



Errata: A Reply to Abbott

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ERRATA

A Reply to Abbott

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I

Here is a small sample of the defects in Philip Abbott's essay. (Number in parentheses refer to the pages of that essay.)

The following assertions about my essays are all false, mostly blatantly so.

(a) "He (Wertheimer) laments the nature of the whole abortion argument" (315). (I do not lament it. So too, Thomson does not "whisper" [319] or "exhort" us to "place [our] high-minded morals aside" [320], and Warren does not "reluctantly" introduce emotion [329]. Such colorful descriptions are not excusable hyperbole, but instead mere misreadings.)

(b) "He asks for the creation of a moderate position" (315). (I do not request the creation of something that already exists. I only examine it and the principles and concepts it presupposes.)

(c) He supposes that "the nature of the abortion argument seems to preclude a compromise" (315). (I suppose nothing of the sort.)

(d) It is because of (c) that "Wertheimer contends that the moderate 'would have to *invent* a new set of moral categories and principles'" (315). (I do not base my contention on [c].)

(e) "Wertheimer insists upon placing the robot and the fetus in the same hypothetical category" (321). (I do not place the fetus in a hypothetical category, let alone the same one as the robot, let alone insist on doing so.)

(f) He asserts (or supposes) that “the fetus is some isolated being, biologically quite independent of ‘personhood’ ” (322). (I state only that our interactions with the fetus are extremely limited and minimal.)

(g) “[T]hese are ‘purely emotional responses,’ ones which we would be admonished (by Wertheimer [presumably]) to remove from any respectable philosopher’s repertoire” (322). (My article is, among other things, an attempt to systematically reveal the essential role of our “emotional responses” in the logical structure of the argument.)

(h) He describes “pro- and antiabortion views as the same argument pointed in different directions” (330). (The description applies to the arguments, not the views.)

(i) “The import of his description . . . ” (h), is that “all individuals have rights” (330). (The description neither says nor implies anything about rights or individuals.)

(j) “Wertheimer . . . waver[s] on the question of the moral status of the fetus” (331). (I describe the positions of others [wavering and otherwise]. I do not take a position [wavering or otherwise].)

(k) “Wertheimer . . . attempt[s] to assign the unborn some residual or diminished rights” (331). (I do not discuss rights, let alone attempt to assign any. This attempt is also incorrectly ascribed to Thomson.)

(l) “Wertheimer is able to drag himself to the boundaries of the philosophical consensus that separates the moral status of a human from the concept of a human” (note 39). (It was hardly a drag!)

(m) “[A]nimals apparently pose less of a problem for him (note 39). (No ranking of problems is suggested.)

II

It is misleading (albeit true) to say of me that “he again reviews pro- and antiabortion arguments without being able to tell the reader whether the fetus is human” (note 39). (What I tell the reader [as one of my central explicit conclusions] is that no one is able to tell it since there is no fact to tell.)

III

Although Abbott does not explicitly attribute it to me, the in-
evitable inference is that he assigns to me “[t]he argument that the

death of a fetus is grieved less than the death of a person, and thus intuitively tells us something about the rights of the unborn" (322). Presumably that is Abbott's reading of my claim that "when the cause of grief is a miscarriage, the object of grief is the mother; rarely does anyone feel pity or sorrow for the embryo itself." That is a claim, not about *how much* the death of a fetus is grieved, but rather about *whom* we grieve *for* when we grieve over such a death. And the point of the claim is not about the rights of the unborn, but about whether people, pro- and antiabortionists alike, really have the same attitudes toward the fetus (at least in its early stages) that they have toward a fellow adult.

IV

The following is a sample of a miscellany of "minor" defects.

(a) At least half of the sixteen quotations (316-318) contain one or more inaccuracies of transcription or pagination.

(b) The antecedent of "it" (line 14, page 320) is not the word "innocence," but the categorical ban on the direct killing of the innocent.

(c) For Hobbes, what is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short is not "the world of state of nature" or "the state of nature" (325), but *the life of man* in that state.

(d) Grammatical errors are in abundance.

V

Abbott's main thesis is that contemporary moral philosophers are uniform in certain respects and that these common features are objectionable. Though he nowhere flatly states, he everywhere gives one to believe, that these features are not only common to contemporary moral philosophers, but also *confined* to them. (How else explain his focus on them in particular?) The latter is a *suggestio falsi*. At least since Plato put the ring of Gyges on the just man's finger, philosophers have employed "extreme" and "fanciful" situations in their reasonings about morality. And presumably it is common knowledge that many persons other than philosophers attain a level of intellectual sophistication at which such reasoning is a matter of course.

VI

All of the following generalizations about the four philosophers Abbott discusses are false, mostly blatantly so.

(a) "The traditional standards by which human life is defined are still accepted in varying degrees by the philosophers in question" (314). (This would be true only if to reject a standard or be silent about it or ascribe it to someone else is to accept it to some [e.g., zero] degree.)

(b) "This pride of philosophers under discussion shares [Singer's] position" (315). (I do not share it; see I (g) above.)

(c) "[T]he philosopher's imagination is set loose to explore every possible moral dilemma *except* those which people confront in their everyday lives" (318). (This is perversely false of all the essays, and is contradicted by Abbott's claim that the "[s]ixteen examples . . . are used to analyze the morality of abortion" [318].)

(d) "The philosopher's response is that we cannot confront the human condition directly" (318). (None of the essays says anything of the sort.)

(e) "We are admonished to liberate ourselves, both from what are viewed as merely personal feelings and the superficiality of unordered reality in order to steel ourselves for the consequences of the real objectivity of method" (318-319). (Singer says things vaguely like that, and that might crudely characterize Warren, but not Thomson and decidedly not myself.)

(f) "The desired effect [of the hypotheses regarding robots, chimps, and so on] . . . is to show us that our moral convictions are based upon limited experience" (320). (The desired effect is to justify some conclusion by means of a sound argument whose intelligibility presupposes that our moral convictions are not limited by our experience.)

(g) "We are instructed to expand our conception of humanity" (320). (Only Warren does anything resembling that.)

(h) "Two tendencies are predominant: (1) an unwillingness to examine relationships that cannot fit into a rights model" (326). (I nowhere discuss rights, employ a "rights model" or restrict investigation to relationships that fit it. Thomson examines relationships that do not fit it. Tooley's and Warren's essays are *about* the relationships that do fit it; little wonder that they do not discuss other relationships or the price of butter.)

(i) "(2) a definite willingness, even a positive desire, to constrict the import of the description 'human'" (326). (Only Warren and Tooley exhibit anything at all like that.)

(j) “[A]ll the attempts we have surveyed approached the question ‘what is human?’ in terms of ‘what characteristics must an entity have in order to claim rights?’” (330). (Thomson never “approaches” either question. Tooley “approaches” the first in terms of biological criteria for species membership; the second question is [roughly] his approach to the question “what is a person?” which he sharply distinguishes from the first question. I deliberately avoid the terminology of rights.)

(k) “This [a situation in which the possession of rights has sharp temporal boundaries] is clearly the dream of these philosophers” (331). (This is baseless, most especially regarding Thomson, who does not discuss the dating problem, and myself, who does not discuss rights.)

VII

The following presents a sample of some of the defects in one of Abbott’s substantive objections. (I lack the patience to present all of the defects in this objection or any of the defects in any of the other objections.)

The process of reasoning Abbott objects to is not clearly and consistently identified. At first it appears that his target is the use of *imagined* situations in moral reasoning. Then it appears that his target is the use of “*extreme*” situations in moral reasoning. Ultimately the text does not determine whether he means to object to one or the other, or both, or some combination of the two. In any case, the two are very different: what is imagined (supposed, treated hypothetically) may be anything at all, ordinary or extreme, real or unreal, common or rare, and so forth; and what is “extreme” (or “bizarre”) may be possible, likely, actual, or even (at least within a restricted domain) quite common—and known to be so. Some of his sixteen quotations do not present the use of extreme situations in moral reasoning (e.g., examples 5 and 7), and some do not present the use of imagined situations in moral reasoning (e.g., example 9). (The latter states an obvious fact and claims that it constitutes a constraint on the possibility of a kind of argument.)

No criticism of the use of imagined situations is argued for. Why it is objectionable, what is objectionable about it is indeterminable from the text. His use of a quotation from my essay (321) suggests that he has in mind something like a point I make there. However, the quote is

cropped and the deletions are essential to its sense; and an induction based on the evidence of his consistent misreadings of me and others elsewhere makes it a safe bet that he does not mean what I meant.

The only thing resembling a reasoned objection to the use of extreme situations in moral reasoning is a complex of confusions. Presumably his gloss on the term "extreme" is this: "Either our own life is threatened or we are placed in the position of threatening others; or we find ourselves confronted with a set of facts that throw our moral habits into chaos" (319). That statement is disjunctive. The first two disjuncts may be treated as one since the distinction between them never enters Abbott's argument. The essential feature of this combined disjunct is that someone's life is threatened by something (e.g., some person). (I am here giving Abbott the benefit of the doubt regarding the second disjunct by supposing that he means that we are placed in the position of threatening *the lives* of others: although the tone of his writing might suggest otherwise, presumably Abbott is not so hysteric as to regard as being *extreme* any situation in which one of us is placed in the position of threatening someone else, no matter what the threat is.)

Situations of the kind described by this combined disjunct are commonly described in discussions of the morality of abortion. Not surprisingly, since abortion is essentially a situation of this kind. And since moral reasoning presupposes the principle of consistency that we are to treat similar cases in similar ways, the cases that abortion will be likened to will also generally be situations of the kind described by the combined disjunct. By contrast, such situations are not so commonly introduced into discussions—by contemporary moral philosophers or anyone else—of, e.g., freedom of speech, affirmative action, paternalism, property rights, and so on.

Abbott certainly supposes that some situations satisfying the combined disjunct also satisfy the last disjunct, but he never clearly indicates that some do not. However, let us suppose that he recognizes that some situations of the first kind are not of the last kind, and that a situation of the first kind is extreme in his intended sense only because and insofar as it is a situation of the last kind. Thus, what defines "extreme" for him is the last disjunct alone; the first two disjuncts are otiose and misleading.

This interpretation may be incorrect. If it is, then, given what he goes on to say about extreme situations, he seems to be claiming that there can be no genuine moral judgments and/or moral reasoning about whether and when killing someone is justifiable, excuseable, condemn-

able, and so forth. Presumably that claim is certainly false, if there is any genuine moral judgment and/or moral reasoning at all.

In any case, Abbott seems to suppose that, in situations like some described by Thomson, an agent and/or judge (it is not clear which) must resort to "egoism," something which contrasts with "morality" (319). However, what Abbott means by these terms is indeterminable. At any rate, the last disjunct (situations that "throw our moral habits into chaos") suggests that we are at a loss how to act and/or judge in or about extreme situations. And yet, he seems to agree with Thomson on (what she and I would call) the moral judgments regarding the excuseability and/or justifiability of the killing in these cases. And insofar as Abbott exhibits any reasoning behind these judgments, it seems no different from Thomson's. So it is thoroughly opaque what point he thinks he intends to be making.

Presumably our moral habits are thrown into chaos because the situation is such that the "very basis of morality is no longer present" (319). This might be a sensible statement if the characterization of this basis had determinate sense and substance. But we are told only that "moral principles are based upon certain social conditions; among them are regularities in human relations" (319), and that is too vague to be assigned any truth value, let alone to forward any argument, especially since the nature of this "basis" relation is left unspecified. The only remotely specific characterization is that "moral systems are based upon the good faith of others" (319), a claim which, on its most natural interpretation, is obviously false since the breaking as well as the keeping of good faith is the *subject* of moral judgments rather than something whose presence renders such judgments impossible or possible. Moreover, though this wooliness denies decisive adjudication of the matter, his characterization of the conditions constituting this basis seems incompatible with his examples of extreme situations, situations in which "none of these conditions exist" (319). I leave it as an exercise for the reader to determine *which*, if any (let alone all), of the conditions alluded to would be absent in *each* of the alleged extreme situations. For example, would the presence among us of a talking chimp render impossible "regularities in human relations," or "the good faith of others," or "relatively complex rules involving individual calculations, assessments of the motivations of self and others" (319), and so on?

One final question. Abbott's whole "argument" regarding the impropriety of claims about what *ought* to be the case in certain

imagined or extreme situations, relies on claims about what *would* be the case in such situations, but why aren't the latter just as improper as the former?

Roger Wertheimer, currently Director of the Carnegie-Mellon University Philosophy Program, is the author of The Significance of Sense and numerous articles on abortion and other public policy issues.