



Is the foetus a part of the mother's body?

1. How to understand the question
2. Does it have a straightforward answer?
3. Where to look for an answer

How to understand the question

1. Is the foetus a part of the mother's body?
2. Is the foetus a part of the mother?
3. Is the foetus a part of the maternal organism?

Questions

1. Is the foetus' body a part of the mother's body?
2. Is the foetus a part of the mother?
3. Is the foetus a part of the maternal organism?

Questions

1. Is the foetal organism a part of the mother's body?
2. Is the foetus a part of the mother?
3. Is the foetus a part of the maternal organism?

Nine questions or one?

- If the mother = the mother's body = the maternal organism, then the foetus = the foetus' body = the foetal organism.
- Then the nine questions are equivalent: they ask whether the same relation holds between the same two entities.
- But most philosophers deny that people are organisms or are their bodies.

Do the nine questions at least have the same answer?

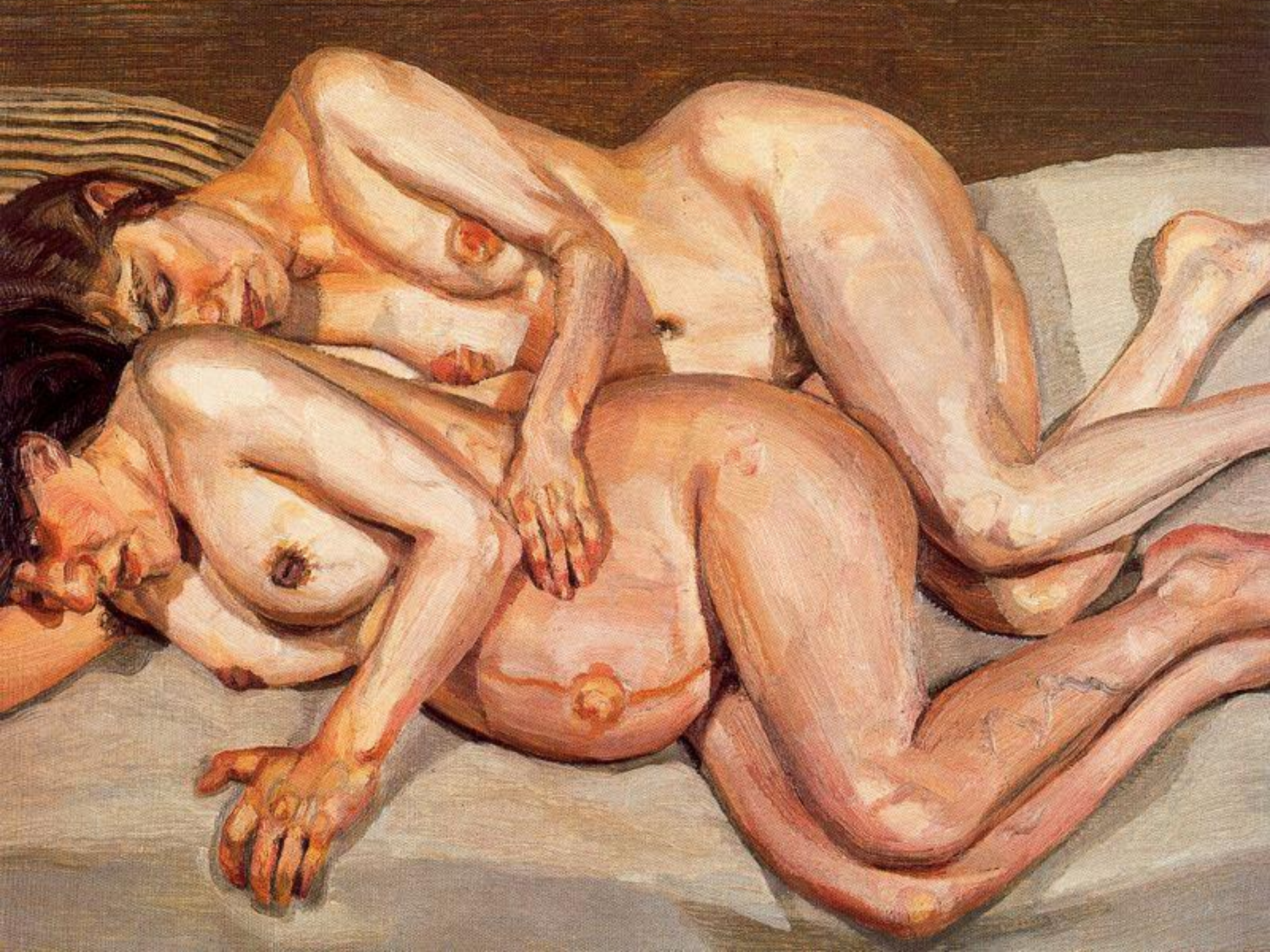
- Some say we are things that could not possibly have a foetus (or a foetal body or organism) as a part.
- E.g. immaterial substances, bundles of perceptions, parts of brains.
- Yet the foetus's body (if not the foetus itself) might still be a part of the mother's body.

Better question:

- Is the foetus' body a part of the mother's body?
- But what thing is the mother's body?
- x is y 's body iff... x ... y ...?
- Maybe a person's body is normally a biological organism.
- Or at least something the same size as an organism.

Idealizing assumptions:

1. The foetal organism is a part of the mother's body *iff* it is a part of the maternal organism.
 2. The foetus' body is a part of the maternal organism *iff* the foetal organism is a part of the maternal organism.
- We can ignore the difference between human organisms and human bodies for present purposes.
 - Then the interesting question is whether the foetal organism is a part of the maternal organism.



Does the question have a straightforward answer?

- Could the foetus be a part of the maternal organism in one sense not in some other, equally legitimate sense?
- There might be two different senses of 'organism', each as legitimate as any other.
- They might have different implications about when something is a part of an organism—specifically, whether the foetus is a part of a pregnant mammal.
- There might be objects satisfying both concepts.

The pluralist proposal

- Two different objects are equally good candidates for being the maternal organism, one having the foetus as a part and the other not.
- Call them the large mother and the small mother.
- Whether the foetus is a part of the maternal organism depends on which maternal organism we're talking about.

Pluralism: interesting implications

- There are two maternal organisms for every pregnant woman.
- Both exist before she gets pregnant (unless the pregnancy brings one of them into being or changes one from a nonorganism to an organism).
- They have the same parts then and are physically identical.

Interesting implications

- When they get pregnant, one organism (the large mother) gets bigger by acquiring the foetus as a part; the other (the small mother) remains the same size but comes to contain the foetus in a cavity within it.
- Why does one of the two organisms get bigger and the other one not?
- Not because of any physical difference.
- Physically identical objects, in identical circumstances, behave in different ways.

Further interesting implications

- That one gets bigger but not the other is not a matter of chance.
- Otherwise in a second pregnancy the small mother might get bigger while the large mother stays the same size.
- Or both might have got bigger the first time, contrary to the pluralist proposal.
- The large mother must have a dispositional property that the small mother lacks: the capacity to acquire a foetus as a part when pregnant.
- They differ in this way before they got pregnant.
- Their behaviour is affected by nonphysical properties.

Yet more implications

- The disposition to acquire (or not to acquire) the foetus as a part does not even supervene on a thing's physical properties: things can be physically identical yet differ with respect to the disposition.
- The two organisms don't have these dispositions because they get pregnant later.
- Presumably they would differ in this way even if they never got pregnant.
- So for every woman, whether or not she ever gets pregnant, there are two different organisms, physically identical throughout their careers.
- Why one but not the other has the capacity to acquire a foetus as a part is a mystery.

Really interesting implications

- The two maternal organisms might differ in other respects too, e.g. in their mental properties.
- Maybe the large mother is rational and intelligent (and so is a moral agent) and the small mother is not.
- Maybe a moral agent has certain rights over her parts.
- That might make abortion permissible in certain circumstances where it would not be permissible if the small mother were a moral agent and the large mother were not.

A less interesting variant of the pluralist proposal

- The ontology of temporal parts
- The large mother and the small one differ only in the size of their temporal parts located during their pregnancy.
- One simply occupies a larger spacetime region than the other.
- They do not have different dispositions.
- Asking why the small mother doesn't gain a new part at conception is like asking why June has only 30 days and doesn't extend into July.

Temporal-parts pluralism

- Because the only difference between the two organisms is whether the foetus is a part of them, the question of whether the foetus is a part of the maternal organism is a verbal one.
- It makes no difference to anything else which candidate we take to be the referent of the phrase 'the mother's body'.
- The question is metaphysically uninteresting.

Temporal-parts pluralism: ethical implications

- Both organisms are moral agents (if any organism can be a moral agent).
- Suppose it's permissible for an agent to have an abortion in certain circumstances if and only if the foetus is a part of her.
- Then it's permissible for the large agent to have an abortion but not for the small agent.
- But they cannot act independently.
- The same action would be both right and wrong.

·EVA·



EVA OCCIDENDO ORFIT

Is the foetus a part of the mother's body?

1. How to understand the question
2. Does it have a straightforward answer?
3. Where to look for an answer

Where to look for an answer

- Whether the foetus is a part of the maternal organism depends on what it takes for something to be a part of any mammal.
- This is a question about the metaphysics of organisms.

What is an organism?

- R. Wilson: an organism is an individual (material object) that
 1. is living during at least some of its existence,
 2. is part of a reproductive lineage, some of whose members can have an intergenerational life cycle, and
 3. has a certain sort of functional autonomy (while it's living).

What is an organism?

- van Inwagen: an organism is a material thing that has a life.
- A life is a self-organizing event or process that maintains the organism's complex internal structure.
- The materials an organism is made up of are intrinsically unstable and need constant repair and renewal. A life takes in new particles, reconfigures and assimilates them into the organism's living fabric, and expels those that are no longer useful to it. These activities enable the organism to retain its structure despite constant material turnover.
- Something is a part of an organism just if it is caught up in the organism's life—if its activities are among those making up that life.

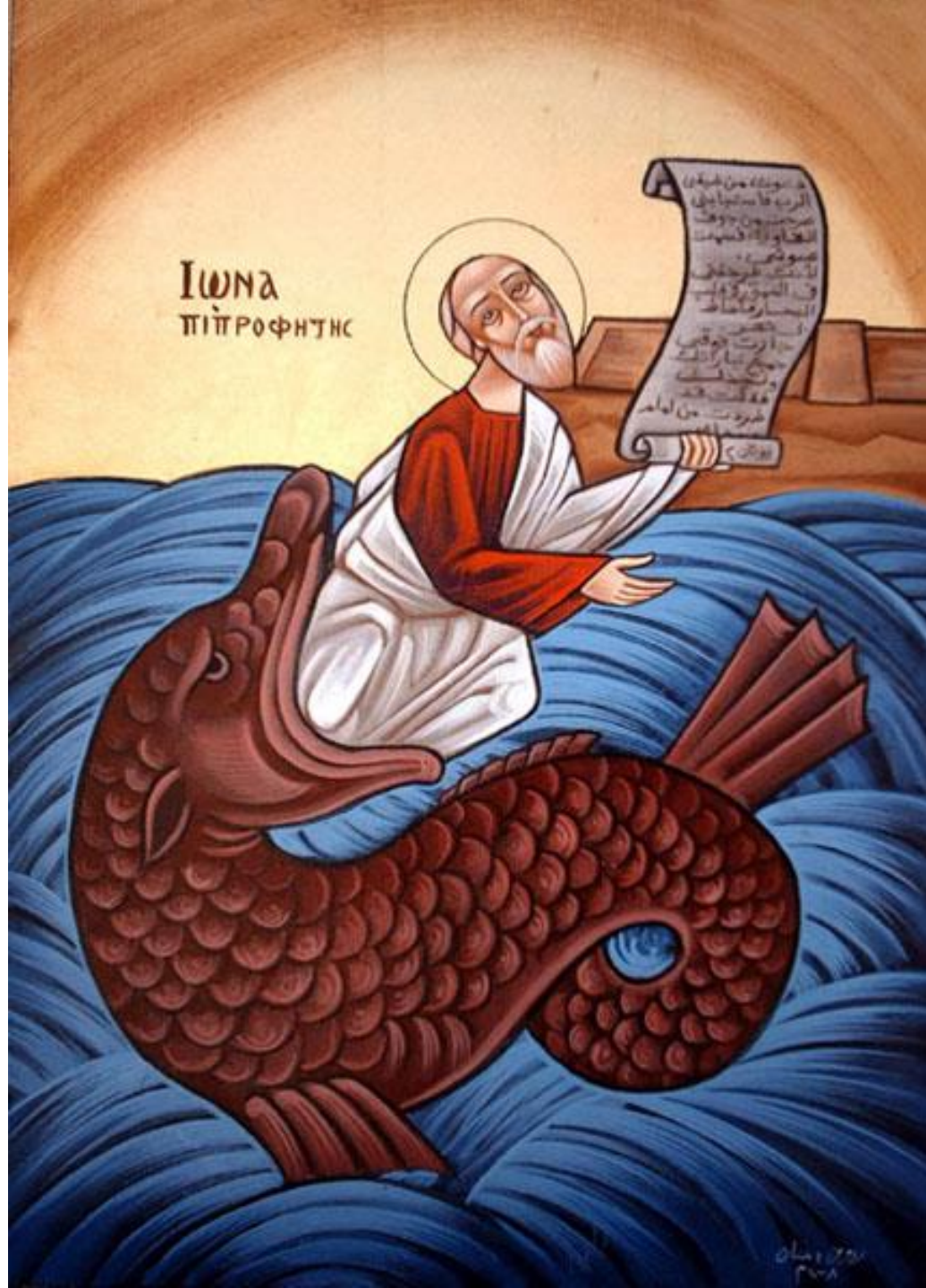
Where to look for an answer

- A foetus has a life of its own, and is an organism.
- Maybe an organism can be a part of another organism.
- An organism can be located within the outer boundaries of another without being a part of it.





ΙΩΝΑ
ΠΙΠΡΟΦΗΤΗΣ





van Inwagen's proposal

- An organism is a part of a larger organism just if its life is subordinate to the larger organism's life.
- Each cell of a complex organism has its own life.
- The activities making up the life of an individual cell, like those of an organ, are directed by the larger organism's life.
- The cells take their orders from the organism they're parts of.
- They have some autonomy (like the city council), but they're not autonomous in the way that independent organisms are.

van Inwagen's proposal

- The foetus is a part of the maternal organism just if the foetal life is subordinate to the maternal life: if the foetus takes its orders from the maternal organism in the way that the mother's cells and organs do.
- If not—if the foetus is like a parasite or a gut bacterium--then it's not a part.
- Which is the case may be hard to know, because the interactions between foetus and mother are many and complex.
- Or because idea of a biological life, or of one life's being subordinate to another, is not clear enough to tell us what embryological facts bear on the question.

Conclusions

- If van Inwagen is right, the foetus is a part of the maternal organism if it relates physiologically to it like the maternal cells and organs do.
- It's not a part of the maternal organism if its relation to it is like those of parasites and gut bacteria.
- If this is wrong or unhelpful, we'll need another account of what makes something a part of an animal.
- Any suggestions?

