A Fallacy in Potentiality

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ABSTRACT: A popular response to proponents of embryonic stem cell research and advocates of abortion rights alike—summarized by claims such as "you came from an embryo!" or "you were a fetus once!"—enjoys a rich philosophical pedigree in the arguments of Hare, Marquis, and others. According to such arguments from potentiality, the prenatal human organism is morally valuable because every person's biological history depends on having completed embryonic and fetal stages. In this article I set out the steps of the underlying argument in light of how it has been cast in the philosophical literature and uncover an intriguingly illicit inference.

RÉSUMÉ : On répond souvent aux avocats de la recherche sur les cellules souches et à ceux du droit à l'avortement par une argumentation qui se résume à des affirmations comme : «vous provenez d'un embryon!» ou «vous avez déjà été un fœtus!» — ce genre de réponse appartient à une riche lignée philosophique qui inclut les arguments de Hare, Marquis et d'autres encore. Selon ces arguments fondés sur la potentialité, l'organisme humain prénatal possède une valeur morale parce que l'histoire biologique de chaque personne dépend de l'accomplissement des états embryonnaire et fœtal. Je présente ici les étapes du raisonnement qui se trouve au fondement de cette argumentation telle qu'elle est formulée dans la littérature philosophique. J'y découvre une inférence curieusement invalide.

Introduction

A popular argument against the destruction of the human conceptus plays on the fact that no one would presumably want the conceptus that became them to have been destroyed.[1] Since every human conceptus has the potential to become a human person, it is wrong to destroy any human conceptus for any reason which would not also warrant the killing of the resulting

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person. A conceptus gains the moral privilege to not be destroyed in the absence of overriding reasons because it initiates a causal trajectory that will likely result in a person. Without yet having a firm grasp of the steps in the argument, let us call this the "Trajectory Argument."

The Trajectory Argument has at least three important advantages. First, it neatly sidesteps the difficult question of whether the conceptus is a person. That is, there exists a causal trajectory from a specific conceptus to me, and since it would be morally wrong to kill me, it would have been morally wrong to destroy the conceptus that resulted in me, regardless of whether the conceptus that resulted in me was *me*—i.e., the same person as me—or even a person at all.

Second, the Trajectory Argument is backed by a powerful intuition: it would have been at least as unfortunate—and perhaps more so, since I would have been deprived of an extra day—for me to have been killed yesterday as today. Pushing the intuition further, it seems that if it is morally wrong to kill me, then it would have been morally wrong to destroy the conceptus which initiated the causal trajectory that terminates with me since the effect, my non-existence, is the same in either case. Generalizing, it is morally wrong to destroy any conceptus since doing so obliterates a trajectory that otherwise would likely have terminated with a person.

Third, the Trajectory Argument has the advantage of firmly backing an often deeply felt intuition that human life in *any* form is sacred and not to be lightly destroyed. Thus, opponents of embryonic stem-cell research can employ the Trajectory Argument to object to the destruction of embryos because embryos, regardless of whether or not they are persons, initiate the biological history of every person. Opponents of the use of drugs, such as the "Morning After" pill, that reduce the chances of implantation can raise the Trajectory Argument in order to point out that obstructing the normal course of development for a fertilized egg destroys the origin of a trajectory, an origin no different from that upon which every existing person has depended. Opponents of abortion rights can draw on the Trajectory Argument to argue for restrictions on a woman's right to choose to terminate a pregnancy because the fetus is likewise part of every person's trajectory. The Trajectory Argument is thus impressively general in its scope and application.

The advantages of avoiding a complicated puzzle, building on strong intuitions, and having broad application recommend the Trajectory Argument for close philosophical scrutiny. One wants to know, what are its steps, and is it, in the end, sound? I outline here the Trajectory Argument against the backdrop of its various incarnations in the philosophical literature. Carefully examining the key steps of the argument reveals a subtle yet fatal flaw: advantages notwithstanding, the Trajectory Argument is unsound.

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How Not to Cast the Trajectory Argument

To be sure, my introductory characterization of the Trajectory Argument is rough, and yet the argument is surprisingly difficult to set out. For the sake of simplicity, let time t = [1,n] be discretized into finitely-many arbitrary but equal time-spans such that t=n is the current time-span, or "now," and t=1 is the time-span of conception.

A First Attempt at the Trajectory Argument

(1) For any person X, if it is morally wrong to kill X at t, then it would have been morally wrong to kill X at t-1.
(2) It is morally wrong to kill J at n.
∴ (3) It is morally wrong to kill J at 1.
∴ (4) For any person X, if it is morally wrong to kill X at n, then it is morally wrong to kill X at 1.

This way of casting the Trajectory Argument will not do, however, because premise (1) is false. The moral-normative property J has of its being morally wrong to kill him is not inductive in the sense in which having the property at one time implies having it at another. Counter-examples are plentiful. The fact that it is morally wrong to kill me now does not imply it would have been morally wrong to kill me yesterday, since yesterday my killing may, alas, have been the only alternative to killing all the children on a school bus in some hopefully extraordinary circumstance. In general it is morally wrong to kill me *without sufficient reason*: sometimes reasons suffice; other times they do not.

The Time-Travelling Assassin

Perhaps, then, what matters for the Trajectory Argument is the trajectory itself, where one's trajectory is (loosely) understood as one's causal history. Since it is morally wrong to kill me now, I have *a fortiori* escaped extraordinary circumstances in which reasons and means would have sufficed to kill me. My trajectory inherits my moral value in such a way that it would have been morally wrong to obliterate my trajectory for the same reason that it is morally wrong to kill me now. Yet to assert that it would have been morally wrong to obliterate my trajectory is to imply, at least, that it would have been morally wrong, absent sufficient reasons, to erase the trajectory by destroying its origin. In short, it would have been morally wrong to destroy the conceptus that became me.

Modal moral claims can be especially slippery, so it may help to have a more concrete explanation of the intuitions behind the Trajectory Argument. Suppose an assassin is sent to kill me but finds that I am extremely hard to get. Intuitively, my would-be assassin might avoid a great deal of fuss by travelling back in time to destroy—perhaps by slipping my mother an abortifact—the conceptus that was to become me. The Trajectory

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Argument is grounded in the intuition that it would be just as morally wrong for the time-travelling assassin to destroy the conceptus that became me with the intention of obliterating my trajectory as it would have been for him to forthrightly kill me since the end result, my non-existence, is the same in either case. That is, if the time-travelling assassin's purpose is to bring about my non-existence, he does just as well destroying the conceptus that initiated my trajectory as directly killing me. The idea is that the terminus of a trajectory confers whatever moral value it has on the origin of the trajectory. Put this way, the Trajectory Argument requires two steps.

The Trajectory Argument, Step 1

(1) For any actions A and B, if A and B would have the same effect and A is morally wrong because of its effect, then B would have been morally wrong.
(2) For any person X, destroying the conceptus that initiated X's trajectory has the same effect of bringing about X's non-existence as killing X at t.
(3) For any person X, it is morally wrong to kill X at t without sufficient reason.
∴ (4) For any person X, it would have been morally wrong to destroy the conceptus that initiated X's trajectory without sufficient reason.
∴ (5) For any person X, if it is morally wrong to kill X at t without sufficient reason, then it would have been morally wrong to destroy the conceptus that initiated X's trajectory without sufficient reason.

I suggest we grant the first step of the Trajectory Argument. It may be possible to devise clever counter-examples to premise (1) or argue that destroying the conceptus does *not* have precisely the same effect as directly killing the terminus of a given trajectory. If the Trajectory Argument has such problems—and it is not at all clear that it does—it is important to appreciate that the Trajectory Argument is far from finished. At this point, the Trajectory Argument concludes that it would have been morally wrong to destroy the conceptus that initiated the trajectory of anyone it is presently morally wrong to kill, suppressing the "without sufficient reason" clause. An inference must be drawn from this conclusion to the further conclusion that it is morally wrong to destroy *any* conceptus, full stop. That is, the trajectory theorist needs to argue that the fact that it is morally wrong to kill a person at *some* point in their lives can be used to infer that it is morally wrong to destroy *any* conceptus.

The Trajectory Argument, Step 2

(6) For any person X and some time t, it is morally wrong to kill X at t without sufficient reason.
∴ (7) For any person X, it would have been morally wrong to destroy the conceptus that initiated X's trajectory without sufficient reason
(8) If, for any person X, it would have been morally wrong to destroy the con-

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ceptus that initiated X's trajectory without sufficient reason, then it is morally wrong to destroy any conceptus without sufficient reason.

∴ (9) It is morally wrong to destroy any conceptus without sufficient reason.

Presumably, the reasons that would suffice for destroying the conceptus that begins a given trajectory must be at least as strong as the reasons that would suffice for killing the person that ends the trajectory. The conclusion is not, therefore, vacuously true. The reasons that would suffice for destroying *any* conceptus must also be at least as strong as the reasons that would suffice for killing an adult, else the Trajectory Argument would lose its punch. Consequently, premise (8) is crucial: the Trajectory Argument must suppose that if it would have been morally wrong to destroy a conceptus and thereby eliminate a trajectory that has resulted in a person it is now morally wrong to kill outright without sufficient reason, then it is morally wrong in the absence of equally strong reasons to destroy *any* conceptus. But why should we think that premise (8) is true?

The Trajectory Argument's Philosophical Pedigree

The Trajectory Argument is striking because it represents a class of arguments philosophers have employed to argue that destroying the conceptus is morally wrong. In each case, the most challenging part of the argument has been to provide justification for analogues of premise (8). Indeed, differences in instances of the Trajectory Argument amount to different bases of justification. Examples include Hare (1975), Marquis (1989), Stone (1987), and, more recently, Pruss (2002). These are sometimes called "Potentiality Arguments" (Gosselin 2000), but not every argument that might be considered a Potentiality Argument is an instance of the Trajectory Argument. For instance, Noonan (1970, pp. 51-59) argues that the potentiality of the human conceptus to become a human being implies that the conceptus *is* a human being:

Noonan's Argument from Potentiality

(1) If a human conceptus is potentially a human being, then it is a human being.

(2) A human conceptus is potentially a human being.

∴ (3) A human conceptus is a human being.

Noonan's decidedly dubious inference from potentiality to identity is not an example of the Trajectory Argument insofar as it short-circuits the crucial step of arguing that it is wrong to destroy any conceptus, not because any conceptus is simply a human being, but because it would have been wrong to kill any conceptus that initiated the biological history of a person. Instances of the Trajectory Argument are identifiable by the justification they provide for Premise (8); they are distinguishable by the different bases of justification they provide.

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Hare's Argument

Hare, who tackles the problem of abortion and the human fetus instead of the more general problem of destroying the human conceptus at any stage of its development, argues that "[t]he single, or at least the main, thing about the fetus that raises the moral question is that, if not terminated, the pregnancy is highly likely to result in the birth and growth to maturity of a person just like the rest of us" (1975, p. 207). This potential of the fetus is morally problematic because, Hare claims, the fundamental moral principle that "we should do to others as we wish them to do to us" implies that "we should do to others what we are glad was done to us" (ibid.). In terms of the Trajectory Argument, we are presumably very glad that our trajectories were not eliminated by destroying the conceptuses that became us; hence we ought to refrain from destroying any conceptus in the absence of very strong reasons. In short, Hare seeks to justify the key move captured in premise (8) by a variation on the Golden Rule.

Hare's Argument for Premise (8)

(8.1) For any person X, it would have been morally wrong to destroy the conceptus that initiated X's trajectory without sufficient reason.
∴ (8.2) It would have been morally wrong to destroy the conceptus that initiated J's trajectory without sufficient reason.
(8.3) If it would have been morally wrong to destroy the conceptus that initiated J's trajectory without sufficient reason, then J is glad the conceptus that initiated J's trajectory was not destroyed.
(8.4) If J is glad the conceptus that initiated J's trajectory was not destroyed, then it is morally wrong to destroy any conceptus without sufficient reason.
∴ (8.5) It is morally wrong to destroy any conceptus without sufficient reason.
∴ (8) If, for any person X, it would have been morally wrong to destroy the conceptus that initiated X's trajectory without sufficient reason, then it is morally wrong to destroy any conceptus without sufficient reason.

Premise (8.3) is awkward but true: there are surely other reasons why J is glad the conceptus that initiated his trajectory was not destroyed, but those are also reasons why it would have been morally wrong to destroy the conceptus that became him. Premise (8.4), on the other hand, instantiates Hare's extension of the Golden Rule: J is glad the conceptus that became him was allowed to do so, so he ought to extend the same courtesy to any other conceptus.

Stone's Argument

Stone likewise focuses on abortion and the moral status of the human fetus, but, unlike Hare, he appeals directly to the potentiality of the fetus to become a person since "a strong fetal claim to protection rises or falls with the appeal to the fetus's potentiality, for nothing else can justify it" (Stone 1987, p. 815). He contends that "the fact that the fetus will develop

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into an adult human being that was once that fetus (if that fetus develops normally) establishes the fetus's right to life" inasmuch as "we have a prima facie duty to all creatures not to deprive them of the conscious goods which it is their nature to realize" (ibid., pp. 818-21). The conceptus is an organism whose nature it is to embark on a specific trajectory which will realize conscious goods. In other words, "the fetus will think, feel, and be self-aware if she develops normally. If we kill the fetus we deprive her of a welfare she would otherwise have realized for herself" (ibid., p. 823). Killing an adult is presumptively morally wrong because of the conscious goods realized by the adult; similarly, killing a conceptus is presumptively morally wrong because of the conscious goods it would have otherwise realized under normal development. The reason why it is morally wrong to kill an adult extends to any conceptus in virtue of their similar capacities for realizing conscious goods such as self-awareness and thought.

Stone's Argument for Premise (8)

(8.1) For any person X, it would have been morally wrong to destroy the conceptus that initiated X's trajectory without sufficient reason.
∴ (8.2) It would have been morally wrong to destroy the conceptus that initiated J's trajectory without sufficient reason.
(8.3) If it would have been morally wrong to destroy the conceptus that initiated J's trajectory without sufficient reason, then J has the capacity to realize conscious goods.
(8.4) If J has the capacity to realize conscious goods, then any conceptus has the capacity to realize conscious goods under normal development.
(8.5) If any conceptus has the capacity to realize conscious goods under normal development, then it is morally wrong to destroy any conceptus without sufficient reason.
∴ (8.6) It is morally wrong to destroy any conceptus without sufficient reason.
∴ (8) If, for any person X, it would have been morally wrong to destroy the conceptus that initiated X's trajectory without sufficient reason, then it is morally wrong to destroy any conceptus without sufficient reason.

Marquis's Argument

While Stone points to the moral value of realizing conscious states to justify a presumptive moral prohibition on the destruction of human conceptuses, Marquis locates the moral wrongness of destroying a conceptus in depriving it of a future, like ours, of great value. That is, the reason why it is wrong to kill an adult human capable of realizing intrinsically valuable conscious states is not just the resulting deprivation of those states but the deprivation of an entire, presumably valuable, future.

> What primarily makes killing wrong is neither its effect on the murderer nor its effect on the victim's friends and relatives, but its effect on the victim. The loss

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> of one's life is one of the greatest losses one can suffer. The loss of one's life deprives one of all the experiences, activities, projects, and enjoyments that would otherwise have constituted one's future. Therefore, killing someone is wrong, primarily because the killing inflicts (one of) the greatest possible losses on the victim. (Marquis 1989, p. 189)

Yet, a fetus will also be deprived of a similarly valuable future under normal development, hence the moral wrongness of killing an adult human generalizes to prohibit the destruction of the human fetus.

> The claim that the primary wrong-making feature of a killing is the loss to the victim of the value of its future has obvious consequences for the ethics of abortion. The future of a standard fetus includes a set of experiences, projects, activities, and such which are identical with the futures of adult human beings and are identical with the futures of young children. Since the reason that is sufficient to explain why it is wrong to kill human beings after the time of birth is a reason that also applies to fetuses, it follows that abortion is prima facie seriously morally wrong. (Ibid., p. 192)

Thus, Marquis's argument subsumes Stone's insofar as a necessary condition on the experiences constitutive of a valuable future is the capacity for conscious states. The style of Marquis's argument from deprivation is, however, very similar to Stone's.

Marquis's Argument for Premise (8)

(8.1) For any person X, it would have been morally wrong to destroy the conceptus that initiated X's trajectory without sufficient reason.
∴ (8.2) It would have been morally wrong to destroy the conceptus that initiated J's trajectory without sufficient reason.
(8.3) If it would have been morally wrong to destroy the conceptus that initiated J's trajectory without sufficient reason, then J has a future like ours of great value.
(8.4) If J has a future like ours of great value, then any conceptus has a future like ours of great value under normal development.
(8.5) If any conceptus has a future like ours of great value under normal development, then it is morally wrong to destroy any conceptus without sufficient reason.
∴ (8.6) It is morally wrong to destroy any conceptus without sufficient reason.
∴ (8) If, for any person X, it would have been morally wrong to destroy the conceptus that initiated X's trajectory without sufficient reason, then it is morally wrong to destroy any conceptus without sufficient reason.

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Pruss's Argument

For Pruss as for Marquis, the moral wrongness of killing me now consists of depriving me of the rest of my life, where the harm in killing is greater the farther back on a given trajectory the killing is done. The greatest harm that can be done in killing, then, is done in destroying the human conceptus. Killing me now does me great harm in depriving me of the rest of my life; killing the conceptus that became me would have done even greater harm in depriving the conceptus of all the life it has thus far been my privilege to enjoy. Pruss, though, takes this as an argument for why it would have been wrong to destroy the conceptus that became me. In effect, he uses deprivation as an argument to justify Step One of the Trajectory Argument. For Step Two of the argument—the task of justifying premise (8), in particular—Pruss employs a principle of justice: like cases ought to be treated alike. Pruss is brief: "If you cut me, do I bleed any more than the next guy? No. I was not and am not special. If it was wrong to kill me when I was a fetus, it was likewise wrong to kill anyone else when he was a fetus" (Pruss 2002, p. 181).

Strictly speaking, Pruss's claim that "it was likewise wrong to kill anyone else when he was a fetus" does no more than justify the generalization to (sub)conclusion (7): For any person X, it would have been morally wrong to destroy the conceptus that initiated X's trajectory. Nevertheless, Pruss's use of the above principle of justice can and should be extended in such a way as to justify premise (8), as follows.

Pruss's Argument for Premise (8)

(8.1) For any X, it would have been morally wrong to destroy the conceptus that initiated X's trajectory without sufficient reason.
∴ (8.2) It would have been morally wrong to destroy the conceptus that initiated J's trajectory without sufficient reason.
(8.3) The conceptus that initiated J's trajectory is similar in all morally relevant respects to any conceptus.
(8.4) If it would have been morally wrong to destroy the conceptus that initiated J's trajectory without sufficient reason and the conceptus that initiated J's trajectory is similar in all morally relevant respects to any conceptus, then it is morally wrong to destroy any conceptus without sufficient reason.
∴ (8.5) It is morally wrong to destroy any conceptus without sufficient reason.
∴ (8) If, for any X, it would have been morally wrong to destroy the conceptus that initiated X's trajectory without sufficient reason, then it is morally wrong to destroy any conceptus without sufficient reason.

What the Trajectory Argument Gets Right

Whether by appeal to general moral principles, such as the Golden Rule or Justice, or by appeal to the deprivation of intrinsic goods, such as the realization of conscious states or valuable futures, the Trajectory Argu-

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ment is by no means a trivial or easily refuted argument. It is, rather, a deep and interesting argument, and there is much, I contend, that it gets right.

Let us revisit my assassin. His intention is to kill me now. As a time-traveller, he can disrupt proximate causes for my continued existence—my respiration, say—or distal causes, such as the conceptus that initiated my trajectory. Destroying the conceptus that became me is morally wrong because doing so has the same outcome and is done with the same intention as directly strangling me. As the Trajectory Argument asserts in premise (1), the moral wrongness of bringing about *my* non-existence implies the moral wrongness of eliminating the origin of my causal history. This much, I submit, should be granted the trajectory theorist.

To be sure, my time-travelling assassin is an overachiever. It is careless to say that he kills me by destroying the conceptus that would become me, since at t=1 he is *not* destroying the conceptus that *would* become me or even *was* me.[2] Rather, he is destroying the conceptus that became me. The point is that even a hard-nosed Laplacean determinist will agree that it was not *inevitable* that the conceptus that initiated my trajectory would result in me: no conceptus is *fated* to result in some one person or, indeed, anything. For the determinist, outcomes might differ on different initial causal conditions. For the indeterminist, outcomes might differ even on the same initial causal conditions. Where the outcome of a conceptus is concerned, a number of different trajectories are possible: many of these trajectories stop abruptly; others, because of the complex interplay between genetic and environmental factors, result in other, possibly similar persons; one trajectory happened, as a matter of fact, to result in me. At t=1 all of the outcomes, including me, are possible, so, in destroying the conceptus that became me, the assassin is bringing about not only my non-existence but the non-existence of all the other persons who might have resulted from the many trajectories which could have been initiated by the conceptus that became me. In intentionally disrupting a distal cause of my existence, my assassin has also intentionally disrupted the distal cause of possibly many persons.

It is unclear whether my assassin's overachieving strengthens the trajectory theorist's case or not, since it is hard to see how merely possible persons have moral value. Still, even though the overachieving assassin may not be any *more* morally blameworthy than had he simply strangled me, he is nevertheless *at least* as morally blameworthy. To wit, the trajectory theorist's case is not weakened by the possibility of many trajectories. It would be morally wrong for an assassin to travel back in time with the intention of disrupting a distal cause of me by destroying the embryo that became me—as morally wrong as it would have been for him to disrupt a proximate sustaining cause of me by, say, strangling me.

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The Pacifist Assassin and the Meddling Friend

The fault of the Trajectory Argument lies in its second step, not its first. Specifically, the generalization from the moral wrongness of destroying conceptuses that became specific persons to the moral wrongness of destroying any conceptus which underwrites premise (8) is illicit.

To see the problem, contrast the following two cases. Suppose, in the first case, that my assassin is a pacifist. He is frankly horrified at the violence necessary to disrupt any proximate cause of my continuing existence. Yet he would not slip my mother an abortifact at t=1—it still seems violent to him and he has in any case craftier means available. He instead goes *further* back in time and conspires to befriend my father so as to interest him in someone other than my mother. By playing matchmaker, the pacifist assassin intentionally brings about my non-existence as surely as if he had given my mother an abortifact or directly strangled me. The trajectory theorist must grant what premise (1) requires: if the effect (my non-existence) and the intention (bringing about my non-existence) are the same, then the pacifist assassin will have done his job no matter which distal cause he chooses to disrupt or how distant the cause.

Contrast the case of the pacifist assassin with the case of the meddling friend. Suppose the woman who would have been my mother has a close and protective friend who disapproves of the man who would have been my father. The meddling friend convinces my would-be mother to avoid my would-be father, and my would-be mother ends up settling down with someone else. The meddling friend has thereby ensured my non-existence. Is she my assassin?

Crucially, the moral wrongness of disrupting the relationship that might have resulted in the conceptus that might have resulted in me derives from the moral wrongness of intentionally bringing about *my* non-existence. I, an actual person, anchor one end of a particular trajectory. Wanting to eliminate me, the pacifist assassin tracks the trajectory backward and eliminates *it*, thereby eliminating me.

In the case of the meddling friend, however, no trajectory is anchored because there are no trajectories. The effect of the meddling friend's meddling is not to obliterate an already existing trajectory, or even to bring about my non-existence. Rather, the effect of her meddling is to ensure that none of an indefinite number of merely *possible* trajectories become actual. Notice that she cannot intend to bring about my non-existence even if it were her intention to keep my mother and father from having children because, say, she fears they would be especially unattractive and slow-witted. That is, even if it is her intention to stop my parents from having children, it cannot be her intention to stop them from having *me*. Unlike the pacifist assassin, the meddling friend cannot be accused of my murder.

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Premise (8) asserts that the moral wrongness of destroying the conceptus that happened to become me suffices for the moral wrongness of destroying any conceptus. This is an illicit generalization. The reason why it would be morally wrong to destroy the conceptus that became me—namely, to bring about the non-existence of an actual person, me—does not extend to the act of destroying some arbitrary conceptus now is that there is no *actual* person one could intend to, or even would, eliminate by destroying the conceptus. At most there is a possible person, and we surely have no more moral duty to possible people than the meddling friend has to my parents' possible children.

Premise (8) is an illicit generalization. It is morally wrong for the pacifist assassin—but not for the meddling friend—to keep my parents from having children by interfering with their courtship because the pacifist assassin does so with the intention of thereby bringing about my non-existence. I anchor the trajectory so eliminated in the sense that the pacifist assassin must begin with me at t=n, trace my trajectory back to t=1, and go back to some t=-j to ensure my trajectory is eliminated. The pacifist assassin can only have the intention of bringing about my non-existence if he is also a time-traveller. The meddling friend, on the other hand, is not a time-traveller. At the time of her meddling there is no actual anchor to make the elimination of possible trajectories morally wrong.[3]

It follows that each of the arguments for premise (8) set out above is unsound. In each argument there is an illicit slide from assertions about trajectories anchored by actual persons to assertions about merely possible (unanchored) trajectories. Hare's premise (8.4),

> If J is glad the conceptus that initiated J's trajectory was not destroyed, then it is morally wrong to destroy any conceptus,

taken as an instance of the moral principle "we should do to others what we are glad was done to us," is false insofar as there are no others in the case of unanchored trajectories. Stone's premise (8.5),

> If any conceptus has the capacity to realize conscious goods under normal development, then it is morally wrong to destroy any conceptus

is false since only those conceptuses with trajectories anchored by actual persons have the capacity to realize conscious goods, which is just what the "under normal development" clause presupposes. A merely possible conceptus, or an actual conceptus whose trajectory terminates before being anchored by an actual person, has no such capacity. Similarly, Marquis's premise (8.5),

> If any conceptus has a future like ours of great value under normal development, then it is morally wrong to destroy any conceptus

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is false since only those conceptuses that happen to initiate trajectories anchored by actual persons have a future like ours of great value. The "under normal development" again signals an anchored trajectory, whereas the consequent encompasses all trajectories, whether anchored or not. Finally, Pruss's premise (8.3),

> The conceptus that initiated J's trajectory is similar in all morally relevant respects to any conceptus

is false because there is one highly relevant moral respect in which the conceptus that initiated J's trajectory differs from other conceptuses: it initiated a trajectory J anchors. Conceptuses with unanchored trajectories have no such morally relevant property.

Conclusion

To press the argument, the trajectory theorist might assert that every conceptus is fated to become some one particular person. That is, the trajectory theorist might hold that each conceptus embarks on a unique trajectory which inevitably results in some specific person, so that destroying the conceptus amounts to intentionally eliminating the unique and inevitable terminus of that trajectory. But this is absurd: no outcome of a conceptus is inevitable since there might, indeed, be no outcome. Equivalently, the trajectory theorist bears the burden of explaining in what sense the meddling friend is an assassin and why we do not ordinarily put meddling friends on trial for murder.

The trajectory theorist might then fall back to asserting that destroying the conceptus that initiated my trajectory just *is* to kill me, since it and I are the same person. The problem is that on this move the Trajectory Argument's virtue of avoiding any assumptions about the status of the conceptus as a person is altogether lost. There is no reason to think that this move is anything but the wholesale abandonment of the Trajectory Argument, since it amounts to putting forward another common but very different argument:

The Personhood Argument

(1) It is morally wrong to destroy a person without sufficient reason.
(2) A conceptus is a person.
∴ (3) It is morally wrong to destroy a conceptus without sufficient reason.

In short, it may be morally wrong to destroy a conceptus, but the fact that I was once a conceptus cannot be used to show it.

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Notes

1 I follow Noonan (1970) in using "conceptus" to refer to any stage of human development from conception to birth.

2 In saying this I depart from Stone and Pruss, who incorrectly judge it important to the Trajectory Argument that the conceptus that became me be identical to me (Stone) or that the conceptus that became me would become me (Pruss). Since Stone and Pruss also differ from Hare and Marquis in arguing that the fetus is a person—which arguments Stone and Pruss correctly judge irrelevant to the Trajectory Argument—it may be that their assertion of more than a merely causal relationship between me and the conceptus that became me serves as a back door for personhood.

3 The case of the pacifist assassin and the case of the meddling friend are deliberately intended to avoid confusions over the so-called Contraception Reductio. According to this argument, the Trajectory Argument is unsound because, if it were not, it would be morally wrong to use contraception. The Contraception Reductio will only persuade those who find a prohibition on the use of contraception absurd. Moreover, it presumably would have been morally wrong for my assassin to surreptitiously start my mother on a birth-control regimen.

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