

# THE COMPLEX PROBLEM OF ABORTION

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The problem of the morality of abortion is one of the most complex and controversial in the entire field of applied ethics. It may therefore appear rather surprising that the most popular proposed “solutions” to it are extremely simple and straightforward, based on clear-cut universal rules which typically either condemn abortion severely in virtually every case or else deem it to be morally quite unproblematic, and hence permissible whenever the mother wishes. This polarised situation in the theoretical debate, however, is in clear contrast with the abortion law in many countries (including Britain), where abortions are treated very differently according to the stage of pregnancy at which they are carried out, so that early abortions are permitted relatively easily, whereas very late abortions are sanctioned only in exceptional cases. It seems likely, moreover, that in thus taking account of the time of an abortion, the law genuinely reflects the weight of public opinion - there may be no overall consensus on the underlying moral issues, but it does appear to be part of “commonsense” morality to accept that, whatever the ultimate rights and wrongs of abortion in general may be, at any rate abortion early in pregnancy is morally greatly preferable to late abortion. Let us call this “the developmental view”, since it holds that the moral gravity of abortion increases with the degree of development of the fetus.<sup>1</sup>

It is, as I have said, surprising that the theoretical debate on such a complex issue should be so polarised. But what is far more surprising, and even paradoxical, is that the various polarised positions, which are so at odds with each other, should all present themselves as the logical working out of the commonsense moral framework which is itself far more moderate than any of them.<sup>2</sup> This I dub the “polarisation paradox”, and one of the primary aims of this paper is to investigate what lies behind it, and how it might be resolved. My diagnosis will be that the abortion debate has been polarised precisely because it has been grossly oversimplified, in that the various protagonists have tended to look for a single general rule to solve the entire problem, when a relatively subtle and sensitive approach would be far more appropriate to the complexity of the issue. Once the search for a simple solution is abandoned, we shall see that it is relatively easy to provide some justification for the commonsense developmental view, and in doing so, to undermine the appeal of the extreme positions which have hitherto held the field. I shall here be able to offer no more than a sketch of how such a justification might go, but I hope that this sketch will be enough to suggest that progress can be made.

All this, however, may seem somewhat academic to those of a strong religious persuasion, whose part in the abortion debate has been too significant to ignore, but who are likely to be quite unimpressed by appeals to

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<sup>1</sup> For simplicity, I shall generally use the single word “fetus” indiscriminately to refer to the conceptus, zygote, pre-embryo, embryo, and fetus, so that the word will carry no implications concerning stage of development.

<sup>2</sup> I shall often speak, apparently uncritically, of such things as the “commonsense moral framework” and even of commonsense moral “intuitions”. Such language should not be taken to indicate any particular meta-ethical view, or any naive illusions about the existence of a unified and coherent moral consensus - it is simply a way of referring concisely to those widely shared “intuitive” moral beliefs (such as that it is wrong to kill children but permissible to kill mosquitoes) to which any moral theory which hopes to gain general acceptance must ultimately be answerable. To keep the paper reasonably accessible, I have tried to make my arguments entirely independent of meta-ethics, and have generally framed them using the standard terms (“moral status” etc.) of the popular debate, even though the moral ontology which such terms suggest seems highly problematic. I am confident, however, that a more critical meta-ethical approach would lend further support to my overall position (for example, in providing additional theoretical justification for my appeal to the “principle of sympathetic respect”). on pages 178-180).

“commonsense” morality when they believe themselves to have at hand a far more authoritative and reliable moral guide. It is important to face up to this issue, for (at least in the West) the Christian religion has been the inspiration for most of those who have, over the years, advocated an extreme “conservative” position. Before turning to the main business of the paper, therefore, it is appropriate to ask whether, for the believer, religion can legitimately cut through the complexities of the moral debate, and establish independently the sort of extreme position which I am here opposing. I shall argue that it cannot, and that therefore even the religious believer, if he wishes to achieve a rationally defensible view, cannot expect to ignore or bypass the twists and turns of this complex moral debate.<sup>3</sup> We shall also see, incidentally, that the most prominent conservative tradition, that of the Roman Catholic Church, provides a far less secure foundation than is generally supposed even for a purely religiously-based rejection of the commonsense developmental view.

### ***Why Religion Provides No Simple Answer***

Although it is very common for those on the conservative side of the abortion debate to appeal to religion to support their case, such an appeal is far more problematic than is usually appreciated. One very obvious point is that, at least in any pluralist society such as our own, all religious principles are themselves highly controversial, so that those who base their opposition to abortion on the authority of, say, the Roman Catholic Church, can expect to convince only those who already share similar religious commitments. Moreover even those Roman Catholics who are convinced by such an appeal to authority may be reluctant to impose their views on people outside the Church: it is perfectly consistent to believe that something is wrong without also believing that one has a right to prohibit others from doing it.<sup>4</sup> Such an imposition of one’s own moral views on others is likely to seem particularly questionable when those views are overtly based on religious doctrines which are themselves very hard to defend.<sup>5</sup>

It is, then, at least problematic to appeal to religious authority in order to establish any law which is to be binding on those of other faiths or of none. But perhaps surprisingly, there are also serious practical and theoretical difficulties even for the rational believer who wishes to base his personal moral opinions on such an authority. Two of the most serious of these difficulties derive from the doubtfulness of many religions’ moral implications, and the relative certainty of some “commonsense” moral beliefs. The first difficulty can perhaps best be illustrated by giving a brief sketch of the history of the Roman Catholic attitude to abortion, by far the most significant religious influence on the abortion debate in the West.

### **Roman Catholic Teaching on Abortion**

It seems to be almost universally assumed in public debate that the Roman Catholic position on abortion has always been clear, straightforward, and historically consistent. It is indeed true that the Roman Church has always condemned the vast majority of abortions, but this condemnation has over the years been made with greatly differing force, on the basis of a variety of reasons, and with a changing list of exceptions and qualifications. Catholic theologians have disputed at great length about the moral implications of Christianity, but many of their arguments, which have been highly influential in determining the development of the Church’s official doctrine,

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<sup>3</sup> In philosophical contexts it is hard to avoid “sexist” language grammatically but without clumsiness, and I have therefore conformed to the traditional policy of using masculine pronouns to include both sexes. I sincerely hope that this policy will cause no offence to the reader, even if he happens to be female.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of precisely this issue see Lee (1986) chapter 2.

<sup>5</sup> For my own view on the rationality of the belief in a supremely good God, whose will is therefore morally authoritative, see Millican (1989).

would probably now seem very questionable to many of those who nevertheless ascribe great authority to the current official position. This position is that the fetus is to be treated as a human person from the “first instant” of conception, and that abortion is therefore tantamount to homicide, excusable only in cases where it is an indirect effect of medical intervention whose direct intention is to save the mother’s life, as in the case of the removal of a Fallopian tube in an ectopic pregnancy, or the removal of a cancerous uterus. We shall see that it is far from clear whether modern Roman Catholics should feel themselves committed to endorsing such a doctrine.

Much of the historical Christian debate was centred around the interpretation of *Exodus* 21:22-25, the only passage of obvious relevance in the Old Testament. In the Revised Standard Version this is translated as follows:

<sup>22</sup> When men strive together, and hurt a woman with child, so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no harm follows, the one who hurt her shall be fined, according as the woman’s husband shall lay upon him; and he shall pay as the judges determine. <sup>23</sup> If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, <sup>24</sup> eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, <sup>25</sup> burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

It is clear from the context that “harm” here means harm to the woman, but in the influential Greek *Septuagint* version, this passage was mistranslated to state that “you shall give life for life” not only where the mother dies, but also where a “formed” fetus dies (that is, a fetus sufficiently developed to have a recognisably human form). Over the centuries most prominent moral theologians (e.g. Jerome, Augustine, Gratian, Lombard, Aquinas, Sanchez, Liguori)<sup>6</sup> accordingly drew a distinction between the abortion of an early (“unformed”) and of a late fetus, usually taking only the latter, at most, to be equivalent to homicide, on the grounds that only a “formed” fetus could be “ensouled”. The *Septuagint* mistranslation may have been indirectly influenced by the Aristotelian theory of progressive ensoulment,<sup>7</sup> which was itself to have a significant independent impact on scholastic thought (principally through Aquinas) after Aristotle’s major biological writings had been translated into Latin near the beginning of the thirteenth century. According to Aristotle the fetus is initially infused with a nutritive or vegetative soul, then a sensitive or animal soul, and finally manifests a rational or human soul at the (misleadingly named) stage of “animation”, occurring after about 40 days of gestation in the case of males, and 80 to 90 days in the case of females. Like the Exodus passage from the *Septuagint*, this theory was understood to imply that early abortion is not homicide, since it does not involve the killing of a being with a human soul.

None of this should be taken to suggest that the Church condoned early abortion, except in a small number of very special cases. For early abortion was indeed condemned, sometimes as strongly as late abortion, but *not* on the grounds that it was tantamount to homicide. The usual complaint was instead that it was “contrary to nature”,<sup>8</sup> so that early abortion would thus be on the same level as the supposedly fairly serious sin of contraception. Most took the two to be roughly equivalent, though Sanchez, for example, thought contraception to be the more unequivocally evil, because of its association with sexual pleasure, whereas early abortion he took to be sometimes permissible. It was not until after the Second Vatican Council in 1965 that the modern distinction was clearly drawn, with abortion at any stage, but not contraception, being declared a “horrible crime”.

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<sup>6</sup> For references to the work of these theologians, and for further details on the historical points that follow, see Dunstan (1984, 1988), Engelhardt (1974), and especially Noonan (1971).

<sup>7</sup> See Dunstan (1988) for evidence of this influence.

<sup>8</sup> An appeal to what is “natural” is still very common amongst both religious and non-religious anti-abortionists, but unfortunately tends to beg the question. For clearly much medical treatment that would be enthusiastically defended by them (e.g. the use of incubators and life-saving drugs) is “unnatural” in the obvious sense, while many manifest evils (such as earthquakes, floods, drought, and pestilence) have been entirely due to natural causes, so it is hard to draw the distinction which they require without relying on other controversial moral or religious considerations.

The distinction between early and late abortion seems to have lost favour for two principal reasons. First, medical advances began to suggest that the development of the fetus was gradual from conception onwards, with no sharp discontinuity to mark the supposed event of ensoulment. The *Medico-Legal Questions* (1621) of Paolo Zacchia was particularly influential in thus undermining the Aristotelian orthodoxy in medical circles (and, much later, amongst theologians), though Zacchia himself retained the idea that late abortion was significantly more serious than early abortion. The second, and theologically more crucial, objection to progressive ensoulment came in the nineteenth century from the increasingly popular cult of the Immaculate Conception of Mary: the doctrine (with no biblical foundation) that Jesus' mother was herself conceived without sin. The point here was that the feast of the Immaculate Conception had been finally settled in the previous century as 8th December, exactly nine months prior to the feast of her birth on 8th September. This looked quite illogical unless Mary's sinless rational soul had come into being at the time of her physical conception, and accordingly, when Pius IX in 1854 "infallibly" proclaimed the Immaculate Conception as a dogma of the church, he stated that Mary had been free from sin "in the first instant of her conception". Consistently, it was this same Pope who, in 1869, finally gave implicit official endorsement to the doctrine of immediate animation, by extending the ultimate punishment of excommunication to all abortions, with no distinction between early and late.

From all this it can be seen that the Roman Catholic position on abortion has developed over a long period subject to many influences, including the interpretation and (mis-) translation of biblical texts,<sup>9</sup> prominent philosophical theories,<sup>10</sup> the development of biological science, many moral judgements about related issues such as contraception and sexual behaviour, and, not least, consistency with theological doctrines.<sup>11</sup> A strict Roman Catholic may be confident that the seal of Papal Infallibility on the Immaculate Conception is sufficient to guarantee the doctrine of immediate animation,<sup>12</sup> and therefore to demonstrate that all abortion is homicide. But for any Christian who has no such confidence, and in particular, for one who denies the traditional belief in the wrongness of contraception and the associated negative attitude to sex, it is far from clear that the Church's historical debate on abortion provides any convincing evidence for the claim that Christian principles require opposition to abortion in virtually all cases, let alone for the extreme Roman Catholic view that all abortion is homicide. Indeed it seems a betrayal of the Church's distinguished history of ethical debate to presume that any such simplistic answer can be derived straightforwardly from the essential core of Christianity. Applied Christian moral teaching has always been influenced by the science and philosophy of its time: it has never been an exercise in purely *a priori* deduction from religious first principles. Thus for example the interpretation of the central Christian command to "love one's neighbour" has always been determined, in the context of abortion, by contemporary views on the stage at which the fetus begins to count as one's "neighbour", that is, as a person. For most of the history of Christianity it has been accepted that this question is a factual one, not a question of fundamental religious doctrine but one subject to metaphysical and scientific investigation and discovery. Modern Roman Catholics who appeal to the current orthodoxy as though any faithful Christian must immediately endorse it on religious grounds alone, are therefore contradicting the spirit of the very tradition to which they appeal.

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<sup>9</sup> For a sober assessment of the various biblical passages that have been thought relevant to the abortion debate, see Wilkinson (1988) pp 232, 252-8.

<sup>10</sup> Aristotelianism was by no means the only major philosophical influence here - Stoicism for example significantly moulded the early Christian attitude to sex.

<sup>11</sup> Including those concerned with immortality and infant baptism.

<sup>12</sup> Such a person might do well to read the classic and trenchant attack on the doctrine of infallibility provided by Salmon (1888).

## The Moral Route to Knowledge of God's Will

Any reasonable religious believer who is aware of the multitude of faiths, of the equal commitment and conviction of many of those who follow them, and of the lack of independently compelling arguments to vindicate any one of them, must surely acknowledge that, from an objective point of view, his religious beliefs are somewhat less than certain. Also, as we have seen, the moral implications of any particular religion can themselves be very uncertain, and even where they are not, there can be serious doubt as to the legitimacy of imposing them on others. Furthermore, and very significantly, all of these three uncertainties will multiply together and thus amplify, indicating that any direct inference from religion to morality is likely to be highly problematic. But there is yet another important point, related to this, which becomes apparent when we focus on the inference in the reverse direction, from morality to religion.

The point is a simple one, probably best made with an extreme example. Suppose that I am a devoted Christian, with what I take to be strong grounds for my faith (based on personal religious experiences, perhaps), and that I also believe, on similar grounds, that Christianity commits me to accepting the entire Bible as the inspired word of God. Reading it one day, I come across the following passage:

<sup>16</sup> [When you make war against] the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, <sup>17</sup> but you shall utterly destroy them, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the Lord your God has commanded.

*Deuteronomy 20:16-17 (RSV)*

No doubt my initial reaction in such a case would be surprise that a good God should order the genocide of six whole nations, but the standard fundamentalist response is to provide God with excuses: “no doubt the Hittites, the Amorites and all the rest were appallingly corrupt, worshipping golden calves and performing other such evil deeds, so that they indeed deserved to die, and since God is not only good but also perfectly just, He had to give them what was coming to them”, or something of that kind. But it is arguable that such a response itself manifests gross moral corruption; that if there is one thing here that I can be totally sure of, it is that multiple genocide and the slaughter of children is an abomination, and that to advocate such things is unequivocally evil. No matter how convinced I am of my religion, or of its fundamentalist implications, there is simply no way that I can justifiably be more sure of these things than I am of that simple moral truth. So even if my reasons for taking the Bible as the inspired word of a good God are compelling by any *normal* standards, nevertheless those reasons will be completely dwarfed by my certainty of the wrongness of genocide. I should conclude either that this passage in the Bible does not express God's will, or else that a good God does not exist (although of course a different Supreme Being might exist, such as an evil one, but then presumably we would be wrong to obey such a being).<sup>13</sup>

To put this more generally, in some cases our independent moral judgements may be more reliable than our religious speculations - indeed the history of theological dispute suggests that this will often be so. But then, if there is a God and He is good, it follows that our most reliable route to knowledge of His will may be through independent moral argument rather than through theology. The consequences of this are considerable. For example it is all too often taken for granted that any Christian must endorse similar moral views to those taken by other Christians down the centuries: views typically based on absolutist principles rather than on the weighing of consequences. But if our independent moral thinking leads us to conclude that utilitarianism, say, is correct, then

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<sup>13</sup> I explore the implications of this last possibility in Millican (1989). In particular, I begin by attempting to refute the suggestion that “what the Supreme Being wills” is good by definition (a suggestion famously attacked in Plato's *Euthyphro*) by showing not only the moral, but also the epistemological and religious unacceptability of understanding His “goodness” in a way that would make it entirely different from human goodness.

this *need* not imply that we must choose between our belief in a good God and our confidence in that moral thinking - we might instead conclude that God is Himself a utilitarian, no doubt with His own excellent and thoroughly consequentialist reasons for having advocated (if indeed He did so) a straightforward absolutist morality in less sophisticated times!

To conclude, it is clear that all religious beliefs are uncertain, while the practical moral implications of the world's major religions are in many cases equally uncertain. On the other hand, sometimes our moral thinking can be compelling on its own terms, without any appeal to religious authority, and with a force sufficient to overrule any such authority if the two conflict. Putting all these points together, it follows that even for the committed believer, religion gives no easy escape from examining, on their own merits, the rights and wrongs of moral issues, and in particular, of abortion.

## ***The Shape of the Abortion Debate***

Before embarking on an examination of some of the arguments that have been most prominent within the abortion debate, it is worth first briefly considering the nature of applied moral argument in general. We can then see how the debate fits into a standard pattern, an insight which may provide the key to its eventual resolution.

### **The Need for a Moral Baseline**

A fundamental point, first noticed by David Hume (Hume 1740 pp.469-70) and accordingly known as “Hume’s Law”, is that moral rules cannot be logically derived from purely non-moral facts: hence any argument that is validly to yield a moral conclusion must include at least one premise which is (explicitly or implicitly) morally loaded. Now if any such argument is to be not only valid but also convincing, the moral premise in question must obviously be accepted in advance by those who are to be persuaded of the conclusion: if they do not accept that crucial premise, then the argument will be powerless to persuade them of anything.<sup>14</sup> It therefore follows that effective moral argument can never take place in a moral vacuum, but has to begin from some baseline which is (at least in the context) taken for granted.

The moral baseline from which the abortion debate starts is constituted by various judgements about the morality of killing and reproduction which are, within our culture, almost universally accepted (albeit with some controversial exceptions for special cases, such as the voluntary euthanasia of a terminally ill adult, killing in war, or judicial capital punishment):

- The killing of an adult or a child is a serious wrong, and should accordingly be punished by law
- The killing of a higher animal such as a rabbit, though perhaps morally significant, is not a serious wrong, while the killing of a lower animal such as a mosquito is morally insignificant
- The use of contraception, if wrong at all, is at most a minor wrong, while the killing of an unfertilised ovum or the removal of a tumour (at least if performed at the request of the “patient”) is morally quite unproblematic

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<sup>14</sup> Strictly this is somewhat oversimplified, since a persuasive moral argument can have an indirect form, in which for example a moral premise is shown to lead to an unacceptable conclusion, the point of the argument being not so much to deduce anything from that premise, but rather to demonstrate its own falsity. Likewise, much moral investigation takes the form of an attempt to find a “best fit” between theory and “intuition”, rather than merely involving deductions from a pre-established baseline. It obviously remains true even here, however, that such moral discussion can only get started on the basis of at least some antecedent moral agreement.

The arguments used by anti-abortionists accordingly attempt to show that abortion should be classed with the killing of an adult or child, whereas those used by pro-abortionists attempt to equate it instead with such things as the killing of an animal, the removal of a tumour, or the use of contraception. Let us look first at three very crude attempts to establish such equivalences.

### **“Hole-in-One” Arguments**

The arguments below might be called “hole-in-one” arguments, because they purport to establish sweeping conclusions in a single logical stroke. They correspond to three extreme positions within the abortion debate, which we can for convenience name the “Conservative”, “Feminist”, and “Liberal” positions respectively (using capitals to signify these particular, polarised views).

“Conservative”: *The Human Being Argument*

1. The fetus is a human being
2. Killing human beings is wrong
- ∴ Killing the fetus is wrong

“Feminist”: *The Woman’s Body Argument*

1. The fetus is part of a woman’s body
2. A woman has a right to do whatever she wishes to any part of her body
- ∴ A woman has a right to kill her fetus

“Liberal”: *The Person Argument*

1. The fetus is not a person
2. Only persons have any moral status
- ∴ The fetus has no moral status

All of these three arguments are manifestly valid - that is, anyone who accepts their premises is rationally committed to accepting their conclusion. But precisely for this reason no opponents who have their wits about them are the least bit likely to accept the premises. Imagine, for example, a dispute between a Feminist and a Conservative which revolves around the Woman’s Body Argument. Initially, I would guess, many Conservatives will be likely to accept the second premise, that a woman has a right to do what she wishes with her body, but will resist the argument by rejecting the first premise, that the fetus is part of her body. Now let us suppose that the Feminist is able to support this premise, at least as regards the very early pre-embryo, by persuading the Conservative that the ovum is part of a woman’s body, and that fertilisation leaves this status unaffected. This may be unlikely, but suppose he is convinced. What then? Will he give up and renounce his position on abortion? Of course not! He will simply conclude that his initial acceptance of the plausible second premise was too hasty, that although in most cases a woman has a right to do what she wishes with her body, there is after all at least one very important part of her body to which this principle does not apply - namely the fetus. And he is not being manifestly unreasonable in taking this position, for even if it is agreed that the fetus is part of its mother’s body, it is clearly a very unusual and untypical part, with certain unique properties which may well be morally relevant (for example, it is arguably the only part of her body that has future interests distinct from her own). Hence it is surely dubious to assume that its “moral status” can simply be extrapolated from this sort of general principle, whose apparent obviousness clearly derives from parts of the body which do not share these unique properties.

An exactly parallel problem arises with the other two arguments. It may be possible for the Conservative to convince the Liberal that the fetus is a human being, for it is apparently a living being and is certainly of the species *Homo sapiens* rather than any other, but if the Liberal is persuaded of this then he can simply deny that killing human beings is always wrong, on the grounds that there are important exceptions to this rule, namely fetuses! (not to mention sperm and unfertilised ova, which by the Conservative's reasoning seem also to be "human beings"). And again this denial is not manifestly unreasonable, for even if the early fetus is indeed a human being, it is so strikingly different from other human beings (e.g. in its lack of activity and sentience) that there must be some legitimate doubt as to whether the conventional absolute prohibition on killing humans should be understood as applying equally to it. As for the Person Argument, the Conservative is likely to accept the first premise, that the fetus is not a person (at least if "person" is defined in what seems to be a fashionable way,<sup>15</sup> as a self-conscious being), but if he does so he is sure to reject the second premise, since he presumably does not believe that only persons have moral status - after all, according to him fetuses have moral status even if they are not "persons". If the Liberal then responds by claiming that "person" is a moral notion, and that persons are *by definition* those beings which have moral status, then perhaps the Conservative could be forced to accept the second premise, but he will now of course immediately deny the first instead, on the grounds that its meaning has changed: if "person" means not a self-conscious being but one with moral status, then the fetus, since it indeed has moral status, is, after all, a person.<sup>16</sup>

The lesson to be drawn from all of this is similar in some ways to one which we drew from our consideration of religion. There we saw that a valid argument which yields moral conclusions from religious premises, for example:

1. Christian principles are true
2. Christian principles imply that genocide is sometimes permissible
- ∴ Genocide is sometimes permissible

can always be turned on its head by someone who denies the moral conclusion. Such a person will either conclude that (some) Christian principles are false, or alternatively, will deny that Christian principles condone genocide. Likewise in the case of the three "hole-in-one" arguments above: it is simply naive to suppose that they can ever persuade anyone of the truth of their conclusion, for someone who starts out denying that conclusion is overwhelmingly unlikely to accept the premises which so obviously entail it. Even if persuaded by the first (apparently factual) premise, the opponent in each case will be able to resist the conclusion simply by rejecting the second (moral) premise, and because it is a moral premise which he rejects, no purely factual investigation will be able to show him to be mistaken - we have a straightforward clash of moral opinions, and no progress whatever.

Hume's Law indicates that the same will be true of any such simple moral argument: if it is valid then at least one of its premises must be morally loaded, and someone who begins from a contrary moral position, even if persuaded to accept all the purely factual premises of the argument, can always consistently reject that moral premise, and with it, the conclusion. In any "hole-in-one" argument the relation between moral premise and moral conclusion will inevitably be very straightforward, so that anyone who denies the conclusion will indeed almost certainly be happy to deny the premise. To make any progress in moral debate, therefore, we must look to arguments which probe much more deeply into our moral concepts, and which, rather than crudely appealing to a

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<sup>15</sup> Discussions of abortion which invoke this kind of criterion of personhood and moral significance include Harris (1985) chapter 1; Tooley (1983) especially chapter 5; Warren (1973) pp 54-7.

<sup>16</sup> A similar ambiguity, between a purely descriptive and a moral notion, is possible in connection with the term "human being". Warren (1973 p 53) suggests that the Human Being Argument derives its superficial plausibility from such an ambiguity.



single explicit principle, instead either aim to tease out the more subtle implications of our general moral framework, or else try to show how some of the plausible moral principles to which the opponent already feels committed are in fact conflicting, so that his moral position must be revised. Perhaps the best examples of such arguments within the abortion debate are the liberal “Argument from Speciesism” (which is of the first type), and the conservative “Argument from Potentiality” (which is of the second).<sup>17</sup>

### **The Argument from Speciesism: the Fetus as an Animal**

The Argument from Speciesism is intended to show that the standard conservative appeal to the moral significance of the fetus’ humanity, as manifested for example in the Human Being Argument, is morally repugnant (the term “speciesism” was coined to suggest an analogy with racism and sexism). Those who advance this argument typically go on to provide an account of moral status based on “personhood” rather than species membership, so it is often used as a prelude to the Person Argument sketched earlier. As presented below, the argument starts from the principle of universalisability - that any basic moral principle must employ only “universal” terms, in other words, terms which can be completely defined without any mention of particular individuals (or of particular groups of individuals).<sup>18</sup> This gives the argument a theoretical basis but a rather more technical feel than it usually has in popular accounts: most frequently, the first two steps are omitted,<sup>19</sup> and readers unaccustomed to such philosophical niceties are welcome to omit them here.

1. A being’s moral status can only depend on its morally relevant “universal” properties, and not, for example, on its colour (which is universal but not morally relevant) nor on its individual identity (which is not a universal property and therefore *cannot* be morally relevant)
2. Membership of the species *Homo sapiens* is not, in itself, a universal property<sup>20</sup>
3. Hence membership of the human race is not morally relevant, any more than membership of the Caucasian race is morally relevant
4. Therefore the moral status of any human being cannot depend just on the fact that it is human - it must as an individual have whatever properties (perhaps feelings and desires, rationality, self-consciousness, capacity for action and for relationships) endow something with that status

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<sup>17</sup> The most notable “feminist” contribution to the debate is probably that of Thomson (1971), though she does not endorse the extreme Feminist position presented above. Her “Famous Violinist Argument” would certainly need to be taken into account in any comprehensive treatment of abortion, but I do not discuss it here because it does not, like the other arguments we are discussing, address the question of the status of the fetus. For useful criticism, with which I am broadly in sympathy, see Hursthouse (1987) chapter 5.

<sup>18</sup> Thus would-be basic moral principles such as “everybody should obey *me*”, or “all foreigners should be deferential to the English” would be not only morally absurd but even logically unacceptable.

<sup>19</sup> Many liberals apparently take it to be *obvious* that a being’s species is in itself morally irrelevant (for example Glover 1977 pp 50-51; Harris 1990 pp 69-70), and therefore see no need for a theoretical argument to that conclusion (Tooley 1983 pp 61-77 is the most notable exception). Singer (1979) presents an explicit two-stage argument from universalisability in which he first (pp 10-12, 18-19) uses it to derive a principle of “equal consideration of interests”, and then (pp 48-54) goes on to deploy this derived principle against speciesism.

<sup>20</sup> The point here is that to be human is not just to have those universal properties which are common to humans: a synthetic copy of a man made by an advanced alien civilisation might have these properties, but would not be a member of our species, because it would not be related to the common stock of humanity. Thus any definition of what it is to be human must inevitably mention particular individuals or particular groups, and this is what violates the principle of universalisability. It may seem surprising that Kant, considered by many the apostle of universalisability, states that we should “always treat humanity ... as an end” in one of his formulations of the Categorical Imperative, often quoted by conservative moralists (Kant 1785 p 91). But it is clear from the context that Kant is no speciesist, since his rule is intended to apply to any *rational* being - he simply knows of no others.

5. The morally relevant universal properties (feelings and desires, rationality etc.) of the mature members of other species of mammals greatly exceed those of a human fetus
- ∴ The moral status of a human fetus cannot be greater than the moral status of an animal such as a mature rabbit, and so since we do not consider a rabbit to have a serious right to life, neither should we attribute such a right to the human fetus

Such an argument is very powerful, since it is based so immediately on the fundamental and widely respected principle of universalisability (or less technically, on obvious considerations of fairness between species). At the very least it presents a serious challenge to anyone who would accord humanity a favoured moral status, to justify that status in terms which are themselves morally respectable. Here, then, we are not left with a crude moral standoff between the two sides, for if the conservative fails to meet the challenge of the Argument from Speciesism, then he must apparently reject a principle which is widely thought to be constitutive of our whole moral framework.

### **The Argument from Potentiality: the Fetus as a Child**

The Argument from Potentiality can be seen as an attempt to meet the challenge of alleged speciesism, by highlighting a morally relevant difference between the human fetus and other animals, a difference which depends not on their current properties, but on their future possibilities. A simple version of this argument is as follows:

1. Although the human fetus may currently have none of the *actual* properties (feelings and desires, rationality etc.) that confer moral status, nevertheless it has the *potential* to acquire them, in that it will naturally develop into a mature human possessing all of these properties to a high degree
  2. No non-human animal has the potential to develop into a being whose morally relevant actual properties are of a similar degree to those of a mature human
  3. If any property is morally relevant, then the potential to acquire it is also morally relevant
- ∴ A human fetus has some morally relevant universal properties (namely, its potentialities) which would justify conferring on it a greater moral status than that of any non-human animal

Here we reach the heart of the abortion debate. For it seems fairly clear that the Argument from Speciesism is correct to claim that the early human fetus, on the basis merely of its existing observable properties, cannot possibly merit the special moral status which the conservative wishes to ascribe to it. So the only non-speciesist and non-religious ground which can be given for its claimed intrinsic special status is that of its potential: it may not *currently* have the properties which we take to be of supreme moral significance, and which mark our species out from all others, but in the course of time, if the fetus is allowed to develop normally, it *will* have them - it therefore has *now* the *potential* to become a mature human being with all that this implies.

The crucial premise in this argument is the third, which we might call the “potentiality principle”, and the argument’s power will depend greatly on the interpretation and justification of this premise. The conservative’s usual strategy here is to argue that a commitment to this principle is already implicit in the generally accepted “moral baseline” beliefs from which the abortion debate starts - in particular, our almost universal belief in the serious wrongness of killing young children.<sup>21</sup> If the conservative is successful in showing that the only way of making sense of this belief is in terms of a child’s potentiality, then the consistent liberal will be faced with a

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<sup>21</sup> See for example Stone (1987) pp 820-3. Devine (1978 chapters II and III) appeals to the wrongness of both infanticide and the killing of the reversibly comatose to reject what he calls the “present enjoyment principle” (that a being’s rights depend only on its present qualities) in favour of a potentiality principle.

dilemma - either to give up his belief in the serious wrongness of killing infants, or else to acknowledge that he is, after all, implicitly committed to the serious wrongness of abortion.

### **Potentiality Criticised: Abortion as Contraception**

Liberal critics of the potentiality principle have generally tried to refute it directly by showing its implausible consequences rather than attempting to undermine it by proposing an alternative account of the high moral status of infants. Some, indeed, have seen no need of such an alternative account, and have accordingly been prepared to countenance the moral acceptability of infanticide.<sup>22</sup>

The standard liberal “refutation” of the potentiality principle can be set out as follows:<sup>23</sup>

1. According to the conservative, killing the fetus is seriously wrong not because of its actual properties (feelings and desires, rationality etc.), but solely because it has the potential to develop into a mature human being
2. However the unfertilised ovum and the sperm, taken as a pair, also have the potential to develop into a mature human being
3. Hence on the conservative’s potentiality principle, the unfertilised ovum and sperm have a similar moral status to that of the fetus, and it is therefore seriously wrong to kill them
4. If it is seriously wrong to kill the unfertilised ovum and sperm, then contraception is a morally serious offence
5. But contraception is not a morally serious offence.

∴ The conservative’s potentiality principle is false

It may be that the fourth step here could be disputed, on the grounds that contraception often merely allows the ovum and sperm to die rather than killing them, but even if it were plausible this objection would hardly matter, since the third step by itself is damaging enough to the conservative. And since this step seems to be directly implied by the first two premises, the conservative who bases his case on the Argument from Potentiality has no alternative but to challenge the symmetry which these premises allege, between the potentiality of the fetus and that of the unfertilised ovum and sperm.

The usual conservative response at this point is to draw a distinction between a strong sense of potentiality (which applies only to the fetus) and a weak sense (which applies to the ovum and sperm).<sup>24</sup> One basis for drawing such a distinction is the claim that the fetus, unlike the ovum and sperm, not only has the potential to *bring about* the existence of a future adult human being, but also, if it does so, will be *one and the same individual* as that adult. So the ovum and sperm may have the potential to *produce* an adult human being, but only the fetus has the potential to *become one*.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Most notably Kuhse and Singer (1985) chapter 6; Singer (1979) pp 122-6; Tooley (1983) chapter 11.

<sup>23</sup> For example Glover (1977) p 122; Harris (1990) pp 70-71; Kuhse and Singer (1982) pp 61-62; Tooley (1983) pp 182-3. Singer and Dawson (1988) extend this standard objection, with added force, to the case of human embryos *in vitro*.

<sup>24</sup> See for example Buckle (1988) pp 93-96 (though Buckle is no conservative); Johnstone (1982) pp 49-50; Stone (1987) p 818.

<sup>25</sup> Very difficult and controversial issues arise here concerning identity and individuation in the pre-embryo stage. See for example Dawson (1988); Holland (1991); Kuhse and Singer (1990).

Again the liberal can reply, maintaining the equivalence of ovum and fetus. He might, for example, appeal to the possibility of parthenogenesis (whereby a single ovum can develop without fertilisation) to ascribe to the unfertilised ovum precisely that strong potentiality which the conservative ascribes to the fetus. And again the conservative can respond, by adding to his strong notion of potentiality the requirement that the individual concerned must have the capacity not only to become an adult, but to do so under its own, natural, internal genetic control, without the sort of artificial external manipulation which successful parthenogenesis would presumably require. Yet again the liberal can come back, pointing out that the development of the fetus is not itself entirely under internal genetic control (and not at all initially), but like that of the parthenogenetic ovum is crucially dependent on a number of “epigenetic” influences.<sup>26</sup> And so the debate goes on, with the conservative repeatedly attempting to establish a moral asymmetry between the fetus and the ovum/sperm pair, and the liberal continuing to dispute it.

### ***The “Polarisation Paradox”***

There is a conspicuous feature of the abortion debate which, in the light of what has been said above, may seem highly paradoxical. We have seen that moral argument in general must start from a baseline of mutually accepted moral beliefs, and typically proceeds by attempting to uncover the (sometimes deeply hidden) implications of those baseline beliefs. Furthermore it is clear that the principal arguments within the abortion debate fit comfortably into this pattern: both the pro- and anti-abortionist arguments fundamentally appeal to commonsense moral principles (such as the serious wrongness of killing children), or to more subtle general features of the commonsense moral framework (such as universalisability or fairness). It is very surprising, therefore, that most of the participants in this debate appear to be drawn by these arguments towards highly polarised positions which seem to square very badly with the baseline of commonsense morality from which they supposedly begin. Let us call this the “polarisation paradox”. It is perhaps best illustrated by spelling out some of the logical consequences of the three extreme views outlined earlier, all of which have what would surely seem to the uncommitted to be implausible and indeed quite unacceptable moral implications.

### **Unacceptable Implications of the “Conservative” Position**

On the “Conservative” view, abortion is as bad as the deliberate killing of an adult, at no matter what stage in pregnancy it is carried out, and it is therefore wrong even where the mother is an eleven-year-old girl, and even where her pregnancy is only a few hours advanced, and is moreover a result of rape. Abortion may possibly be justifiable where it is necessary to save the mother’s life, but even in this case the doctor who performs it is in the dubious position of murdering one individual to save another (*the doctor* cannot plead self-defence, even if the mother could). Conservatives are typically also opposed to euthanasia, and if so they will reject abortion even in cases of diagnosed genetic disease, and even where the disease is so serious that others might be inclined to kill the fetus out of mercy, to save it from a life which will inevitably and foreseeably be nasty, painful and short (e.g. Tay-Sachs disease or Duchenne muscular dystrophy).

Not surprisingly, however, some of the most implausible consequences of the Conservative view are associated with very early pregnancy, where an ascription to the fetus of the same moral status as an adult seems particularly hard to take seriously. First, it implies that the intra-uterine device, and any variety of drug that similarly acts partly by preventing implantation, is a potential murder weapon rather than a mere contraceptive, whose knowing use presumably warrants suitable punishment: at a time when the burgeoning population is already putting the

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<sup>26</sup> For details see Johnson (1989) pp 2-4.

planet's resources under considerable stress, the effect of prohibiting so many of the Third World's most effective contraceptives can only be imagined. A second consequence of the Conservative position is that countless morally significant lives (estimated at 50% of fertilised ova)<sup>27</sup> are being regularly lost in early pregnancy, through spontaneous abortion - surely the consistent Conservative should support attempts to avoid this appalling loss of life, by promoting research on methods to help bring these unfortunate fetuses to term. No matter that it seems likely that a high proportion of them are chromosomally abnormal, and aborted for that very reason: if they have the same status as an adult human, then we should presumably make serious efforts to help them survive.<sup>28</sup> Consistent Conservatism, therefore, would not only seriously hamper efforts to control Third World population growth, but would also apparently entail spending an ever-increasing proportion of the developed world's budget on coping with its own population boom which, if spontaneous abortion were significantly reduced, would be made up very largely of a massive increase in the proportion of severely handicapped infants.<sup>29</sup>

### Unacceptable Implications of the "Liberal" and "Feminist" Positions

Just as the extreme Conservative view seems particularly implausible at the beginning of pregnancy, so the extreme "Liberal" and "Feminist" views seem equally implausible at the end of pregnancy and beyond. For according to the Liberal who bases his position entirely on the Person argument given earlier (and who, typically, understands a "person" to be a being whose mental life significantly exceeds that of a newborn baby), even the eight- or nine-month fetus, and even the young baby after its birth, have no moral status whatever, and could therefore be killed (or, say, donated for scientific experimentation) without compunction and for any reason however trivial: because the fetus moves or the baby cries too much, because it is the "wrong" sex, or even perhaps for entertainment. The extreme Feminist position shares these implications in so far as they affect the unborn fetus, for this is supposedly a part of the mother's body and can accordingly be removed, with no more thought than would accompany a haircut, should the mother so choose - for example if a termination at seven months will save her the nuisance of having to postpone a trip abroad.<sup>30</sup> Surely most would consider these to be conclusions almost as evidently objectionable as the sanctioning of genocide: if the Liberal and Feminist arguments really have these implications, then so far from justifying their conclusions, they only succeed in revealing the unacceptability of their premises.

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<sup>27</sup> The estimate that 50% of fertilised ova might be lost through spontaneous abortion is quoted by Potts *et al.* (1977) p 60: the figure is very uncertain, since most spontaneous abortions probably occur before the mother is aware that she is pregnant. Of those pregnancies which survive long enough to be recognised clinically, only about 15% abort spontaneously (Bieber and Driscoll 1989 p 59).

<sup>28</sup> It seems that between 30% and 60% of spontaneously aborted fetuses have chromosomal abnormalities (Bieber and Driscoll 1989 p 63). The Conservative might try to salvage a plausible policy here by appealing to the distinction between acts and omissions, so that killing early embryos will be wrong, but allowing them to abort permissible. However a complementary problem could arise in the case of an embryo with cleavage arrest, incapable of progressing beyond the early stages of cell division. Suppose that such an embryo were able to implant and survive indefinitely *without* intervention - how could the strict Conservative, who endorses the Human Being Argument, justify its (surely desirable) termination, since on his own principles it is apparently a human being?

<sup>29</sup> Even without an appeal to the distinction between acts and omissions, the Conservative need not be committed to the prevention of as many spontaneous abortions as is medically possible (just as he need not be committed to maintaining large numbers of elderly patients indefinitely on life-support systems), since available resources will obviously impose some limit. However, it remains true that he must view this limitation on prevented spontaneous abortions, even in the first few days of pregnancy and even in the case of severely abnormal fetuses, as *gravely* regrettable, and this in itself seems implausible enough.

<sup>30</sup> This example, which Thomson (1971 pp 65-66) calls "indecent", is considered morally unproblematic by Warren (1973 p 59).

## Diagnosis of the Paradox

It seems unlikely that many people would be initially attracted by the extreme implications of the “Conservative”, “Liberal”, or “Feminist” views. Certainly many would accept them, but most of these would do so, I suggest, reluctantly rather than enthusiastically, because they feel committed to accepting them on the basis of whatever fundamental principles seem to them to be required to support their immediate moral “intuitions” about abortion in general. Thus a Conservative, for example, will not typically *start* from a firm view about the case of a just-pregnant eleven-year-old rape victim - his moral intuitions are far more likely to get a grip on cases that are less obviously problematic for him, where pregnancy is the result of carelessness rather than rape, where the mother is an adult, and where the fetus concerned is sufficiently advanced to be “visibly” human. Seeking a means of justifying such “intuitions”, he may then be drawn towards some principle such as the Sanctity of Human Life, and hence endorse the Human Being Argument outlined earlier. Having reached this point, he will now feel forced to pronounce a negative judgement on the child rape case, but this judgement will be based not on immediate moral intuition, but on the demands of consistency and the apparent logical force of the Human Being Argument.

Likewise most pro-abortionists will not, I suggest, usually begin with clear “intuitions” about the case of a healthy, eight-month viable fetus, but are far more likely to focus on the relative insignificance of the early pre-embryo, the tragic results of congenital disease, the sometimes devastating effects of unwanted pregnancy, and the serious dangers of back-street abortions.<sup>31</sup> Some may also see evidence of sexism in the Conservative’s disapproving attitude towards the unwilling mother,<sup>32</sup> and understandably react by adopting a Feminist line. Others may be shocked by the striking contrast between the Conservative’s anxious concern for a mere “bundle of cells” which happens to be human, and his relative disregard for the far more highly advanced members of other species: this will probably incline such people towards a Liberal position. At this point, again, the search for a theoretical justification takes over, with the Feminist appealing to the Woman’s Body Argument and the Liberal to the Person Argument. The demands of consistency then propel them both down the slippery slope towards a blanket endorsement of universal abortion on demand.

If these speculations are at all correct, then it may be that what is responsible for the polarisation of the abortion debate is not the extremism of the protagonists’ basic moral “intuitions”, but rather an over-enthusiasm for simple, all-encompassing rules (and corresponding hole-in-one arguments) that leads them to generalise far too quickly from a limited range of examples. This diagnosis would explain why all of the extreme positions conflict with “commonsense” morality on one particular point: they all claim that abortion at any stage has much the same moral status, whereas the commonsense consensus surely endorses what I earlier dubbed the “developmental view”, that whatever the final judgement on late abortion may be, it is, at any rate, morally a significantly more serious matter than very early abortion. The failure of the extreme positions to accommodate this compelling belief is a clear indication that the spurious demands of over-simple systematisation, and the straitjacket of absolute “principles”, have here gained the upper hand over moral common sense.

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<sup>31</sup> For impressive evidence of the dangers posed by back-street abortions see Barron (1992) - Leonard Barron’s contribution to the same volume in which the present paper was published.

<sup>32</sup> Radcliffe Richards (1980 pp 221-6) argues that the exception which conservatives commonly make for abortion in the case of rape can only make sense on the assumption that their prohibition in other cases is based on the disapproval of women who have “indulged willingly in sex without being willing to bear a child” (p 223).

## Escaping from the Trap

The diagnosis just given suggests a possible means of escape from the polarisation trap. For if it is true that polarisation is an artefact of the assumption of moral simplicity rather than a genuine reflection of the various protagonists' basic moral "intuitions", then it may be possible to undermine the extreme positions by challenging that assumption, and by showing how a more subtle and sophisticated treatment of the issue can reasonably accommodate the most fundamental intuitions of all concerned. Moreover if, as I have suggested, the arguments for the extreme positions ultimately derive their strength from those parts of the "commonsense" moral consensus to which they so conspicuously appeal, then there is no way that they can legitimately be used to retaliate against a position which more faithfully reflects the overall nature of that consensus. If the *a priori* assumption of a single-dimensional solution is rejected, then there will be no basis on which they can challenge a more sophisticated position which better fits the varied contours of our commonsense moral landscape. It seems, then, that the polarisation paradox may contain the seeds of its own dissolution.

How can we attack this pervasive assumption of the moral simplicity of abortion? Presumably the most direct method would be to provide a complete alternative account of the issue, which while being more complex and heterogenous than the popular extreme positions, would be both internally coherent and morally compelling. I shall soon attempt to sketch what might be a small contribution towards such an account, but before doing so I shall try briefly to undermine the "simplicity assumption" in another way, by explaining how such an assumption, though entirely false, might nevertheless have become so deeply entrenched. At least three factors seem likely to have played a part. First, widespread traditional attitudes to the ethics of homicide, which (no doubt for obvious sociological reasons) generally treat it as an area where simple and absolute rules hold sway. Secondly, the influence of the Judaeo-Christian moral tradition, with its powerful emphasis on straightforward, categorical, God-given laws. Thirdly, Christian teaching on the soul and the nature of man, which has generally been taken to imply that human status is an all-or-nothing matter: one either has a rational, immortal soul (in which case one merits full moral respect as a being "made in the image of God"), or one does not (in which case one is, by comparison, morally irrelevant).

None of these three considerations now seems at all persuasive: the first merely begs the question, the second we have already dismissed, while the third relies on a concept which (quite apart from any other difficulties it may have) has been rendered wildly problematic by the development of evolutionary theory. If man indeed evolved gradually from the animals, then it is hard to see any place for a uniquely human rational soul, or indeed for any other kind of soul which might radically distinguish our metaphysical status from that of the animals. And if, as seems reasonable, our "moral status" too developed gradually, in tandem with our bodies and brains, then this provides excellent reason for denying that moral status in general, and in particular that of the fetus, must be an all-or-nothing matter rather than one of degree.<sup>33</sup>

It may be that a fourth influence, no doubt itself a hangover from the other three, has been largely responsible for maintaining the popularity of the simplicity assumption, namely the language in which the abortion debate is usually conducted, and which can all too easily cast its spell over the unwary participant. Take, for example, the common tendency to present the central issue in terms of "rights", which already seems to presuppose a clear-cut answer, given that the possession of a right is paradigmatically an all-or-nothing affair and also morally overriding: the fetus either has the right to life or it doesn't, and if it does, then that is the end of the matter. It is also often

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<sup>33</sup> The assumption that moral status must be all-or-nothing seems to lie behind the popular conservative "Argument from Continuity", according to which the gradual and continuous development of the fetus from conception to birth implies that it has the same moral status throughout. Clearly such an argument is hopeless if moral status, like the fetus' physical dimensions, can increase by gradual degrees.

assumed, though it does not follow, that if the fetus lacks the right to life then that too settles the matter: to make such an assumption is to presuppose that abortion can only be wrong if it involves the infringement of a fetal right. Rights are obviously very precious on this view, and only to be accorded to those of appropriate status. Thus we arrive at the hackneyed question of the “moral status of the fetus”, a question whose very phrasing seems to suggest not only a crude division of the moral universe into rights-bearers (“persons”) and others, but also a similarly crude picture of morality itself, with individuals as independent bearers of objective moral value, governed entirely when their interests conflict by those rights and obligations which appropriately correspond to their varying “status”.

We must be careful not to be bewitched by such language. For we may wish to conclude that the claims of the fetus are not after all a matter of absolute “rights”, but we need not thereby be committed to seeing abortion as permissible or unproblematic.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, as I have suggested, we may wish to view the status of the fetus as a matter of degree. Finally, as we shall see, we may wish to reject the whole individualistic picture of morality, by considering the problem of abortion not only with regard to the fetus and mother, but also with regard to the other members of their moral community.

### ***Defending the Middle Ground***

Let us pause for a moment to take stock. We have seen that the arguments of both the liberal and conservative start from a baseline of generally accepted moral beliefs, for example beliefs in the serious wrongness of killing a child and the relative inconsequentiality of killing an animal such as a rabbit. The liberal then seeks to show that certain fundamental principles that are implicit in our moral baseline, notably the principle of universalisability (and its corollary, the “principle of non-speciesism”), inevitably commit us to placing the fetus at the inconsequential end of this spectrum, along with the rabbit. The conservative aims to counter this move by appealing to a potentiality principle, supposedly also implicit in our moral baseline, which while respecting the constraint of universalisability, forces us to place the fetus at the other end of the spectrum, along with the child. Meanwhile, I have suggested, the entirely consistent and eminently defensible preference of “commonsense morality”, uncorrupted by the polarised language and spurious oversimplifications that so bedevil the abortion debate, would be to place the fetus somewhere in the middle of this moral spectrum, its position depending very largely on its particular degree of development. I shall now try briefly to substantiate this suggestion.

My strategy for defending the middle ground will be as follows. First, I shall show that even without appealing to any principle of potentiality, it is quite easy to defend in a non-speciesist way the commonsense claim that the killing of a developed human fetus is far more serious than the killing of a rabbit. This result may seem to be damaging only to the liberal’s case, but we shall see that it also has the more subtle consequence of significantly undermining the conservative’s claim that his strong principle of potentiality is indeed implicit in the baseline of commonsense morality. I shall then go on to consider the issue of potentiality in a little more detail, with the aim of showing that even if a potentiality principle were implicit in commonsense morality, it could only very questionably be extended to cover the case of the early fetus, while even if it could be so extended, it still would not vindicate any extreme conservative position, but would on the contrary support the commonsense developmental view, that the moral significance of the human fetus is at least to some extent proportional to its development.

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<sup>34</sup> Generally in legal contexts, anything that is not forbidden is permitted, but we should not be seduced by quasi-legal talk of “rights” into assuming that the same is true of morality. For even some acts which are characterised by a strict observance of “rights” can nevertheless be morally objectionable, for example if they are grudging, heartless, mean, or even legalistic.



## Speciesism and Human Concern

The principle of universalisability, as the liberal insists, implies the unacceptability of a certain kind of preference for our own species - the conservative cannot consistently claim that the “intrinsic moral status” of an early human fetus is greater than that of an animal such as a rabbit (let us call this the “intrinsic superiority claim”), simply on the ground that the fetus is human and for no other reason. An appeal to potentiality then seems to be the conservative’s only plausible way of defending his claim, but it is important to see that even if this appeal were ultimately to fail, and his intrinsic superiority claim to be rejected, this would not immediately imply the conclusion which the radical liberal wants, namely, that we should treat the human fetus with no more respect than the rabbit. Such a conclusion would follow only if our moral obligations to others depended entirely on their “intrinsic moral status”, but this assumption, once stated, can easily be seen to be questionable for at least two reasons.

The first reason is that our obligations may depend not only on the intrinsic properties (moral or otherwise) of those with whom we deal, but also on their relationship to ourselves. For example I consider myself to have far greater obligations towards my wife and children than I have towards anybody else, but I do not need to pretend that their intrinsic moral status is greater than that of all other wives and children in order to justify these special obligations.

The second reason, which is a generalisation of the first, is that our obligations towards someone (or something) can depend not only on their intrinsic properties, and their relationship to ourselves, but also on their relationship to others. Suppose, for example, that my young son David has a pet slug, Slimy, which he values very dearly. I personally dislike slugs, and would not normally hesitate to kill one if I saw it in our garden, but in the circumstances described I would certainly not kill Slimy. However my sense of obligation towards “him” does not in any way indicate a change of heart about his intrinsic moral status compared with others of his species - on the contrary, I stay my hand out of consideration for David, not for Slimy.

It should be noted that neither of these examples of preferential treatment, for my family and for Slimy respectively, is in any way a violation of the principle of universalisability. For I can happily endorse the corresponding universal rules, first, that everyone has special obligations towards the members of his own family, and secondly, that any animal (or indeed thing) which is valued by any member of any species should in general be treated with some corresponding respect. The availability of such universal rules substantially reduces the impact of the Argument from Speciesism, for it shows that it is in principle possible to justify giving more respect to the human fetus than to a rabbit without infringing against universalisability, and without having to rely on controversial claims about the fetus’ superior intrinsic moral status. This can be done in a variety of ways, for example by endorsing universal principles of the following kinds:<sup>35</sup>

### *Principle of Special Obligation*

Any member of any species has a special obligation to protect any other member (fetus or otherwise) of its own species

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<sup>35</sup> Two other possibilities are made use of by Devine (1978). First, he proposes a “modified species principle” (pp 53-4) which ascribes personhood to *all* members of any sufficiently intelligent species (even to those members which are not themselves intelligent). Secondly, he endorses an “overflow principle” (p 101), according to which “the principle of respect for persons extends ... to things closely associated with persons”. He takes the latter to indicate both that “corpses ought not to be treated as ordinary garbage”, and that “a modicum of reverence should be accorded to processes by which persons come to be” (and hence presumably to human fetuses).

### *Principle of Sympathetic Respect*

Any member of any species, if it is an object of love and concern to others (of any species), should be accorded additional respect in proportion to the magnitude of that love and concern

Though perhaps plausible enough, I shall not here put any weight on the first of these two principles, for it may appear to be no more than a cover for pernicious speciesism, given that we are easily the most powerful species on earth and depend on no others for protection.<sup>36</sup> It also seems to be suspiciously *ad hoc*, for at least three reasons. First, we are presumably the only terrestrial species with moral obligations; secondly, our special obligation to the mature members of our own species can be perfectly well explained in a number of familiar ways without invoking any such principle; thirdly, there is no obvious independent reason why the principle should include fetuses within its scope (or indeed immature organisms of any species, terrestrial or otherwise, which have as yet no morally relevant actual properties).

The principle of sympathetic respect, however, is open to no such objection, and indeed seems fairly persuasive. For we do tend to give some additional respect to those people and animals (and even objects, especially works of art) which we know to be dear to others, and this cannot be just out of consideration for those others' feelings, for it can even apply after their death (there are also, as suggested in note 2, meta-ethical reasons for endorsing some such principle). One qualification of the principle may, however, be appropriate, for the respect which we sympathetically extend to the objects of others' concern may well depend on our approval (or at least non-disapproval) of that concern: if for example a friend is captivated by some charismatic Nazi, then his uncritical admiration is unlikely to increase my regard for that Nazi, but may on the contrary make my disgust all the stronger. Fortunately, however, such considerations have little impact on the argument regarding abortion, where as we shall see the relevant sentiments are clearly worthy of our approval.

The argument, then, is that just as a slug can merit some respect, however minimal, because of the affection of a small boy, so a human fetus, or a child, can also merit respect, and in much greater measure, because of the affection and concern of its parents and their community. And of course the same will apply to the young of any other species which values its offspring (though some may wish to restrict this to cases where the mature animals' own "moral status" is sufficient to confer respect on those they value). However several factors then combine to provide a powerful case for viewing the human fetus and child more generally with special respect. First, there are obvious evolutionary reasons, in view of the human child's unusually long period of total dependency, for expecting human parental affection to be almost universal and extremely powerful. Secondly, it can be expected that human parents, given even the most primitive understanding of the processes of reproduction, will imaginatively extend this affection from the anticipated child to the fetus, at least once the fetus can be easily thought of as a child (e.g. when they are aware that it looks human), and especially once its activity becomes physically apparent (at "quickenings"). Thirdly, it is inevitable that the parental experience of this affection, of valuing offspring so highly, will stretch beyond the immediate family, and colour the view that parents take of other children and other fetuses.<sup>37</sup> Finally, these widely shared attitudes to children and fetuses are likely to mould the moral language and thought of any

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<sup>36</sup> Something like this principle of special obligation was apparently the basis for the Warnock Committee's ascription of a "special status" to the human embryo (Warnock 1987 p 10). Warnock hints at an argument founded on our natural "preference" for our own species, but such a biased preference would only justify a *moral* conclusion here on the strength of the sort of argument which I give below, which presupposes the principle of sympathetic respect (and besides, the mother who requests an abortion is also one of our species!).

<sup>37</sup> This point helps to explain the widely felt relevance of viability to the moral status of the fetus. For a fetus which is viable will be at the same developmental stage as some infants who have already been born alive, making a sympathetic extension of concern almost irresistible since, as Zaichik (1980 p 21) puts it, "it is only due to this fetus' bad luck" that it is not already born.

human society, so that even those who have never themselves experienced parental or personal affection for children will nevertheless come to share, to some extent, the attitudes of those who have.

This account is not merely a sociological sketch of how a certain moral attitude is likely to develop. It is also, if on the right track, and if the principle of sympathetic respect is legitimate, a vindication of that attitude. For it serves to show that the human fetus and child are in a unique social situation which vastly inflates their perceived moral status quite independently of their intrinsic qualities, and in a manner which cannot apply to the young of any other existing (terrestrial) species, simply because the members of those species lack the biological, social and intellectual characteristics which bring it about. Having once explained why we should be so strongly and universally partial towards our own young, the principle of sympathetic respect can then be invoked to provide what might seem to be a “bootstrap” justification of that very partiality. But there is no circularity here, and no appeal to speciesist assumptions - merely a commitment to value those beings (whatever they may be) that others (of any species) value.

We have now seen that an account can be given of why we do, and should, accord special respect to human infants and fetuses, even if their morally relevant intrinsic properties are no more advanced than those of, say, a rabbit. No doubt other accounts could also be given, based for example on the principle of special obligation above, and I make no claim for the unique correctness of that which I have sketched. But if that sketch is at all in the right direction, then it seems to have a number of significant implications for the abortion debate. For first, it shows against the liberal that it is possible to justify a special respect for the human fetus and child without infringing against the principle of universalisability, and without embracing speciesism. Secondly, it provides a reason for supposing that this special respect should increase with age, so that the child should be accorded more respect than the baby, the baby than the late fetus, the late fetus than the embryo, and so on. Finally, it somewhat undermines the conservative’s claim that the potentiality principle is an essential, though implicit, part of commonsense morality. For if the special respect that we owe to children can be perfectly well explained and justified without recourse to that principle, then a major part of the conservative’s case, namely his claim that only potentiality can account for our attitude to children, is demolished.

### **The Implications of the Potentiality Principle**

Any account of the special moral status of children which does not appeal to the conservative’s potentiality principle (such as that given above) *ipso facto* undermines the credentials of that principle, by casting doubt on its alleged indispensability to the justification of that particular commonsense moral belief. But this by itself cannot prove that the potentiality principle has no role whatever within commonsense morality, and since so many have considered it to have such a role, it is worth investigating just what implications this would have for our position on abortion. Suppose that it were to be conclusively established that our commonsense moral attitudes towards adults and children, and even towards animals, in fact depend significantly on their perceived potential: would this then imply that the commonsense moral framework is implicitly committed to a conservative position on abortion? There are at least two strong reasons for denying any such implication, the first of which is concerned with the power of the potentiality principle, and the second with its scope.

The first reason is based on the natural and compelling assumption that the moral value of potential personhood, for example, is less than that of actual personhood, just as the honour due to a potential monarch (president, saint, grandmaster, professor) is less than that due to an actual monarch (president etc.). If the moral status of a fertilised ovum is solely derived from the possibility of its future enjoyment of morally significant capacities (such as feelings and desires, rationality, self-consciousness etc.), then surely this status must at least be

somewhat diminished by comparison with that of an actual person, who already enjoys those capacities, and whose erstwhile mere moral possibilities have now become solid realities.<sup>38</sup> But this assumption can then be powerfully combined with the observation that a fertilised ovum is a potential person only *in virtue of* its potential to become an embryo: developing into an embryo is an absolutely essential stage on its long journey to personhood. The fertilised ovum, therefore, has moral value only in so far as it is a potential embryo, and given our stated assumption, it follows that the moral status of a fertilised ovum must be less than that of an embryo. Likewise the embryo is a potential person only in virtue of its potential to become a fetus: therefore, by the same reasoning, the moral status of an embryo is less than that of a fetus. And this same argument can, of course, be repeated for all the intermediate stages of embryonic and fetal development, showing that so far from supporting a strict conservative position, the potentiality principle would instead lead much more naturally to some sort of developmental view.

The second reason for doubt about the conservative's appeal to the potentiality principle concerns the principle's range of application rather than its force. Let us use the term "moral universe" for all those individuals (notably humans and many animals, but perhaps not slugs and mosquitoes!) which have moral significance, that is, whose "status" is sufficient to require that their interests should be taken into account, however minimally, in relevant moral decisions. Then the crucial question is this: does the potentiality principle apply to any individual whatever, including those which would otherwise have absolutely no moral significance, or does it apply only to those which are already members of the moral universe? This question is crucial because the early fetus, whose brain has not yet developed sufficiently to achieve consciousness,<sup>39</sup> seems to have little claim to a place within the moral universe *except* on the alleged basis of its potentiality - we would not normally consider a being to be worthy of moral consideration if it were quite incapable of having even the most primitive of experiences (and indeed it is far from clear that the notion of "moral consideration" makes any sense as applied to such a being). So if the potentiality principle were to apply only to those already independently within the moral universe, then it could get no purchase in the case of an early fetus, and hence could not endow such a fetus with any moral significance at all.

An analogy might help to bring out the genuine plausibility of this restricted interpretation of the principle. Suppose that a company decides to adopt a pay policy which determines any individual's salary partly on the basis of his potential for advancement within the firm, so that a potential managing director will, other things being equal, be paid more than a potential head of accounts, a potential head of accounts more than a potential chief clerk, and so on. Then the question arises: should this policy extend to those who are not yet employed by the company but who might be in the future, including those potential directors who may just have submitted their job applications (not to mention those who are currently at school or college)? Presumably not: a company that pays its employees according to their potential is not thereby committed to paying its potential employees as well, however promising they may be - one has already to be on the payroll in order to qualify for the potentiality bonus! And likewise, on the restricted interpretation of the potentiality principle, one must already count morally, at least to some extent, before the consideration of one's potential can carry any moral weight.

So we have two different interpretations of the potentiality principle, one of which applies only to already-qualified members of the moral universe, and one of which applies also to potential members. Only the latter interpretation will ascribe any moral value to a fetus whose present capacities are in themselves morally worthless: this broader interpretation, therefore, seems to be required by the conservative if the potentiality principle is to be of any use to him in opposing the abortion of an early fetus which is not yet capable of consciousness. And naturally

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<sup>38</sup> Thus we would rightly be outraged by a mother who, while in hospital awaiting *in vitro* fertilisation treatment, elected to save from a fire a test-tube containing her newly fertilised ovum rather than her existing child.

<sup>39</sup> For a recent discussion of the concept of "brain birth" which reviews some of the neurological data, see Jones (1989).

the conservative's opponents, for that very reason, will in contrast prefer the former, more narrow interpretation. But how are we rationally to decide between the two? Obviously we cannot appeal to pre-established assumptions about the moral status of, say, a ten-week fetus, since any such appeal will immediately beg the very question at issue, and in any case the nature of the abortion debate suggests that on the status of such a fetus there is absolutely no pre-established commonsense consensus. What we require, therefore, is a generally accepted *independent* moral belief, whose truth or falsity crucially depends on the interpretation of the potentiality principle, and which can thus be used to adjudicate between the two rival interpretations.

Unfortunately, however, no such belief is likely to be found, not merely because (as I argued earlier) the place of the potentiality principle within commonsense morality is anyway extremely uncertain, but also for a more interesting and particular reason. This is that the two interpretations of the potentiality principle differ only with respect to those individuals which on the one hand currently have no "actualised" moral significance, but which on the other hand have the potential to acquire such moral significance in the course of their future development. But the only beings that we know which develop in this way are, of course, the reproductive precursors of animals and humans: fetuses, embryos, pre-embryos and (arguably) gametes. And it is precisely the moral status of these very entities which is what we are trying to discover. So there is no realistic possibility of finding any independent and relatively uncontroversial moral belief from which we might hope to extrapolate a solution to this singular problem. The problem of the status of the early fetus, in so far as it depends on the potentiality principle, is entirely unique!<sup>40</sup>

## The Middle Ground

We have now looked again at the key arguments of the liberal and conservative camps, namely, the Arguments from Speciesism and from Potentiality, and we have found good reason to doubt the extreme conclusions which are commonly thought to follow from them. The Argument from Speciesism can be opposed in a number of ways, in particular by appeal to a plausible "principle of sympathetic respect" which, without being arbitrarily speciesist, provides a reason for ascribing to the developed human fetus a far higher moral status than that which we ascribe to an animal such as a rabbit. The protection afforded to the fetus by this principle, however, is greatly dependent on its stage of development, and the principle thus not only undermines the most objectionable consequences of the extreme liberal position, but also provides us with a plausible rationale for the commonsense developmental view.

Our assessment of the Argument from Potentiality is less clear-cut. First, we have found some reason to doubt that the potentiality principle is indeed implicit in commonsense morality as the conservative claims, given that the high moral status of infants can be explained perfectly well without it using instead the principle of sympathetic respect. But even if the conservative is in fact correct to claim that it is thus implicit, we have seen that it too will lead naturally to the developmental view, and can only very dubiously provide any protection at all for the early embryo which is not yet conscious. The conservative will no doubt wish to interpret it as providing such protection, but significantly it appears that he will in principle be quite unable to give any independent grounds for doing so.

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<sup>40</sup> This need not imply that the problem is insoluble, but does suggest that illumination must be sought not from the extrapolation of moral conclusions from analogous real-life situations, but rather from the consideration of imaginary "thought-experiments" such as the following. Suppose that fertilisation in a humanlike species of alien were to occur not through genetic combination of the gametes, but rather through selective "activation" of some of the (vast number of) genes already present in the ovum - instead of itself contributing genetic material, the sperm would simply activate whatever genes within the ovum correspond most closely to its own. Thus the unfertilised ovum would be manifestly *one and the same individual* as the fertilised ovum, and would plausibly therefore be just as much a potential person. But it is hard to believe that this makes a significant difference to its "moral status" when it is so far from achieving any "actualised" moral significance: for example, would we really change our mind about contraception if it turned out that our own reproduction functioned in this way? I suspect, but cannot prove, that all such thought-experiments which relate to the status of the pre-embryo will similarly favour a liberal rather than a conservative position at that stage.

It seems, then, that the way may now be clear for a developmental position on abortion, which sides with the liberal at the beginning of pregnancy, and with the conservative at the end. Exploration of the details of such a position, however, must wait for another occasion.

### ***Conclusion: The Complex Problem of Abortion***

In this paper I have attempted to provide the outline of a case for a “moderate” position on the morality of abortion, though most of my arguments have had the immediate purpose of undermining the familiar extreme positions rather than directly securing the middle ground. One reason for this indirect strategy has been what I take to be the manifest plausibility of the “developmental view”: it is, I believe, so overwhelmingly natural to see a massive moral distinction between the microscopic blob which is the early pre-embryo, and the fully-formed sentient and active individual which is the nine-month fetus, that only the spurious demands of religious dogma or of simplistic theoretical systematisation could ever lead anyone to deny it. I have therefore sought primarily to show that neither religion nor moral theory has the power rationally to depose the developmental view - if I have here been successful, then the moderate position should win by default as long as it is internally coherent. Hence I have also tried to illustrate, by arguing from the “principle of sympathetic respect”, how it is indeed possible to give a plausible account of the developmental view which is consistent with the structure of our “commonsense” moral framework. Many different such accounts could perhaps be given, and I do not claim that this particular one is the best available: its main purpose is to illustrate a possibility rather than to demonstrate a necessity.

The key to my argument against the extreme positions has been the identification of a “polarisation paradox”, which arises from the combination of two claims: first, that the arguments used to support these extreme views do, and must, essentially appeal to elements of our “commonsense” morality, and thence derive their force; secondly, that the moral implications of the positions thus supported are wildly at odds with that same commonsense morality. If these claims are correct, then it does indeed seem to follow that a coherent alternative which better matches our overall commonsense framework will be immune to rational attack from either of the extreme positions which it displaces. This still leaves the possibility of an appeal to religious authority, but I have attempted in advance to spike the guns of any such appeal by showing some of the theoretical obstacles which stand in its way, particularly when it is used to support a position which again seems, on purely moral grounds, highly implausible.

All this, of course, leaves much to be done. The developmental view is consistent with a great variety of moral positions, and I have not attempted to clarify exactly where I would myself be inclined to draw the moral line (or, more probably, range of lines) between a fetus which can unproblematically be aborted on demand (as can, I believe, a pre-embryo), and one for whom the protection conferred by the principle of sympathetic respect (and probably a variety of other considerations) amounts in effect to an absolute prohibition (as it does, I believe, in the case of a healthy and viable fetus). Far more discussion is needed of this fiendishly complicated issue, not least to establish what force remains in the standard liberal and conservative arguments which have been criticised here. For although I have tried to show that they have insufficient power to overthrow the commonsense developmental view, this does not imply that they have no force whatever, and indeed we have seen already that the potentiality principle can easily combine with the developmental view, and may, if accepted, have significant implications for its detailed working out. This paper can claim, then, only to have added some substance to the natural observation that certain extreme positions in the abortion debate are too one-sided and remote from common sense to be credible. But this mere ruling out of the extremes does not get us very far: most of the hard work remains to be done!<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> For help and useful criticism I am very grateful to Nina Collins, Christopher Coope, Gordon Dunstan, Chris Megone, Jim Parry, Roger White, and especially Jennifer Jackson.

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This paper was published in 1992 in the collection *Ethics in Reproductive Medicine* (Springer Verlag, London) edited by DR Bromham, ME Dalton, JC Jackson, and PJR Millican, pp.161-88.