

Working Title

Being-towards-Birth: What can engaging with phenomenologies of pregnancy teach us about what it means to be a person?

Aim and Research Questions

The main question at the heart of this project is: What is a person? Although this question has been asked across the disciplines in different ways, this project aims to answer it through the phenomenology of pregnancy. Specifically, the following sub-questions are posed:

- Are there differences between biological individuality and subjectivity, and what might pregnancy teach us about these differences?
- What kind of consciousness is required for Dasein, and how might foetal development inform us about Dasein?
- What does it mean to lose the special ontological status of not-one-not-two-ness through giving birth or miscarriage?

1. How might a phenomenology of pregnancy inform our understanding of Dasein as Being-towards-death?

Project Structure and Timeline

The project will be divided into four main substantive chapters, which will be framed by a comprehensive introduction and conclusion. The introduction will outline the project's key contributions; introduce the topic and its main questions; and present the research plan. The conclusion will synthesise the key contributions again, provide reflections on the topic and discuss potential future avenues for research. I am proposing a five-year part-time PhD, with each chapter taking nine months to complete and the final six months bringing everything together into a piece of research that will hopefully have an impact well beyond its own subfields of philosophy.

1. What is a person?

Although there is literature around subjectivity in foetal development (Olson, 1997; Noller, 2021) and the metaphysics of biological individuality in pregnancy (Morgan, 2021), there is an overlap between concepts of biological individuality and subjectivity which I aim to tease apart.

I will begin by examining the difference between biological individuality and subjectivity with regard to pregnancy. The question of what constitutes a biological individual has seen much attention (Clarke, 2010; Pradeu, 2010; Bouchard, 2018). Factors invoked include spatial boundaries (Smith & Brogaard, 2003), neurological development (Barandiaran & Moreno, 2006; Godfrey-Smith, 2016), and immunology (Wegmann et al., 1993; Howes, 1998).

Lymer (2018) and LaChance Adams & Lundquist (2013) discuss the neglect of phenomenologies of pregnancy in Western philosophy. Wynn (1997) and Welsh (2013) frame pregnancy as an ontologically complex state of being neither strictly one nor two subjects.

I expect to argue that there is a difference between biological individuality and subjectivity, and that to engage with existential questions of pregnancy we have to go beyond a purely biological approach, without removing it altogether.

2. Is a person necessarily Dasein?

Heidegger (1962) questioned what 'being' means and posited humans as 'Dasein,' an important facet of which is Being-towards-death. For Heidegger, death is one's 'ownmost possibility': something which can be experienced only by the dying person, not by anyone else. It is subjectivity that makes us Dasein, the special category of self-reflecting organism that is a being rather than an entity (Heidegger, 1962).

I will engage with the question of whether personhood and Dasein are conceptually identical, with reference to the philosophy of consciousness particularly when applied to continuity of identity (Parfit,

1984; Wiggins, 2001). I will argue that persistence of identity through time is a key element of Dasein as Being-towards-death (Heidegger, 1962).

In order to write this chapter I will revisit *Being and Time* both in the original German (Heidegger, 2006) and in translation (Heidegger, 1962). I will also engage with secondary sources regarding Being-towards-death as an essential facet of Dasein (Blattner, 1994; Heinämaa, 2010; Guignon, 2011; Buben, 2015), including criticisms of the foregrounding of death within Heidegger's ontology (MacAvoy, 1996; Kenaan & Senderowicz, 2022).

Following on from the previous chapter, I expect to argue that persons are Dasein; that consciousness is a necessary constituent of Dasein; and that Dasein is an important distinguishing factor between biological individuals and subjects.

3. Is a foetus Dasein?

Rodemeyer (1998) and Langfur (2014) discuss Dasein during development, but not specifically in relation to pregnancy loss or Being-towards-death. If pregnancy is an ontologically complex state of being neither one nor two (Welsh, 2013; Wynn, 1997), what does this mean for Dasein as Being-towards-death? If a pregnant person loses a foetus, *what is it that they are losing*? What does that loss mean for the complex not-one-not-two subjectivity of pregnancy? And what does *giving birth itself* mean for all of this?

The extent to which Dasein requires consciousness (Olafson, 1975) and the extent to which foetuses might be called conscious (Smith & Brogaard, 2003; Lagercrantz & Padilla, 2016) will be important questions in this chapter. Tentatively, I expect to argue that a foetus is not Dasein from the moment of conception, and put forward some suggestions for when Dasein might be said to set in.

4. Can a foetus die?

Heidegger (1962) delineated between the physical cessation of life, and death as an existential concept. I will discuss how subjectivity is important for death in the Heideggerian sense, and will argue that a Heideggerian death necessarily entails an ontological metamorphosis, rather than just an ontic state-change.

I will then examine whether a foetus can ever be said to die in the Heideggerian sense. I expect to argue that the foetus itself cannot be said to die, but that the cessation of the pregnancy holds a special ontological status within the pregnant person's experience of their own selfhood. If subjectivity in pregnancy involves a not-one-not-two-ness (Wynn, 1997; Welsh, 2013), then the question of what is lost when a foetus is lost is existentially complicated.

To engage with this question I will examine the literature around grief and loss with regard to miscarriage (Beutel et al., 1995; Brier, 2008; Frost et al., 2007; Kersting & Wagner, 2012) and compare it to how people grieve others they have lost (Rosenblatt, Walsh & Jackson, 1976; Tonkin, 1996; Stroebe & Schutt, 1998; Hardy-Bougere, 2008) as well as how people grieve the loss of elements of their own subjectivity (Nyström, 2006; Harris, 2015; Vehling & Kissane, 2018; Goto-Jones, 2021).

I expect to argue that pregnancy loss is an ontologically unique category. In some ways it is phenomenologically similar to losing a living loved one, but the identity of a foetus is intrinsically linked to the subjectivity of the gestator in a way that is not true of any other relationship. This distinction lies at the heart of debates about abortion within moral philosophy, law and medicine.

Beneficiaries and Impact

This project has implications for the philosophy of biology, particularly the metaphysics of individuality. It also has implications for what constitutes 'death' and 'birth.'

The project could see wide-ranging interest outside of the academy too, particularly with regard to abortion. Teasing apart distinctions of individuality and subjecthood could offer an important perspective on why moral debates around abortion are so contentious. Abortion is currently seeing a great deal of attention within law, medicine and popular media (Das, 2022; Glenza et al., 2022).

The project might inform how we approach people who are grieving miscarriages, which is a neglected area within psychotherapy (Shear et al., 2005; Barat et al., 2020) and medicine (Koopmans et al., 2013; Donaldson, 2019).

The project might also shed some light on the treatment of pregnant people and their decision-making processes within medical contexts, and demonstrate the importance of compassionate phenomenological approaches to practitioner-patient care.

Relevant experience

I am an existential psychotherapist working phenomenologically with clients. The training I have undertaken involved two years of psychotherapy and two years of existential philosophy. During my MA I published my first philosophy paper, a phenomenological enquiry about makeup and illness (Andekalithan, 2022). The final piece for my MA is a precursor to this proposed PhD: a phenomenological exploration of my experience of miscarriage, which has just been submitted to the *European Journal of Philosophy*.

Prior to becoming a psychotherapist I undertook research in psychology within a team at the University of Oxford. This gave me experience of engaging with meaningful topics from philosophical and psychological perspectives whilst ensuring that the real-world impact outside of the academy is not overlooked.

On a practical level, I read German and therefore have the capacity to engage with Heidegger's philosophy in the original language. I have also worked as a translator, so I have experience of understanding the linguistic nuances of texts.

Supervisory Team

My proposed supervisors for this project are Professor Woollard (Southampton) and Dr. Mitchell (Cardiff). Professor Woollard is one of a handful of philosophers to pay close attention to how pregnancy is not just biologically, but also epistemically, transformative (Woollard, 2020; 2022). Her work on pregnancy has been highly influential and has won a number of awards. Her current project 'Philosophical Issues in Pregnancy and Motherhood' brings together many different aspects of pregnancy and motherhood with application to moral philosophy (Woollard, 2016; 2018).

Dr. Mitchell's research focuses on the philosophy of mind and emotional experience (Mitchell, 2021) and highlights the relevance of twentieth-century existential phenomenology to embodied emotional experience (Mitchell, 2018; 2020). I therefore feel that this co-supervision would be the perfect match for my project, given its location between phenomenology of pregnancy, twentieth-century existentialism, and moral philosophy.