to the good.”²³

Because having some orientation to the good is necessary for choosing, it follows that the emerging self cannot choose its orientation to the good. The newly conscious self becomes aware of itself within the given moral framework of its community. Without the “moral particularities,”²⁴ as MacIntyre calls them, of the community in which one finds oneself, there “would be nowhere to begin” the search for defining the good for oneself. Taylor explains this by saying selves “only exist in a certain space of questions, through certain constitutive concerns.”²⁵ These questions and concerns are given to us;

that is, we come to be conscious of ourselves as individuals defined by these questions and concerns.

In addition to the givenness of the moral framework in which a self emerges, the possibility of an individual self coming to recognize him/herself as an individual self, that is, as an object and subject in the world, requires language and therefore requires community. Not only is it the case that the “self cannot be described without reference to those who surround it,”²⁶ but, as Wittgenstein explains, “a great deal of stage setting in the language is presupposed if the mere act of naming is to make sense.”²⁷ For the name “self” or any surrogate name to be meaningful to the individual, or, in other words, in order for the use of the word “I” to have any meaningful content to the self uttering it, some community language is necessary. Without this there would be no “criterion of correctness”²⁸ for the naming of self as self or for the use of the word “I.” Choosing to refer to oneself either in thought, or to others, requires some given criterion for the use of the word. What it means to be a “self,” then is given or established by the community in which the self emerges.

Thus, we can, at most, be co-authors of our own biographies. Both MacIntyre and Wittgenstein use the metaphor of a stage to explain the emergence of the self. To continue the metaphor, if our lives are a play, then we emerge on the stage mid-story, with the stage set and our character determined for us. Though it may be that at some point we take control of, and responsibility for, the direction of the play, nonetheless we can never be more than co-authors of our stories.

This is relevant to the question of the morality of abortion because if we consider autonomy and self-determination to be necessary for fully realized personhood we must

consider how a society's recognition of abortion as an endorsed and frequently chosen option for pregnant women affects the ability of those children not aborted to realize their potential as autonomous selves.

The reasons offered for having an abortion vary from concerns for the mother's health, her finances, career, and convenience, as well as the genetic characteristics of the fetus. Those children allowed to be born into a community that accepts such reasons for abortion must begin life with an understanding of their existence and worth as contingent upon their passing these tests. In other words, at some point it must become apparent to them that their existence is contingent upon their being convenient, or affordable, or presentable, that is, contingent upon their being desired for some particular quality or set of qualities they possess. Yet, this being the case is certainly not compatible with a society that seeks to value and respects persons as such. A society that finds moral worth in the self-creation projects of autonomous subjects, and not in some "further fact," such as a soul, cannot accept abortion as a legitimate option for pregnant women because the practice affects negatively the formation of human selves with the self-respect necessary to become autonomous, fully realized persons. The burden of being wanted for the benefits one brings, which benefits one brings accidentally and may at some point fail to bring, makes such formation unlikely. To take an extreme, but not unheard of example, if one is valued for one's potential to be a star quarterback one will not develop the understanding that any course in life one chooses is worthy of respect.²⁹

When Parfit addresses the question of the morality of abortion, he finds that it should be considered morally acceptable for any reasons in the early stages of a

pregnancy. As pregnancy progresses abortion becomes more morally problematic because the fetus is becoming more and more like a person, though it is not yet a person and is not psychologically connected to the person it will some day become. Parfit writes, "After being in no way wrong, it becomes a minor wrong-doing, which would be justified all things considered only *if the later birth of this child would be seriously worse*³⁰ *either for its parents or for other people* (emphasis added). As the organism becomes fully a human being, or a person, the minor wrong-doing changes into an act that would be seriously wrong."³¹ However, if Rawls is right that, "A sense of their own worth is necessary if they are to pursue their conception of the good with satisfaction and to take pleasure in its fulfillment,"³² and that self-respect "includes a person's sense of his own value, his secure conviction that his conception of the good, his plan of life, is worth carrying out,"³³ then abortion as a practice must be rejected. Self-respect, and the sense that one's life plan is worth carrying out, not as a means to someone else's end, but as a life plan of an autonomous rational being, can only be inculcated in persons emerging in a community that welcomes them unconditionally. Otherwise the emerging self will understand its value as contingent upon its particular features or qualities outside of his/her control. The awareness that one was only brought into this world on the assumption that one's presence would not make life worse for one's parents or for other people is not a good foundation for developing a sense of self-worth and self-respect.

¹ DeGrazia, David. "Identity, Killing, and the Boundaries of Our Existence." Philosophy and Public Affairs 31:4 (Fall 2003): 413-442.

² Parfit, Derek. Reasons and Persons. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1984.

³ Locke, John. An Essay concerning Human Understanding. ed. Peter H. Nidditch. New York: Oxford Press, 1979.

⁴ Locke 1979 Book 2, Chapter 27, part 6

⁵ *ibid* Book 2, Chapter 27, part 10

⁶ Parfit 1984 284

⁷ *ibid* 217

⁸ *ibid* 216

⁹ Schechtman, Marya. "Personality and Persistence: The Many Faces of Personal Survival." American Philosophical Quarterly 41:2 (April 2004): 87-105 99.

¹⁰ Shcechtman 2004 102

¹¹ DeGrazia 2003 424

¹² *ibid*

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ *ibid* 425

¹⁵ *ibid* 424

¹⁶ In A Theory of Justice (Rawls, John. A Theory of Justice. Rev ed. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 1999.) Rawls writes that "each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice"(p3) "Provided the minimum for moral personality is satisfied, a person is owed all the guarantees of justice."(p442) The minimum requirement for moral personality is autonomy (following Kant); thus "moral education is education for autonomy"(p450).

¹⁷ MacIntyre, Alasdair. After Virtue. 2nd ed. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984 221

¹⁸ This difference is the difference between a child being welcomed as gift or wonderful accident and being welcomed for the benefits he/she brings, or the burdens he/she doesn't, i.e. because he/she is healthy, or intelligent, or affordable, or convenient, or because he is not a she. See Richards, Amy. "When One is Enough" New York Times Magazine, July 18, 2004.

¹⁹ This should be evident given the relative recentness of such recognition in the history of human thought.

²⁰ MacIntyre 1984 206.

²¹ *ibid* 208

²² Taylor, Charles. Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2001 28

²³ Taylor 2001 34

²⁴ MacIntyre 1984 221

²⁵ Taylor 2001 50

²⁶ Taylor 35

²⁷ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. Philosophical Investigations. 3rd ed. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968 257.

²⁸ *ibid* 258

²⁹ See, for example, the life of Todd Marinovich, raised from birth to be the perfect quarterback. Marinovich played quarterback at USC and in the NFL with the Raiders for a short time.

³⁰ Imagine growing up in a society that endorses abortion in cases where birth "would be seriously worse either for its parents or for other people." Upon self-reflection one would know that one's existence was dependent upon it not being seriously worse than one's non-existence. This is incompatible with recognizing one's self worth as a "free and equal rational being" to use Rawls' language. Instead one's worth is measured by one's benefit to one's family and/or community.

³¹ Parfit 1984 322

³² Rawls 1999 155

³³ *ibid* 386