★ Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge: Issue 41 (2026)

Surviving Birth in One Piece: Fetus ontology and personal identity

Niels Wilde Langballe
Aarhus University

Abstract: When does a human being begin? In the recent academic debate propelled by Elselijn Kingma, the fetus is conceived as either a substance being contained in or as a part of the pregnant organism, or as a process produced by another process. If a human being begins to exist earlier than at birth, how does prenatal existence relate to postnatal existence in terms of fetus and person? In this paper, I argue that neither the substance view nor the process view can account for the structure of becoming of a single being. In two steps, I present a new model called the substantive survival view: I take from Derrida the notion of survival (traces of the past continuously informing the present), and from Harman the notion of substance (a thing irreducible to its components and effects). I argue that from the very outset, the subject must be subjected to alterity, the possibility of becoming a person in the ongoing process of becoming informed by the past, which survives in modified form as traces.

Disclosure and declaration: The work presented here is supported by the Carlsberg Foundation, grant CF21-0559.

Introduction

Most often, the questions of fetus identity and personal identity depart from different theoretical fields and traditions. While the former combines biological facts with philosophical analysis of human organisms, the latter concerns either a reductionist or non-reductionist account of persons—a person persists through time by means of being *x* (substance or bundle)—or an existential account of a subject in becoming—a person unfolds through time in a self-relational fashion.

Barry Smith and Berit Brogaard (2003) have developed a systematic account of when a human being begins to exist in the vein of Aristotelian substance ontology and modern biology. Instead of "fetus", they use the Danish term "foster" as a noun by which they refer "in neutral fashion to the human zygote, embryo, or fetus at different stages of development" (Smith & Brogaard 2003: 45). I shall use this term as well in what follows. The first premise for Smith and Brogaard is that human beings count as substances, i.e., "three-dimensional spatially extended entities which exist *in toto* at any time at which they exist at all" (Smith & Brogaard 2003: 47). Based on six criteria for substancehood, they argue that a human being begins to exist on day 16 of pregnancy with the process of gastrulation, in which the cluster of homogeneous cells is transformed into a heterogeneous entity (ibid., 62). As a substance, the foster is an ontologically independent entity existing in the womb as a tenant in a niche. It is not part of the mother but merely *contained* in the mother as a bucket of yoghurt in the refrigerator

(ibid., 74). Elselijn Kingma has recently challenged this model in favor of what she calls the *parthood view*, in which the foster is considered a part of the pregnant organism via the umbilical cord and placenta (Kingma 2018, 2019). The containment view as well as the parthood view concern the *antenatal* existence of a human being in which the foster is conceived as a substance from a particular moment in its development, primarily determined by *topo-spatial relations* such as boundary, connection, part, whole, dependence, and independence.

The question of personal identity is usually addressed through a formula that could look something like the following: person *x* is the same person at t^1 and t^n due to factor *y* (t^1 = birth, t^n = death, factor *y* =?). In the Neo-Lockean tradition, factor *y* is identified with some sort of psychological continuity between t^1 and t^n (Shoemaker 1970, Perry 1983, Parfit 1984, Burge 2003, Noonan 2019). In the tradition of McIntyre, factor *y* refers to the very capacity to turn the timespan between t^1 and t^n into an autobiographical narrative in an ongoing self-reflective manner (Rudd 2012, Davenport 2012, Stokes 2015, Schechtman 2015). Both traditions take *birth* to be t^1, the moment person *x* comes into being, which generates a few problems of its own. If memories make up the psychological continuity that persists through time, it cannot include the moment of birth since this is an event of which we have no recollection. In other words, how does person *x* connect t^5 to t^1 due to factor *y* (psychological continuity) when person *x* lacks the necessary psychological capacities (factor *y*) at t^1? The same problem applies to the narrativist view. Person *x* is not capable of forming an auto-biographical narrative at t^1, so person x at t^5 (a subject capable of self-narrating) and t^1 (a subject incapable of self-narrating) cannot be identical (Ricœur 1994, Lippitt 2007). In both traditions, personal identity is concerned with the problem of *persistence through time* in terms of the *postnatal* existence of a human being.

If the debate about foster identity is restricted to the nine months of pregnancy before birth understood as the starting point of postnatal human life (let us call that period $t^{-9} – t^0$), and personal identity begins at birth, *how does antenatal existence ($t^{-9} – t^0$) relate to postnatal existence ($t^1 – t^n$)?* Even though the question of transtemporal identity before and after birth sets the stage for Smith and Brogaard, they view birth as a mere passage from one environment to another, thus downplaying the importance and complexity of the question (Smith & Brogaard 2003: 46, 65). Kingma is opposed to this view and argues that birth is a substantial change since it marks the end of the foster and the beginning of a new substance, the baby-organism (Kingma 2018: 175-176). However, the debate about foster identity orbits around the relation between the foster and the mother, rather than the foster and the later postnatal individual. Recently, Anne Sophie Meincke, among others, has presented an alternative process-ontological view which seems to solve certain problems. The foster, Meincke argues, does not have to be viewed as an individual thing but as a coming-to-be individual which allows for a relation of identity "connecting the foster and the baby, while insisting that the foster is not yet a full-blown individual because it is only just developing into one" (Meincke 2022: 1517).

In the following, I argue in favor of what I call the *substantive survival view* of identity, for conceptualizing the relation between antenatal and postnatal existence of a subject. By subject, I refer to a human being at any stage of becoming. I pursue this task in two steps. I take from Derrida the concept of *survival* in terms of a trace-structure which preserves the past in the present through the plasticity, or modifiability, of matter and (mnemonic) form in an ongoing process of inscription and re-inscription. I take from Harman the definition of *substance* as a unified entity which is irreducible to what it is made of or what it does. In this definition, a process qualifies as

substance only if we reject the definition of process as purely an activity. The subject is a substance in this sense, a unified being subjected to alterity in a process in which past stages of development survive as traces in the ongoing process of becoming.

Coming into Being: antenatal existence

The first problem of connecting antenatal and postnatal existence is that the *foster* and the *person* seem to belong to two different categories. While the former is an organism, the latter might be something else or something more. As Lynne Rudder Baker argues, ontology is not a branch of biology, and our animal nature, which we share with higher primates, does not expose what we fundamentally are as persons (Baker 2005: 25). It is numerically neat to keep the two categories apart and go with the claim that persons come into being at birth (understood as labour), but, as Kingma argues, this has an obvious disadvantage because "the baby, intuitively, seems to be numerically identical with the foster. Surely newborn babies were fetuses only seconds before? Surely the new mother is holding in her arms the very *thing* she was pregnant with?" (Kingma 2018: 178).

Smith and Brogaard suggest that matter persists but instantiates different substances, now one form (cluster of cells), now another (human being: a single, causally isolated substance) (Smith & Brogaard 2003: 52). The issue here is that cells renew themselves through metabolism, which implies that matter does not remain the same (Meijsing 2022: 157). However, this might only be a problem in terms of the bodily criterion, since the cells of the body are replaced several times during a person's lifetime.[1] According to Eric T. Olson, the biological approach bypasses this problem because here, personal identity relies on the *biological life* of human animals but not on their bodies, i.e., an organism persists as long as its capacity to direct those vital functions, which keeps it biologically alive, is not disrupted (Olson 1997: 135). However, it seems to me that Olson ends up relying on a bodily criterion—not in the sense of *the persistence of the body* but in the *presence of a certain body part*, as the animal relies on the brainstem to coordinate its life-sustaining functions (ibid., 142). Further, Olson defines biological life in terms of the sum of metabolic activities, which might be a rather unsatisfying answer to the question *what are we?* (ibid., 136).

Despite these reservations, the foster might still be defined first and foremost as an organism, but it cannot be conceived solely in biological terms. If the foster is going to become something it currently is not, namely a person (or gain important properties particular to humans such as language, reasoning, etc.), it must be subjected to alterity. An excessive possibility space of non-identity must be part of the foster's basic constitution, in which the future person exists virtually *sub specie possibilitas.* In this sense, the constitution of the foster is not the same as what is usually referred to as the *constitution view.* On this account, as defended by Baker, the human person is a material being with no immaterial parts, constituted absolutely *by* without being temporally coextensive *with* the human organism (subatomic particles) (Baker 2005: 27-28). By contrast, I argue that the foster exists vitally as living matter, subjected to a set of possibilities, one of them being the virtual existence of person *x.* Note that person *x* is not simply waiting to be actualized by the zygote. Rather, the virtual signifies "the property of every set of cases of emerging within a becoming which is not dominated by any pre-constituted totality of possibles" (Meillassoux 2011: 232). In biological terms, this possibility space is somewhat akin to the feature known as *totipotentiality.* Immediately upon formation, the zygote begins to undergo a process of genetic replication and cell division. Each cell in this multi-cell zygote (up to the eight-cell stage) is *totipotent,* that is, they

all have the full potential to develop into a human being. How the programming for differentiation is expressed from here depends on the specific environments surrounding the cells (Smith & Brogaard 2003: 54, 60). Who we become as persons is not a pre-destined potential harbored in one of the cells; it results from the unfolding entanglements of matter and form in the ongoing process of becoming. But when do we, then, begin to exist?

Smith and Brogaard conclude that the human individual cannot begin as the unicellular zygote since it is destined to undergo fission, that is, a process that gives rise to new entities and destroys the entity that preceded them (ibid., 53, 59). Neither can it begin as a multi-cell zygote because none of the cells in the bundle inherit from the single cell the property of serving as the bearer of the identity of the human being; each of the cells are totipotent (ibid., 60): “For all of these reasons we shall argue that, while human life is present at earlier stages, it is gastrulation which constitutes the threshold event for the beginning to exist of the human individual” (ibid., 62). According to Kingma, however, this conclusion is based on the premise of what she identifies as *the future baby view*, “where the foster only comprises the parts that emerge as the future baby: the (future baby’s) body, circumscribed by its skin and stopping at the umbilicus or some way along the umbilical cord” (Kingma 2018: 171). Gastrulation is only the threshold event of the beginning of the human individual according to the future baby view, as it marks the point at which the embryonic disk starts unfolding into a three-dimensional entity, resulting in the baby’s body. However, if the foster, as Kingma argues, is necessarily a *part* of the pregnant organism connected via the umbilical cord and placenta, the human individual starts to exist much earlier:

> Other parts of the zygote-derived entity, such as the trophoblast, starts differentiating much earlier, however; around 4–5 days after conception (i.e. just prior to implantation) the blastocyst has already differentiated the trophoblastic cells that help it implant in the uterine lining, and will later build part of the placenta (ibid., 184).

The parthood view has the obvious problem of establishing a numerical identity between the foster as a baby-with-placenta (a part of the gestating organism) and the neonate (no longer a part of the gestating organism). According to Meincke, Kingma’s revision of Smith and Brogaard’s criteria for substancehood in allowing substances to be part of other substances does not do the trick to secure numerical identity between the foster and the neonate. Since the criteria for the delineation of organisms, 1) homeostasis and physiological autonomy; 2) metabolic and functional integration; 3) topological continuity; 4) immunological tolerance, are

not met by the foster but only the foster-gravida whole, the foster itself cannot be an organism in itself, at least not if organisms are defined as substances (Meincke 2022: 1505). Meincke’s process-ontological alternative might be better in capturing the difference between the *foster* at one moment, $t^{-9} – t^{0}$, and the neonate and future person at another moment, $t^{1} – t$, since process and change, according to Meincke, “are at the heart of the existence and identity of organisms” (ibid., 1507). The pregnant individual is defined as an organism in terms of a hypercomplex autopoietic higher-level bifurcating process, and the foster is defined as an offspring that lives in a dynamical autopoietic unity with the gravida in the process of "springing off" (ibid. 1514). Rather than a substance being part of another substance, Meincke’s alternative suggests a process producing another process. Her solution to Kingma’s deadlock of fosters being foster-gravida-wholes on the one hand and independent entities numerically identical to the neonate on the other, consists in rejecting the notion that fosters are individuals in their own right. Under this premise, she claims that “we can happily assume that there is a relation of identity connecting the foster and the baby, while insisting that the foster is not yet a full-blown individual because it is only just developing into one” (ibid., 1516-1517).

In the following, I argue that neither the substance view nor the process view are fully satisfactory models for explaining the relation between antenatal and postnatal existence. However, I agree with Meincke that the very potential of developing into a full-blown individual is an essential point here.

Becoming: postnatal existence

By invoking a process-ontological framework, the problem of identity (organisms persist *through* change) becomes the very solution (organisms persist *by* changing). Meincke states that "organisms persist by metabolizing," and further "an organism's identity over time, hard-won through autopoietic interactive self-stabilisation, is intrinsically dynamic and processual" (ibid., 1507-1508). John Dupré holds a similar view: "My simple working definition is that whereas the default state of a thing is stasis, for a process to persist it must undergo change" (Dupré 2021: 150). According to Dupré, Kingma's substance-ontological model of fosters overlooks the process of individuation, in which the foster becomes more independent from the mother. More generally, defenders of the substance model find it difficult to explain the fact that the properties we occasionally describe as particular to humans, such as reason, language, bipedalism, etc., are all developmental outcomes that cannot be found in the zygote or the infant to begin with (ibid. 161, 156). However, I have three main reservations about the processes-ontological framework.

First, as David Wiggins argues, a world of pure process is hard to imagine. If the world consisted of nothing but weather, for example, we might approximate such a world of pure process, but weather does not occur in a vacuum, it needs air, earth, water or at least some material principle which is other than process (Wiggins 2021: 168). Nevertheless, this seems to be what thinkers like Meincke and Dupré claim—that everything is process, reality consists only of processes (Meincke 2018: 369, Dupré 2021: 150). In that case, a rock, for example, would not be a material thing but a slow process (Dupré 2021: 150). Further, the organism is not a thing that changes, develops over time or undergoes a process. The claim made by Dupré and Meincke is stronger: *the organism is itself a process* (ibid., 152) or *an organism's activity is its being* (Meincke 2022: 1507). In that case, we can ask the same question as Wiggins: "Meanwhile an organism can be the proud possessor of eight fingers and two thumbs. Can a process?" (Wiggins 2021: 168). Other questions might be posed along these lines—an infant can be charming. Can a process? An artist can be passionate. Can a process? If a human being is defined solely in terms of process, something is lost.

Second, if we follow Meincke's definition, a process is a kind of activity in the form of interaction between different elements (Meincke 2022: 1507). However, if we take the statement "everything is process" at face value, we risk ending up with the exact opposite result of what process-ontological models promise, that is, a world where nothing ever happens. Look at the premises:

a. Nothing exists but processes.
b. Processes equal change.
c. Change is an activity in terms of interaction.
d. Processes are interactions (b-c).
e. Nothing exists but interactions (a-d).

The problem here is that the process-ontological model risks becoming what Graham Harman has called an overmining strategy. If an organism qua process is nothing but its interactions, i.e., the sum of its relations or effects on other processes in this very instant, how is it able to do something different a week, a month, or a year from now? If it holds nothing in reserve from what is currently expressed, nothing ever changes, because change involves the capacity-to-be-other, or what we usually refer to as *potentiality* (see Harman 2018: 49).

Third, when we ask about the identity of a process (what is it?), we now know that it is change. When we ask about the identity of an organism, the answer is the same since organisms are processes. Hence, the identity of an organism is change. However, Meincke sometimes seems to distinguish between identity and change: "Identity is always identity *by virtue of* change and as such manages, at least temporarily, to perpetuate itself *despite* change" (Meincke 2018: 371). It is easy to make sense of the claim that an organism's identity must be maintained by means of metabolic activities, i.e., by virtue of change. But this description confuses things because the organism now occurs to be a substance rather than a process. Meincke's distinction easily fits the formula for identity in terms of substance: process *x* (the organism) is the same process at t^1 and t^n (it perpetuates despite change) due to factor *y* (metabolism). Yet this cannot be the case since "change is everywhere" (ibid. 372), so, in fact, there is no difference between identity and change after all. If we then translate the quote above, we get: Change is always change *by virtue* of change and as such manages to perpetuate itself *despite* change. The problem here is that differentiation now seems tricky, if not impossible. If the world consisted of nothing but processes, how would a river differ from a rock, a tree, or an ant colony? I agree with Dupré that the boundaries of an organism are far from uniquely determined (Dupré 2021: 154), but processes must be bounded entities in order to be at all. By admitting that there are boundaries to organisms and, hence, to processes, Dupré hereby commits himself to a notion of topo-spatial relations such as boundary, connection, part, whole, dependence, independence, and delineation. For something to be *this* rather than *that*, there must be something that makes it so, even for a process. The dog is not an elephant—it is *this* (dog) rather than *that* (elephant), and even if *change* is what makes up each of their identities, there is still a difference. This dog's metabolism is not that elephant's metabolism. If there is no way to make such delineations, everything would dissolve into everything else. A process is a bounded entity. No matter how fuzzy the boundary is, it is still a bounded entity. Otherwise, nothing is.

I am not denying that change is at the heart of the organism's identity, but I do not subscribe to a process-ontological framework in which reality consists entirely of processes. A human being is not a process but in a process of becoming. As Kierkegaard would say, to become in general is a movement from one place to another but to become oneself is a *movement at the same place* (Kierkegaard 1980). I am not immediately who I am since it is something I become, but who do I become? No one but myself. On my account, a human being is a *foster* at $t^{-9} – t^0$, i.e., a vital being subjected to alterity in terms of a virtual person at some other time t^1 – , and a *person* at some point between $t^1 – t^n$ with traces of its foster-past ($t^{-9} – t^0$) inscribed in its ontological history and its becoming. In this sense, *a human being is never fully present to herself.* As a foster, she is *not yet* a person and as a person, she is *no longer* a foster. Yet, she is still the *same* subject (a human being at any stage of becoming). It is *this* subject, Veronica, not *that* subject, Jessica, which is exposed to these stages of becoming. Allow me to make some further definitions.

The basic composition of the subject is somewhat akin to what Jean-Luc Nancy calls the *corpus ego*, which goes beyond the classical division of "I have a body" and "I am my body." Rather, as a proliferation, declaration, expression, articulation of an *ego's* "I am," the mind and lip are the same—a *corpus ego* always localized not only as a taking place of existence but *the place* of a body proffering, exposing itself (I *am* = I am *here*), which is already implied in the etymological meaning of existence—*existere,* "to step out, stand forth." In this extension of the ego, Nancy notes, I am delivered to others and otherness, which, as I argued before, is one of the engines of the foster's capacity to become other than what it currently is. Nancy expresses it in the following way: "I'm the extension that *I am* by being withdrawn, subtracted, removed, and ob-jected" (Nancy 2008: 25, 29). On my account, the subject is a kind of *corpus ego* which means that it has a certain materiality without being reducible to its material compounds. Veronica experiences the world through her eyes and ears, but the experiences are not themselves eyes or ears. Her thoughts exist in her brain without being the brain itself. Even as a foster, she still has a deeper reality than her current organization of subatomic particles because the virtual space of future possibilities that belongs to her own constitutional makeup is not itself these particles. This is not to say that there is a chasm between the material and immaterial in the sense of sneaking the mind-body dualism in through the backdoor; it is a way to conceptualize identity and difference in the structure of becoming.

In the following, I will try to make sense of the claim that the subject is a unified corpus ego (a human being in the different stages of development—"I *was* a foster" and "I *am* a person") in the structure of becoming.

Surviving: Beyond the antenatal-postnatal binary

Let us return to the central issue: how does antenatal existence relate to postnatal existence in terms of identity?

To answer this question, I suggest a two-step model involving a reconstruction of Derrida's notion of *survival* paired with Harman's refined concept of *substance.* This is no easy task given the fundamental differences of deconstruction and object-oriented ontology. Nevertheless, I think it will prove fruitful to formulate such a hybrid position, which I will refer to as the *substantive survival view* of identity.

When Derrida talks about *survival*, he is not referring to recovery or the continuance of existence after exposure to life-threatening circumstances. Nor does the term suggest something like a sequence of successive selves surviving from one moment to the next in the style of Parfit or Strawson. Rather, to survive [*sur-vie*] suggests something like "being over", "on", not "after" in terms of an afterlife or life postmortem, but a *living on* that goes beyond the life-death distinction (Derrida 1979: 108). Marija Grech explains this concept in relation to an organism. At a cellular level, she says, the continued existence of any organism is dependent on *apoptosis* (the process that kills off cells, also called the programmed cell death) in which old cells are broken down, reassimilated and absorbed into new structures. This process is complemented by *mitosis*, the process by which a cell replicates and creates new copies of itself. Apoptosis and mitosis are crucial to the life of the organism, and this involves survival that goes beyond life and death, or involves both life and death, since on a cellular level, the *life* of an organism and its continuous renewal necessitates ongoing *death* (Grech 2022: 95).

The question of foster identity is closely linked to the question of topological relations, boundaries, limits, etc. However, such demarcations cannot be detached from temporal categories. *When* does the foster become a human being—in 4-5 days after gestation, as Kingma suggests? Or in the process of gastrulation after 16 days of gestation, as Smith and Brogaard hold? The question of personal identity is closely linked to the question of time—how can a person *x* be the same at two different moments? Note that this question cannot be separated from the topological question either. What is the *connection* that unifies the person at different moments? The question of identity is related to what Derrida calls the becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space. This becoming-space of time is, according to Hägglund, the very pre-condition of any identity:

> Every moment of life is a matter of survival, since it depends on what Derrida calls the structure of the trace. The structure of the trace follows from the constitution of time, which makes it impossible for anything to be present *in itself.* Every now passes away as soon as it comes to be and must therefore be inscribed as a trace in order to be at all (Hägglund 2008: 1, 18).

Identity cannot be thought of in terms of the metaphysics of presence, exactly because the present itself is constituted by a synthesis of marks—traces of the past exposed to the future through retentions and protensions (Derrida 1982 13). The foster must be exposed to alterity to become other than what it currently is in a future yet to be defined, and it must be marked as a trace of things past to be at all. Otherwise, it would vanish due to the instantaneous passing away of the 'now' as Hägglund argues. According to his reading of Derrida, self-presence is utterly impossible because even the simplest positing of myself *as* myself takes time and makes a simultaneous identity between I=I impossible (Hägglund 2008: 25). However, the unavoidable division of the "I" does not result in an endless sequence of selves. As Goldgaber argues, “the structure of the trace establishes that the past *survives*, that it persists in its modification” (Goldgaber 2020: 159). Goldgaber interprets the trace-structure as a generalization of memory or mnemonic form. Due to its plasticity, matter becomes a kind of recording device—the intrinsic power of matter being to take on, lose, and give itself form (ibid. 150). Matter and form come together in Derrida’s notion of textuality. Form and matter are indissociably united in the text in terms of a substrate in which other textual inscriptions are inscribed as a system of traces (ibid., 151, 153). Traces, for Derrida, are not simply remains, marks, imprints, although he sometimes seems to include such notions as well (Derrida 2007: 32, 2013: 208). Rather, the trace, as Goldgaber argues, refers to a modifiable-retentive form (being imprinted of the imprint), of textual structures (ibid., 144, 149). Becoming is closely linked to this notion of *form, formation,* and *in-formation* because the subject becomes (partly) based on what it was, informed by the past that sur-vives in modified form as traces.

However, there is at least one problem with this model. If persistence is secured through the survival of textual structures informed by traces, we must ask *what is it exactly that survives?* For something to be at all, it must be *this* and not *that*—this thing and not some other thing, even if the boundaries are fuzzy as in the case of processes. However, a text seems to lack such boundaries since a text, according to Derrida, is not simply a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book, but “a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces” (Derrida 1979: 84). This account of texts faces “the infinite deferral of specification,” as coined by Arjen Kleinherenbrink in his critique of Markus Gabriel’s ontology of fields of sense. By “specification,” Kleinherenbrink means that an entity must be *this* rather than *that* entity (Kleinherenbrink 2018: 137).

The problem is that Gabriel defines existence in utterly relational terms—to be is to appear in a field of sense or context (see Gabriel 2015: 158). Now, the issue is that if an object exists only by appearing in a field, this field cannot work as the specifier of the object (*this* rather than *that*) because in order for this field to exist at all, it must appear in yet another field that must appear in a field and so on *ad infinitum* (ibid. 138). A similar problem occurs in Derrida's definition of texts. If the *trace* is nothing in itself, it only exists by referring to other traces, trace *a* is only trace *a* by referring to trace *b*, but trace *b* cannot tell us anything about trace *a* in terms of its specification (*this* trace, not *that* trace) because trace *b* is only trace *b* by referring to trace *c* and so on *ad infinitum*.

The substantive survival view

In some way or another, the subject must *remain the same* through change in order to maintain numerical identity. Even if we take the process to be essential here and define the subject itself as a process, it must be a bounded entity that differs from trees, rivers, rocks, star light and waterfalls, at least to some extent. A subject is *this* subject rather than *that* subject. Veronica is Veronica and not Jessica. In this sense, the subject is not two different things at two different moments—this thing, a foster, at $t^{-9} – t^{0}$ and some other thing, a person, at $t^{1} – t^{n}$. Rather, the subject is *the one to whom* something happens, namely being a foster at $t^{-9} – t^{0}$ and a person, $t^{1} – t^{n}$.

In Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology, we find a notion of substance that fits my notion of the subject. Harman uses the terms "object", "thing", "substance" to refer to an entity that cannot be reduced to its building blocks (what it is comprised of) or to the relations it has to other things (what it does) (Harman 2018: 43). This definition covers more than long-lasting physical objects such as granite or pulsars; it includes relations, events, and processes such as hurricanes and sunrises (ibid., 43, 53). Hence, an object is a unified, irreducible, yet destructible thing in the broadest sense possible. An object can in fact undergo certain changes without changing completely. In the case of personal identity, or what Harman refers to as "human biography," he applies the concept of endosymbiosis as developed by Lynn Margulis. Most often, the different key moments in a human life happen through a symbiosis with some other thing—a profession, a partner, an idea, etc. Harman states: "What the model of symbiosis suggests is that both of the usual alternatives are wrong: entities have neither an eternal character nor a nominalistic flux of 'performative' identities that shift and flicker with the flow of time itself. Instead, we should think of an object as going through several turning-points in its lifespan, but not many" (Harman 2016: 47). The point here is that the symbiotic stages are phases in the life *of one and the same* object (ibid. 50).

Is it possible at all to make sense of a *substantive survival view* of identity? If we stick with the idea of survival, we base our concept of identity on a relational or referential structure of traces that faces the infinite deferral of specification. If we identify the subject with a substance in Harman's sense, we base our notion of identity on the ontological autonomy of objects that exist in their own right apart from any relational structure. As Goldgaber and Colebrook remark, the notion of substance does not imply the essential plasticity of the trace structure. Hence, deconstructive materialism is a materialism without substance (Goldgaber 2021: 146). Harman contrasts his own position to that of Derrida. While Harman advocates for a kind of depth where things stay the same, he ascribes to Derrida an anti-Aristotelian agenda by which the basic level of reality is difference rather than identity, change rather than endurance (Harman 2023: 106). However, while Harman criticizes Derrida for conceiving identity as

self-presence, Hägglund has the complete opposite reading. To him, identity is not self-presence, rather, it is rooted in the survival of the trace structure due to the instantaneous vanishing of the 'now.' Still, deconstruction is *not a substance ontology*.

Despite these differences and disagreements, I think it is possible to combine the notion of survival with Harman's broad concept of substance. First, it is worth noticing that objects or substances in fact emerge through connections, and that these connections survive as inscriptions on the interior walls of the object: "…every object is the result of a connection. The history of this connection remains inscribed in its heart, where its components are locked in a sort of kaleidoscopic duel" (Harman 2007: 208). In a dialogue with Harman, Manuel DeLanda makes the point that:

> We both agree that objects must have a historical origin, so the only disagreement is over *how much of a trace* their birth has left on their identity. This, of course, varies from one kind of object to another. Atoms are born in stars, but we find little or no trace of that in their current nature. Humans (and other animals) do keep traces about their history (birth and experiences) and these memories (and scars) surely affect who they are today (Harman & DeLanda 2017: 14).

Timothy Morton, a proponent of object-oriented ontology as well as deconstruction, states that the essence of a thing has to do with its data (what happened to it). He uses the example of bananas: "What bananas are, their 'essence' if you like, is the never-quite arriving futurality of banana data. Data (it's in the word, it's a past participle) is the past. The form of a thing, its data, is what happened to it" (Morton & Boyer 2022: 32). On the one hand, *what a thing is* amounts to what happened to it (thing data). On the other hand, as long as the thing is, it is still subjected to outer influence, which means it is not identical to the sum of its data simply because it is still exposed to the possibility space of the future, which is not yet in the past participle. At other occasions, Morton is very clear that when we encounter the thing, we only ever get thing data, not the thing itself, which means that the never-arriving banana data must imply that the sum of encounters or anthropomorph translations of the thing are not the thing itself (Morton 2016: 16).

Derrida refers to texts as patterns of signifiers in a general sense, but he also talks about concrete texts—semantic content enclosed in a book or some other material support (diskette, film, micro tape, etc.)—as *things* (Derrida 2013: 152, 188). The great masterpieces of Shakespeare, Kafka, Blanchot, Celan, etc. are, on the one hand, decomposable, capable of being assimilated into the living culture, memory, tradition, which they nourish, but on the other hand, they are resistant to centuries of what Derrida calls hermeneutic microorganisms (Derrida 2013: 154). A masterpiece "must be assimilated as inassimilable, kept in reserve, unforgettable because irreceivable, capable of inducing meaning without being exhausted by meaning" (ibid., 188).

This very thing persists in its irreplaceable singularity by recycling transformations and the common compost of memory—not because it is irreducible to the totality of all possible interpretations or because it exceeds interpretations and keeps enriching the cultural ecosystem, but due to the *work itself:* "It is this singular impropriety that permits it to resist degradation—never forever, but for a long time" (ibid.). Such a text must be *this* rather than *that,* a specific text—*The Process* by Kafka or *Romeo and Juliet* by Shakespeare—with a certain biodegradability of its own. Further, such texts do not exist forever, which means they can *survive* through traces only on account of their possible destruction: "Now, there is also the possibility of destruction without

replacement, of a forgetting without remainder. I have called this ashes [*cendres*]. No trace as such without this possibility" (ibid., 207, see also Derrida 2014: 24). An *irreplaceable singularity* that resists any relational totalization or overmining strategies without lasting forever might not be so different from Harman's *destructible substances*?

In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, we find a similar point. Here, Derrida notes that we should not talk about animals under the general category of "the animal," because there is an "infinite space that separates the lizard from the dog, the protozoon from the dolphin, the shark from the lamb, the parrot from the chimpanzee…" (Derrida 2008: 34). When Derrida describes the gaze of animals, he talks about a specific animal—a cat, and not just any cat. This cat, he says, is not the same cat as described by Baudelaire, or the one described by Rilke or Buber or Tieck or Carroll, but a specific cat with a gaze behind which an uninterpretable, unreadable, abyssal, and secret bottomlessness remains (ibid., 12). Derrida does have a notion of the specific after all. Indeed, he even makes the *limit* a central issue, although not in terms of a strict demarcation. Rather, he is interested in what happens at the edge of a limit:

> Limitrophy is therefore my subject. Not just because it will concern what sprouts or grows at the limit, around the limit, by maintaining the limit, but also what feeds the limit, generates it, raises it, and complicates it. Everything I'll say will consist, certainly not in effacing the limit, but in multiplying its figures, in complicating, thickening, delinearizing, folding, and dividing the line precisely by making it increase and multiply (ibid., 29).

On the one hand, I believe Heidegger is right when he says that a boundary is not where something stops but where it begins its presencing (Heidegger 2001: 152). On the other hand, the boundary is buoyant, plastic, malleable, and porous. Morton describes the relation between the text and boundary in Derrida in the following way: "'Text' is precisely the word for this fractal weaving of boundaries that open onto the unbounded: it is not the case that nothing at all exists […] The boundary is not nonexistent but not thin - it is thick, permeable, folded into itself, fragile, teeming with parasites" (Morton 2010: 2).

Likewise, the boundary of the subject is folding as it goes along, forming as in-formed formation. The substantive survival view takes from Derrida the idea that the foster survives as a trace but not in an endless differential network but in a specific modifiable form, a substance in Harman's definition, which I have referred to as the subject subjected to alterity in and through the process of becoming of the same entity (*this* subject not *that* subject).

Conclusive remarks

Traditionally, foster identity concerns the antenatal existence of what counts as human life, but not yet a human being. Personal identity concerns the postnatal existence of a human being, and how this being can be said to remain the same at two different moments. The problem is, then, how to link these two phases of existence? If the human being is a substance from beginning to end, what is it that remains the same? While classical suggestions such as the psychological continuity of memories or the capacity to form a coherent autobiographical narrative fall short of the fact that these faculties are developmental outcomes that are not present to begin with. The process-ontological view seems to solve this deadlock by making change essential to

identity. The problem is that a process is often defined solely in terms of change or pure activity, which ends up preventing anything from happening, rather than the opposite. If a thing is what it does right now and nothing more, nothing other than what is already going on could happen since there are no hidden potentials.

In this paper, I have presented a strategy for a new model—the *substantive survival view* of identity. First, I took the subject to refer to a human being at any stage of development. The subject is subjected to alterity in order for the foster to become something it currently is not—a person. As a foster at $t^{-9} – t^{0}$, the subject is a vital being subjected to alterity in terms of a virtual person *sub specie possibilitas* at some other time $t^{1} – t^{n}$, and a *person* at some point between $t^{1} – t^{n}$ with traces of its foster-past ($t^{-9} – t^{0}$) inscribed in its ontological history through its material modification and informed formation. The subject is not two different things at two different moments—some thing, a foster at $t^{-9} – t^{0}$ and some other thing, a person, $t^{1} – t^{n}$. Rather, the subject is *the one to whom* something happens, namely being a foster at $t^{-9} – t^{0}$ and a person, $t^{1} – t^{n}$. The subject cannot be reduced to its material compounds or its relations to other entities. Hence, it is a substance in Harman's definition of the term. The subject is a unified bounded being, *this* rather than *that*—always Veronica *not* Jessica—in a process where past stages of development survive, in the Derridean sense, as traces in the ongoing formation of becoming.

Like any other ontological model, the substantive survival view of identity has social implications. The model shakes the traditional 'universal' definitions of Man as an animal with an exclusive capacity and by 'exclusive' I mean that which makes him different from anything else in the cosmos and by capacity, I refer to the different historical suggestions of such unique faculties (self-awareness, reason, language etc.). I say Man and he/him because universal definitions of this sort are typically gendered and excluding. Exclusiveness implies exclusion. In relation to personal identity, aging becomes an important issue, since the idea of the universal 'human' is often, if not always, an *adult,* but no one enters the world as an adult. In recent years, 'birth' has gained ground in academic debates after decades of death as the favored fencepost of human existence for ontological analysis. But what about the antenatal stage? Derrida talks about *khôra,* a term associated with 'womb' from the platonic tradition, but also with différance—a surname for the trace and arche-writing in line with Derrida himself. There is a khôral reef beneath the birth waters, a Mariana Trench of potential for theoretical analysis. By leaving the universalization strategy in defining the human person, we hopefully also avoid smuggling the cargo of white Western male essentialism through the backdoor into our definitions. The idea of substantive survival might sound like good old essentialism in disguise, but mnemonic form(ation) is a non-all continuous integration of what happens in and through the antenatal/postnatal development, but not of a predetermined future or an always-already established core. The foster is subjected to alterity, which means a capacity-for-things-to-be-otherwise is inscribed within its ontological fabric. In this sense, the model cannot serve as an argument for or against abortion in a social-ethical context. The anti-abortionist traditionalist and/or naturalist cannot appeal to 'the way things are by nature', which is more like an ideological statement than it is a scientific one, using the substantive survival view, since this model relies upon the capacity-for-things-to-be-otherwise. The pro-abortion position could say that according to this model, fetuses are exactly *not* persons and only persons can have the right to live, which means abortion is morally sanctioned, but I would not go down that road. First, the substantive survival view does not imply that the one subjected to alterity either has or hasn't the right to be alive. By granting that right to persons only, we risk reopening the can of worms we just closed, where *homo mensura* excludes everything else but the adult human in ethical as well as ontological matters. The capacity-for-things-to-be-otherwise is ontologically a reservoir of potencies or virtual capacities while in the realm of ethics, it would

translate to freedom. The freedom of women to decide whether they want to reproduce or not rather than being trapped in social patriarchal structures that sacrifice hard-gained rights to bodily autonomy for pro-life principles. Again, the substantive survival view does not in itself offer a knock-down argument for either of those positions except that it keeps the question open for debate. We might use Sartre's famous dictum "existence precedes essence" and recall that essence in line with Morton and Boyer signifies an ongoing negotiation, processual unfolding as we age, live and develop while never fully arriving at a definite result. The question whether the fetus has the right to stay alive does not concern a value interior to the fetus as 'bare life' (existence) but to a social, culture, societal and normative order that negotiates values and belief-systems (essence).

References

Baker, Lynne Rudder 2005. "When Does a Person Begin?" *Social philosophy & policy*, Vol.22 (2), pp. 25-48.

Barad, Karen 2017. "No Small Matter: Mushroom Clouds, Ecologies of Nothingness, and Strange Topologies of Spacetimemattering" in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* eds. Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, Nils Bubandt, Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 103-121.

Burge, Tyler. 2003. "Memory and Persons." *The Philosophical Review* 112: 289–337.

Davenport, John J. 2012. *Narrative Identity, Autonomy, and Mortality: From Frankfurt and MacIntyre to Kierkegaard.* New York and London: Routledge.

Derrida, Jacques 1979. "Living On – Border Lines" in Harold Bloom ed., *Deconstruction and Criticism,* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. Pp. 75-177.

Derrida, Jacques 2007. *Learning to Live Finally – An Interview with Jean Birnbaum,* Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (trans.), Hoboken: Melvillehouse Publishing.

Derrida, Jacques 2008. *The Animal That Therefore I am,* New York: Fordham University Press.

Derrida, Jacques 2013. *Signature Derrida,* Jay Williams ed. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press.

Derrida, Jacques 2014. *Cinders,* Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.

Dupré, John 2021. "Processes within processes: a dynamic account of living beings and its implications for understanding the human individual" in *Biological Identity Perspectives from Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Biology*, eds. Anne Sophie Meincke and John Dupré, London; New York: Routledge pp. 149-167.

Flanagan, Owen J., Jr. 1984. *The science of the mind*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Gabriel, Markus 2015. *Fields of Sense – A New Realist Ontology,* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Goldgaber, Deborah 2021. *Speculative Grammatology – Deconstruction and the New Materialism,* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Grech, Marija 2022. *Spectrality and Survivance – Living the Anthropocene,* London: Rowman & Littlefield.

Harman, Graham 2007. “On Vicarious Causation”, *Collapse II* pp. 187-221.

Harman, Graham 2016. *Immaterialism – Objects and Social Theory,* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Harman, Graham 2018. *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*, London: Pelican.

Harman, Graham 2023. “Objects as the Root of Time” in Graham Harman and Christopher Witmore *Objects Untimely – Object-Oriented Philosophy and Archaeology* pp. 96-125, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Harman, Graham & DeLanda, Manuel 2017. *The Rise of Realism,* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hägglund, Martin 2008. *Radical Atheism – Derrida and the Time of Life,* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Heidegger, Martin 2001. *Poetry, Language, Thought,* New York: Harper Perennial.

Kierkegaard, Søren 1980. *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening—Kierkegaard’s Writings, XIX*, eds. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kleinherenbrink, Arjen 2018. “Fields of Sense and Formal Things: The Ontologies of Tristan Garcia and Markus Gabriel”, *Open Philosophy* 1 pp. 129-142.

Kingma, Elselijn 2018. “Lady Parts: The Metaphysics of Pregnancy”, *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 82 pp. 165-187.

Kingma, Elselijn 2019. “Were You a Part of Your Mother?”, *Mind* Vol. 128, 511 pp. 609-646.

Lippitt, John 2007. “Getting the Story Straight: Kierkegaard, MacIntyre, and Some Problems with Narrative”, *Inquiry* 50(1): 34–69.

Meijsing, Monica 2022. *A Philosophy of Person and Identity: Where Was I when I wasn’t there?* Cham: Springer.

Meillassoux, Quentin. 2011. “Virtuality and Potentiality” in *the Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, eds. Bryant et. al., trans. Robin Mackay, pp. 224–236. Melbourne: RePress.

Meincke, Anne Sophie 2018. “Persons as Biological Processes: A Bio-Processual Way Out of the Personal Identity Dilemma” in Daniel J. Nicholson & John Dupré (eds.). *Everything Flows: Towards a Processual Philosophy of Biology,* Oxford: Oxford University Press pp. 357-378.

Meincke, Anne Sophie 2022. “One or Two? A Process View of Pregnancy”, *Philosophical Studies* 179 pp. 1495-1521.

Morton, Timothy 2010. “Ecology as Text, Text as Ecology”, *Oxford Literary Review,* Vol. 32, No. 1 Deconstruction, Environmentalism, and Climate Change pp. 1-17.

Morton, Timothy 2016. *Dark Ecology – For a Logic of Future Coexistence,* New York: Columbia University Press.

Morton, Timothy, Boyer, Dominic 2021. *Hyposubjects – On Becoming Human,* London: Open Humanities Press.

Nancy, Jean-Luc 2008. *Corpus,* trans. Richard A. Rand, New York: Fordham University Press.

Noonan, Harold W. 2019. *Personal Identity,* third ed. London, New York: Routledge.

Olson, Eric T. 1997. *The Human Animal Personal Identity Without Psychology,* New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Parfit, Derek. 1984. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Perry, John R. 1983. *Identity, Personal Identity, and the Self*. Indianapolis: Hackett.

Ricoeur, Paul 1994. *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.

Romano, Claude 2009. *Event and World,* trans. Shane Mackinlay, New York: Fordham University Press.

Rudd, Anthony. 2012. *Self, Value, and Narrative—A Kierkegaardian Approach,* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schechtman, Marya. 2015. The Moments of a Life: On Some Similarities Between Life and Literature in *Narrative, Identity and the Kierkegaardian Self*, ed. John Lippitt and Patrick Stokes, 11–28. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Shoemaker, Sydney. 1970. “Persons and Their Pasts.” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 7: 269–285.

Smith, Barry, Brogaard, Berit 2003. “Sixteen Days,” *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* Vol. 28 No. 1 pp. 45-78.

Stokes, Patrick. 2015. *The Naked Self: Kierkegaard and Personal Identity.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wiggins, David 2021. “Activity, process, continuant, substance, organism” in *Biological Identity Perspectives from Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Biology*, eds. Anne Sophie Meincke and John Dupré, London; New York: Routledge pp. 167-177.

Notes

1. According to Owen Flanagan, a person has seven different bodies, on average, during a lifetime due to the process of cell renewal (Flanagan 1984).

Cite this Essay

Langballe, Niels Wilde. “Surviving Birth in One Piece: Fetus ontology and personal identity.” *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, no. 41, 2026, doi:10.20415/rhiz/041.e06

RHIZOMES ISSN 1555-9998 ★ 230 East Hall Bowling Green State University Bowling Green, OH 43403
Editors: Ellen Berry and Carol Siegel. Reviews editor: Craig J. Saper. Technical editor: Helen J Burgess