

Reply to A Kantian Argument Against Abortion

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Abstract

This essay examines Gensler's general consistency principle (GR) and its application to the moral permissibility of abortion. The central claim is that applying GR to abortion leads to the conclusion that abortion is morally impermissible. The essay presents two objections to this claim, which challenge the validity of GR and the manner in which it is applied to abortion. The first objection (O1) states that it is impossible to accurately judge the potential of an object to become a rational being, while the second objection (O2) argues that applying GR to abortion involves the invalid use of a set of potential rational beings rather than a specific instance. Both objections reveal difficulties in applying GR to abortion, undermining the claim that using GR results in the moral impermissibility of abortion.

Section 1. Introduction

In "A Kantian Argument against Abortion," the central philosophical claim contends that by applying Gensler's general consistency principle (GR) (Gensler, 1986, pp. 89-90) to the topic of abortion, the conclusion that abortion is morally impermissible (Gensler, 1986, pp. 93-94) could be reached. In this paper, I am going to provide an objection to this claim, giving support for denying the truth of the claim. This objection will consist of two main arguments. Firstly, I will challenge the validity of the GR itself, highlighting its failure to delimit the scope of the individuals involved, which results in the inability to clearly define the potential of an object to become a rational being. Secondly, I will argue that even if GR is valid, its application to abortion, as presented by Gensler, is flawed due to the inappropriate use of the rule on a set of elements that could potentially become rational beings instead of a specific instance within the set. Throughout the paper, I will

defend my objections against possible counterarguments, ultimately concluding that the central claim of Gensler's argument against abortion is not sufficiently supported.

Section 2. Role of the Claim

The central argument in the essay under discussion revolves around the claim that applying Gensler's general consistency principle (GR) to abortion leads to the conclusion that abortion is morally impermissible. This claim serves as the main thesis and consists of two interconnected components. The first component establishes and proves the validity of GR, while the second component demonstrates that applying GR to abortion results in the assertion that abortion is morally impermissible.

In the first part of the essay, Gensler presents a refined version of the golden rule, referred to as GR (ibid., pp. 89-90):

"If you are consistent and think that it would be all right for someone to do A to X, then you will think that it would be all right for someone to do A to you in similar circumstances.

If you are consistent and think that it would be all right for someone to do A to you in similar circumstances, then you will consent to the idea of someone doing A to you in similar circumstances.

∴ If you are consistent and think that it would be all right to do A to X, then you will consent to the idea of someone doing A to you in similar circumstances. (GR)"

Gensler formulates the general consistency principle (GR) by integrating two rational principles, which are the foundations of the original golden rules: the universalizability principle and the prescriptivity principle (ibid., p 90). The universalizability principle stipulates that if we regard an action as morally permissible when performed on someone

else, we must also consider it morally permissible for others to perform the same action on us in analogous circumstances. This principle necessitates consistency in moral judgments across similar cases, with any discrepancies in a judgment requiring morally relevant justifications. The prescriptivity principle asserts that if we deem a certain action performed on us morally permissible, we must consent to someone performing that action on us in comparable circumstances. This principle demands consistency between moral beliefs and their corresponding attitudes, motivations, or actions.

Through the amalgamation of these principles, Gensler establishes the GR, which posits that if we view a specific act performed on someone as morally permissible, we must also consent to someone performing the same act on us in similar circumstances. This rule serves as a rationality principle guiding moral reasoning rather than as a moral principle in and of itself. The GR can be employed to criticize inconsistent moral judgments and, when combined with information about our attitudes and preferences, generate moral judgments that we must accept to avert contradiction.

In the second part of the essay, Gensler clarifies the application of GR by using examples such as stealing (ibid., pp. 90-91) and robbing (ibid., p. 91). The GR is employed in hypothetical situations, requiring consistency between our judgments and attitudes when we imagine switching places with another party. For instance, we must consider whether we would consent to be treated in the manner we are willing to treat others if we were in their position. Crucially, Gensler applies the GR to the abortion debate, beginning with the case of blinding a fetus. If we do not consent to the idea of having been blinded as a fetus, we cannot consistently maintain that it is morally permissible to cause the blinding of another fetus. The same rationale applies to abortion: if we do not consent to the idea of having been aborted, we cannot consistently argue that abortion is morally permissible.

There are two potential avenues for objecting to this claim. The first objection challenges the validity of GR itself, while the second objection posits that even if GR is valid, its application to abortion as Gensler presents is flawed.

Section 3. Objection to the claim

As previously discussed, there are two strategies for contesting the claim that applying GR to abortion will lead to a valid conclusion. In this section, I will present a combined objection utilizing both approaches. First, I will argue that GR, as articulated by Gensler, is not valid due to its failure to delimit the scope of the individuals involved (denoted as X). Subsequently, I will expand upon this argument by asserting that applying GR to actions affecting non-human entities is not appropriate.

Let us examine the GR:

“If you are consistent and think that it would be all right to do A to X, then you will consent to the idea of someone doing A to you in similar circumstances.”

Here, it is incorrect to assume that A or X could represent any object. For example, it might be morally acceptable to consume yogurt, but does this imply that one would consent to be eaten? Certainly not. Although not explicitly stated, Gensler employs X in a Kantian sense (ibid., pp. 83-85), which implies that X is an arbitrary subject selected from the set of all rational beings. Only in this context can the GR be considered a valid claim; otherwise, it would be deemed morally impermissible for one to throw a rock onto empty ground because they do not consent to be thrown similarly. However, it is morally permissible for one to throw a rock onto empty ground.

Now, can we argue that, like a rock, a fetus does not belong to the set of rational beings, and therefore, GR cannot be applied to it? At first glance, this may seem valid. However, a counterargument could be made, highlighting the key difference between a rock and a fetus in terms of their nature: a fetus possesses a significantly higher potential to become a rational being. Hare (1989) raises the question, "Will the fetus, if the pregnancy continues and the child survives, develop into a human adult like us, or into something else, such as a horse?" Hare begins by examining the moral status of the fetus, addressing whether it should be considered a person with moral rights. Kantian ethics emphasizes

the importance of rationality and autonomy in determining moral personhood. Hare argues that while a fetus may not currently possess rationality or autonomy, its potential to develop these traits could still grant it some moral consideration. Only if the scope of the "someone" GR refers to includes not only rational beings but also elements with a high likelihood of becoming rational beings, can GR be applied to a fetus. Gensler does not clearly state this; however, he discusses what constitutes human life at the beginning of his paper and points out that scientific data is not a reliable source, but we should adopt a Kantian approach (Gensler, 1986, pp. 83-85). By now, we should recognize that there is a problem with the GR as stated by Gensler; the problem is that Gensler does not clearly delineate the range of objects to which GR can be applied. However, this problem can be easily resolved in a Kantian manner, as Gensler would agree, by focusing on the set of rational beings and those with the potential to become rational beings.

Since the problem can be easily resolved without deviating from Gensler's main idea, it is not the primary objection I am raising. Now, I will present two main objections regarding the second part of applying GR, even if we accept the refined version of GR. The first objection is that

(O1) It is impossible to accurately judge the potential of an object to become a rational being.

The second objection is that

(O2) When applying GR to abortion, we are applying the rule to a set of elements that could potentially become rational beings but not to a specific instance within the set. This is an invalid application since GR should be applied to a particular instance.

O1 may initially appear counterintuitive. How can we not discern that a rock has no potential to become a rational being, while a fetus has the potential to become one? Let us scrutinize the moral consideration of the potential for a fetus to develop rationality or autonomy, acknowledging that any physical object could potentially exhibit these

qualities. For example, silicon does not inherently possess autonomy; however, it is difficult to deny the potential autonomy of advanced language models (e.g., GPT-4 or BARD), which pass traditional Turing tests and demonstrate human-like reasoning in various dimensions. These models' performance on GRE and LSAT tests significantly surpasses that of many college students, suggesting that machines may outperform human rationality within a decade. Considering that GPUs powering large language models are made of silicon, recognizing the models' potential for rationality or autonomy implies that silicon, too, possesses such potential.

Given that any physical object can potentially exhibit rationality or autonomy, what distinguishes a fetus from a random object, such as a rock, regarding this potential? If there is no difference, they should share moral status. If a distinction exists, it may lie in empirical probability rather than inherent potential. In other words, a fetus having a higher probability of developing rationality in the future compared to a silicon piece only occurs when Artificial Intelligence technology is not advanced enough. It is important to note that this claim relies on empirical statistics derived from previous observations, which do not necessarily reveal the objects' true nature. If future technology enables Artificial Intelligence production using silicon as readily as Coca-Cola manufacturing, would the difference in empirical probability persist? This challenges Gensler's point (*ibid.*, p. 85) that the problem of what counts as human life does not relate to scientific data. In any case, O1 should be clear because we understand that anything has the potential to become a rational being, and there is no metric that could quantify this potential to make two objects comparable in terms of their potential to become rational beings. Therefore, it is impossible to accurately judge the potential of an object to become a rational being.

O1 serves as a crucial objection to the claim because, in this way, the refined GR is not well-defined, as there is no difference between a rock and a fetus in terms of their potential to become rational beings, and thus, there is no difference between their moral status. Consequently, the scope of GR has been limited to strictly rational beings

(excluding those with potential). In this context, because X could only be a rational being, considering it morally permissible to perform action A on a fetus does not imply consenting to be treated similarly. Therefore, the claim is not valid.

In supporting objection O2, we begin with a thought-provoking example provided by Meyers (2005). Meyers offers a compelling scenario to illustrate the potential issues with applying the Golden Rule (GR) to potential rational beings. In this scenario, Charles, a philosopher adopted at birth, contemplates the life he might have experienced if raised by his biological parents. He recognizes that the hypothetical individual, "George," would have led a markedly different life, despite sharing the same genetic makeup. Their respective experiences, professions, and social circles would diverge significantly.

Applying the GR to this case generates counterintuitive results. Charles would advise his biological mother to place him for adoption, as keeping him would preclude Charles' existence. According to the GR, this implies that it is morally impermissible for a woman in his biological mother's position not to relinquish her child—a problematic conclusion. There is nothing inherently immoral about a woman raising her own biological child. Although specific instances might be morally objectionable from a utilitarian standpoint, this particular case does not support such a view. Moreover, if Charles' biological mother had chosen not to place him for adoption and he had become George, George would not realistically consent to being relinquished for adoption. This leads to a paradox: from George's perspective, it would be wrong for Charles' biological mother to give up her baby, while from Charles' viewpoint, it would be wrong not to do so.

The paradox highlights that when referring to a fetus as a potential rational being, we are actually referring to a set, which in this example includes both Charles and George, rather than a specific instance. However, when Gensler (1986, p. 93) states, "If you are consistent and think that abortion is normally permissible, then you will consent to the idea of your having been aborted in normal circumstances," he conflates the potential rational being-fetus with a specific instance, rather than acknowledging it as a set.

Consequently, the GR cannot be appropriately applied in this context, which undermines the validity of the claim.

Section 4. Objections to the O1 and O2 and My Response

The most compelling objection to O1 might involve emphasizing the potential of becoming rational beings under proper conditions. For instance, if a pregnant woman maintains good health without intentionally harming herself during the nine months of pregnancy, there is a high likelihood that the fetus will develop into a human and, thus, a rational being. In contrast, without any intentional intervention, silicon or rock would never evolve into artificial intelligence, as described earlier. The significant effort and change required by large companies like Google or OpenAI to construct GPUs and train large language models cannot be considered proper in this context.

However, the term "proper" is vaguely defined, as it relies on empirical criteria that are subject to environmental factors. It is conceivable that advancements in computer science technology might lead to the creation of an automated machine capable of converting rock into an intelligent robot without any additional human labor. In this scenario, the intelligent robot would undoubtedly be considered a rational being, and the automated machine would be analogous to a pregnant human, with the rock functioning as the fetus. If left undisturbed, the rock would ultimately become a rational being. In this sense, the entire process is proper. Consequently, since there is no clear-cut definition of properness, we cannot object to O1 by invoking the potential of becoming rational beings under proper conditions.

The most formidable objection to O2 that one might propose is the assertion that each element within the set, as described in O2, could itself be considered a single-element set. Consequently, we can refer to a specific instance rather than a set by identifying the specific instance in the future that action A will lead to. In this way, one can argue that George and Charles are distinct elements that do not belong to the same set.

In response to this objection, I contend that when taking action A with respect to X, action A may lead to multiple instances for the following reasons: (1) The instance depends on X and can differ for various X values. As we discuss generic X in O2, there should be multiple instances for a single action A, purely dependent on the choice of X. This means we cannot select a specific element. (2) In the real world, there will be other unknown actions affecting X. (3) Quantum physics suggests that the future is indeterminate, causing the future to encompass a range and a set rather than a single element. As a result, the objection does not hold up under scrutiny, and the original argument remains valid for the purposes of a philosophical discussion.

Section 5. Summary

My challenges the central claim of "A Kantian Argument against Abortion" that applying Gensler's general consistency principle (GR) to abortion results in its moral impermissibility. I present two main objections: (O1) it is impossible to accurately judge the potential of an object to become a rational being, and (O2) applying GR to abortion refers to a set of elements with potential for rationality rather than a specific instance, making the application invalid. This paper also addresses potential counterarguments to these objections and demonstrates that they fail to undermine the initial objections. Consequently, the author argues that the claim that applying GR to abortion leads to the conclusion of its moral impermissibility is not valid.

References:

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