The Term "Human Being" and the Problem of Abortion

Those who favor the practice of direct abortion usually maintain that the killing of a human fetus is not the killing of a human being. They admit that a fetus procreated by human parents is a living being and a human fetus. But they refuse to admit that a fetus is a living human being. Opponents of abortion, on the other hand, maintain that this is a deliberate dodge. If a box is small and blue then why not call it a small blue box ? Similarly, if a fetus is a human and a living being then why not call it a living human being ?

This objection is very important, and must be understood if the problem of abortion is ever to be got straight. The assumption being made, which I regard as mistaken, is that the meaning of a compound noun is always the result of a simple combination of non-ambiguous components and that this combination never involves a shift in meaning. But what fluent English speaker would seriously maintain that if a tray is made of ash it necessarily follows that it is an ashtray ? If black guards protect someone does this mean that they are necessarily blackguards ?

I do not wish to belabor this point. It is obvious that the meaning of a compound noun is not necessarily the result of simple addition. What is not as obvious is that there is a similar shift in meaning when "human" and "being" combine to form the compound "human being."

Part of the dictionary entries for "being," "fetus," "human," and "human being" read

*being*₁ → [Noun],	(That which has existence); ⟨SR⟩.*
*being*₂ → [Noun],	(Individual which has or has had an independent nature capable of sustaining and regulating its own metabolic pattern); ⟨SR⟩.
fetus → [Noun],	(Physical object), (Living), (Animal), (Vertebrate), (Unborn Progeny); ⟨SR⟩.
human → [Adjective],	(Of or pertaining to members of the family Hominidae); ⟨SR⟩.
human being → [Compound Noun],	(Physical object), (Living), (Animal), (Mammal), (Individual which has or has had an independent nature capable of sustaining and regulating its own metabolic pattern); ⟨SR⟩.

It is true to say that every human being is human. But given this lexical structure it is not true that every being that has human characteristics is a human being. Moreover, it is not true that every human fetus is a human being.

There are two reasons for the latter claim. First, the fluent English speaker understands that the word "being" is used ambiguously, that the sentence "Every human fetus is a human being" can be paraphrased to read "Every human fetus being₁ is a human being₂." Second, and more important, he realizes that the underlying structure of this sen-

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* This form of a dictionary entry is to be interpreted as follows: first, there is the orthographical representation of the word, then the syntactic marker, and finally, the lexical reading. The Selection Restriction, *SR*, expresses necessary and sufficient conditions for that reading to combine with others to form non-anomalous sentences. See Katz and Postal, *An Integrated Theory of Linguistic Descriptions* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1964), pp. 12–17; Jerrold Katz, *The Philosophy of Language* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), pp. 151–161.

tence is self-contradictory. For the fluent English speaker understands that to say that "Every human fetus being$_1$ is a human being$_2$" is in essence to say that "All unborn human progeny are born human progeny."

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