

## **When do I begin and end?**

When I begin and end depends on what kind of thing I am.

The two main contenders are (1) I am an animal (2) I am a person.

These are different because they have different persistence conditions. An animal persists for as long as it's alive. A person is a being with mental capacities, such as a sense of itself existing over time. A person persists for as long as the mental capacities persist, so he persists while he is asleep, but not if the capacities are lost irretrievably.

It is tempting to say we begin when we're born and end when we die.

But Plato thought I exist before my birth, as a soul. But I couldn't have existed as an animal before I was born, or at least before I was conceived. Could I as a person? I don't remember existing before I was born, but I could just have forgotten. Maybe I have kept the capacity to remember, but can't exercise it at the moment.

If I'm an animal, I began at conception, or some time afterwards. We'll come back to this.

If I'm a person, then I didn't begin then, for I didn't have any mental capacities then. It's not that I had the capacities but

wasn't exercising them. I didn't have them. I didn't begin as a person until I was, say, 18 months old.

But some people argue that I have always been a person, from the moment of conception. This seems wrong. For I had no mental capacities then. I had the capacity to *develop* the mental capacities of a person, but I didn't have those capacities. We'll come back to this.

Do I end only at death?

Perhaps I don't end at death, because there is an afterlife. But this seems unlikely if I'm an animal. I would have to be resurrected as the same animal. This is possible, but unlikely. If I'm a person, then I could survive in the afterlife. But what if I remembered nothing; what if I lost the capacity to recall anything? Then, I would have gone out of existence.

If I'm an animal, do I survive as a corpse? We use phrases like Robert Griffiths' corpse. Is that *my* corpse? We'll come back to this.

If I am a person, then presumably I could end before my death. Suppose I suffer severe brain damage and am in a permanent coma. Have I then ended, even if I haven't died? If the brain damage is severe enough perhaps I have died. I might be what is known as brain-dead, which normally counts as dead But what if

only my cortex is damaged and the lower parts of my brain still work so I can breathe on my own. Then I am counted as alive, and in a persistent, vegetative state. But I am no longer a person, am I? For I have lost all mental capacity.

If I end before I die, do I go to the afterlife, or do I have to wait until I die? The consensus seems to be that I have to wait.

### **In the Beginning**

Presumably, if I'm an animal, I can begin no earlier than conception. I do not begin in the male sperm or the female egg, but I might begin in the zygote that results from their joining together. If this is the case, then the precise moment of my beginning is hard to pin down because the process of conception takes time. Do I begin when the sperm penetrates the egg, or must I wait until the joining of genetic material has finished, the point known as syngamy? This makes the point of my beginning vague.

But there is a problem in supposing I begin as an animal this early. At any point in the first 21 days after conception, the zygote, which is a collection of undifferentiated cells, might split into two cells which go on to become twins. If I am a twin do I date my beginning from conception or from the moment of twinning? It must be from the moment of twinning, for at that point the original

zygote goes out of existence, so I am not identical with that. I cannot be identical with something that no longer exists.

If I am not a twin, should I also date my beginning from the last point where twinning was possible? Or should I date my beginning from conception? This is less clear. It is tempting to say that I can only date my beginning from the first moment after which twinning was no longer possible. And this is assuming I am not a person.

Do I begin only when I become an *organism*? Is the zygote an organism? Perhaps not. The zygote is a collection of undifferentiated, totipotential cells for several weeks. It is not clear which of its cells form the embryo and which the placenta. Any cell could be taken from it and could become a human being. Does that mean that the embryo is a collection of human beings? Some argue that only at gastrulation, about three weeks after conception, when the embryo's cells start to differentiate, is the embryo an organism. So I begin after three weeks.

When does a person begin? It would have to be some time between their 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year. But some people have argued that the person begins much earlier than that, even from conception. They argue that a human being is a substance that retains its essential properties throughout its existence. When it is 20 years old it is a person-substance. When it is a second old it is still a

person-substance for this is its essential property. A human being, on this view, is always a person-substance.

But the foetus doesn't function as a person, does it? It has no sense of itself existing over time, does it? To this it is said that the that the foetus has the *capacity* to see itself as existing over time, although it is not yet able to exercise that capacity. In this respect, it is said, it is only like a sleeping adult, or an adult in a non-permanent coma. Both these have the capacity to see themselves as existing over time, but cannot exercise that capacity. We should call them persons. So we should call a foetus a person.

However, it is not clear that a foetus has this capacity and is merely not exercising it. Given their more advanced brains, it seems to make sense to say of a sleeping person, or someone in a non-permanent coma, that they have the capacity to see themselves existing over time, but are not exercising it. But what the foetus seems to have is not this, but only a capacity to develop a capacity to see itself as existing over time. And this seems different. A foetus does not have the capacity to see itself as existing over time, but is merely not exercising it. It still needs to develop that capacity.

So, the various options are:

- 1) I am an animal and began at conception.

2) I am an animal and began 3 weeks after conception.

3) I am a person and began at conception.

4) I am a person and began 18-24 months after birth.

It's hard to know which of these to pick. My personal preference is for (2). I am an animal and began when the cells of my embryo began to specialise and I was safely implanted in my mother's womb.

But some people think we can't be animals. They think this because they think we have the persistence conditions of persons. Suppose Jones' higher brain is transplanted into Smith's animal. Who is Jones? If you think we are persons, you will say that the owner of the Smith animal is Jones. If you think we are animals, you will say that the Jones animal is Jones and he has lost his brain. There are arguments for both sides of this question. They would need another article. If you prefer to see yourself as a person, then you will probably prefer (4) above. It would mean that you began later than I did. Animals start earlier than persons.

### **In The End**

Suppose I suffer severe brain damage and pass into a permanent coma. My higher brain is destroyed but my lower brain still works and maintains my breathing. Have I come to an end? Not, if I'm an animal, because I'm still alive. Yes if I'm a person, because I have lost all the mental *capacity* of a person.

But legally, I am not dead, so have not legally come to an end by dying. Legally I still count as a living person, although what I really am is a living animal. The person has ended, even though the person has not died. So there are two ways a person can end, by dying (assuming no afterlife), or by losing all mental capacities.

But even if I died have I come to an end? For don't I continue to exist as a corpse? People might naturally refer to Robert Griffiths' corpse, as though Robert Griffiths still exists, but is dead, and now a corpse.

If I'm a person then when I die I come to an end. I don't exist as a corpse. I have been annihilated. If I'm an animal I do seem to exist as a corpse. I only go out of existence when I decay, or when I am cremated. Then I come to an end.

So again, there are choices:

- (1) I am an animal and I end when I die.
- (2) I am an animal and I end when I rot or am cremated.
- (3) I am a person and end when I die.
- (4) I am a person and end when I lose all mental capacity.

My preference is for (2). If you think you are a person, you probably go for (4) as this covers (3) as well. As I said, whether we are animals or persons is another paper.