Warren and Marquis on Abortion, part 2

Don Marquis

Futures Like Ours

- The argument over abortion has been debated by debating the conditions necessary/sufficient to have a right to life. Opponents seek a capacious sufficient condition which a fetus will meet, so that a fetus will have a right to life. Advocates seek a restricted necessary condition which fetuses do not meet.
  - Both claims appear plausible.
  - Both claims are subject to the same difficulties:
    * for the anti-abortionist, there are scope problems: cancer cells are genetically human, but they don’t have a right to life.
    * If ‘human’ means ‘morally human’, then the anti-abortionist’s argument is question-begging.
    * for the defender of abortion, there are scope problems: infants and the severely mentally ill aren’t given a right to life.
    * If ‘person’ is taken as a moral category, then the defender of abortion’s argument is question-begging in the same way that the anti-abortionist’s argument is question-begging.

- So we reach a stand-off. We must look elsewhere to settle the question of the morality of abortion.

- Marquis: let’s ask another question: what makes killing wrong?
  - Killing is wrong because it brings premature death; it deprives us of future conscious life worth living.
    * When we say that it is life worth living, we don’t mean that we now value that life. Rather, we mean that we value that life when we are living it (or that we would value it when we were living it). Else, we’ll have to say that suicidal people don’t have a life worth living.
  - In general: killing is wrong when it deprives a being of a future like ours (FLO).

- Some data that speak in favor of the FLO account of the wrongness of killing:
  - It is not wrong to kill somebody who is permanently unconscious.
– If a person is at the end of their life and faces only pain and suffering for the rest of their existence, we do not think that killing them (with, eg, a large dose of morphine) is wrong.

– It is wrong to kill sentient, rational aliens.

– It is wrong to kill infants.

• This account of the wrongness of killing affords the following argument that abortion is wrong:

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P_1 \text{ Killing is wrong when it deprives a being of a future like ours.} \\
\quad P_2 \text{ A fetus has a future like ours.} \\
\quad C \text{ Abortion is wrong.}
\]

**Objections and Replies**

• Objection: Having some kind of consciousness is necessary for having interests, and having interests is necessary for being a moral agent. Since fetuses don’t have consciousness, they are not moral agents, and killing them cannot be wrong.

  – Reply: if that were so, then it wouldn’t be wrong to kill the temporarily unconscious. But it is wrong to kill the temporarily unconscious. So that can’t be so.

• The FLO account of the wrongness of killing entails that it is wrong to use contraception, or even to abstain from having sex, since doing so keeps there from being a being with a future like ours.

  – Reply: In the case of contraception and abstaining, there is no being which is being deprived of a future like ours.

  ∗ Objection: yes there is—there’s the spatially-separated sperm and egg pair which is being deprived a future like ours.

    · Reply: why suppose that this is the subject of harm? Why not the sperm alone, the egg alone, or any of the other sperm who might have had a chance at getting to the egg, or the pair of those sperm with the egg? There is no non-arbitrary way to determine the subject of harm, so there is no subject of harm.