Strong's objections to the future of value account

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ABSTRACT

According to Carson Strong, the future of value account of the wrongness of killing is subject to counterexamples. Ezio Di Nucci has disagreed. Their disagreement turns on whether the concepts of a future of value and a future like ours are equivalent. Unfortunately, both concepts are fuzzy, which explains, at least in part, the disagreement. I suggest that both concepts can be clarified in ways that seem plausible and that makes them equivalent. Strong claims that better accounts of the wrongness of killing exist. I show that those alternative accounts are unsatisfactory.

In recent issues of the *Journal of Medical Ethics*, Carson Strong and Ezio DiNucci have disagreed on the nature of the objections to the future of value account of the wrongness of killing.[1 2] Their disagreement revolves around the relation between the expressions 'a future of value' and 'a future like ours'. Discussions of this kind usually deal with the views of dead philosophers. The history of academic disputes suggests that this leaves room for almost any interpretation one wishes and endless amounts of scholarly debate. Fortunately (or unfortunately perhaps), the author of the future of value account is not dead. Since I know him well I can shed some light on this matter.

According to the future of value account, what makes it wrong to kill those individuals we all believe it is wrong to kill, is that killing them deprives them of their futures of value.[3] This view is based on both medical and common knowledge. Consider a typical person who is 50-years-old. The medical community has data concerning the median life expectancy of 50 year olds. That life expectancy is the future life of a typical 50 year old. With the exception of individuals who have suffered severe mental and physical deterioration of great age, the vast majority of people over the age of 50 value most of the experiences that are part of their lives and regard their deaths as a misfortune. Talk of the future of value of a typical 50 year old is based on these well established facts concerning longevity and value. This allows us to say that someone who dies for any reason at age 50 was deprived of a future of value, and allows us to understand that death as a great harm. Considerations of this kind allow us to talk of the futures of value of human beings at various ages.

Therefore, we can understand a future of value of a human being in the following way. An individual human being's future of value at some time consists of whatever would make a later stage of that same human being's life valuable to that human being at that future stage if she survives. This is based on our extensive knowledge of the nature of biological organisms of the species *Homo sapiens*.[4] The value of an individual's life at a later stage is determined by the individual's judgement at that time if that individual were to continue to live. If killing a human being is wrong because it deprives her of a future of value, then because fetuses have futures of value, abortion is immoral. (Note that this account supplies, at best, a sufficient, but not a necessary, condition of the wrongness of killing. Note further that, as with any general account of the wrongness of killing, the considerations that make killing wrong may be over-ridden in exceptional circumstances. Think of killing in self-defense or killing in time of war. The account also assumes that Judy Thomson's famous objections can be met.[5])

According to Carson Strong,[1] the future of value account is unsound because it fails to account for all cases of wrongful killing. It does not account for the wrongness of killing terminally ill patients who want to live and who have satisfactory, if very short, lives in prospect and for the wrongness of killing humans who are severely cognitively impaired. Because humans in neither class have futures like ours and, because a future like ours and a future of value are equivalent, such individuals lack futures of value even though it is wrong to kill them. Since the future of value account is supposed to account for all cases in which killing clearly is wrong, the future of value account is unsatisfactory, or so goes Strong's argument.

Alas, matters are not so simple. Ezio Di Nucci[2] has pointed out that individuals in both classes have futures of value because there are experiences in their futures they will value if they continue to live. (I neglect some minor matters of interpretation.) He agrees with Strong that individuals in both classes lack futures like ours. He objects to Strong's failure to distinguish futures like ours from valuable futures. Strong replies that since I treat 'future of value' and 'future like ours' as equivalent expressions, if an individual lacks a future like ours, then she lacks a future of value.[6] Therefore, his objection stands.

This disagreement is due, at least in part, to some unfortunate fuzziness in the future of value account. Consider the following passage from *Why abortion is immoral*[3]:

> In the second place, the claim that the loss of one's future is the wrong-making feature of one's being killed entails the possibility that the futures of some actual non-human mammals on our own planet are sufficiently like ours that it is seriously wrong to kill them also. Whether some animals do have the same right to life as human beings depends on adding to the account of the wrongness of killing some additional account of just what it is about my future or the futures of other adult human beings which

makes it wrong to kill us. No such additional account will be offered in this essay.

When I wrote this, my belief that no additional account was needed was based on the following consideration. Consider, as an example of a non-human mammal, a rabbit. Rabbits enjoy eating vegetation. Therefore, most rabbits have futures of value. Either rabbits have futures of value sufficiently like ours to make killing rabbits wrong or they do not. If they do, then it will be wrong to kill postnatal rabbits. The future of value theory would imply that, not only are abortions on humans wrong, but abortions on rabbits are wrong as well. If they don't, then because (human) fetuses have futures, parts of which are *exactly* like ours, the theory entails it is wrong to kill them. Therefore, whatever you wish to say about rabbits, abortions on humans are wrong. The issue of whether rabbits have futures sufficiently like ours to make killing them wrong can be finessed without prejudice to the anti-choice conclusion of the essay and without raising a controversial issue. After all, if one is prepared to jump into a controversial matter with a view like mine, why take on another controversy?

Finessing this issue was a mistake. Rabbits clearly have futures of value, because a future of value is understood as experiences in the future an individual will value if she continues to live. There is no reason to think that rabbits desire their future lives, of course. However, the future of value theory does not make a present desire for one's future life or for one's future happiness a necessary condition for having a future of value. Nevertheless, the basic argument for the future of value theory fails to support the claim that having the kind of future that rabbits have makes a killing wrong. The basic argument for the future of value theory appeals to what human beings believe would make their premature deaths a misfortune for them. A typical person believes her premature death would be a misfortune for her because such a death would cause her to miss out on all of those future experiences that would make her life valuable to her, whether those valuable experiences involve watching television, or going fishing, or doing philosophy, or seeing her grandchildren graduate from college or many other things. On the assumption that it is wrong to cause another human being to suffer a major misfortune, causing another's death is wrong. This in turn supports the inference that depriving a fetus of *a future that contains what a typical human's future contains* is sufficient to make abortion wrong. This argument does not imply that it is wrong to kill a rabbit. Although (human) fetuses have exactly the same kinds of futures that older human beings will have if they continue to live (just more of a future), rabbits do not. The future of a rabbit, unlike that of a fetus, is not *qualitatively* like that of a postnatal human being. This point undercuts the indeterminacy of scope I had been willing to tolerate concerning the future of value theory.

Indeed, my agnosticism concerning the scope of the future of value theory leads to more problems than the problem with rabbits. Does a mosquito *value* biting humans? Any theory that could lead to this concern should be avoided.

Another concern is that the plausibility of any account of the wrongness of killing should rest, in part, on its ability to deal with cases in which we all believe that killing clearly is wrong and cases in which we do not believe that it is. Some people believe that it is wrong to kill human beings *just because* they are human beings. Other people believe that it is wrong to kill (most) human beings because (most) human beings are *persons*. Whatever their other virtues (or lack of them) both of these accounts purport to explain the common belief that postnatal human beings have the right to life and rabbits do not. The future of value view, as described above, lacks that virtue. Therefore, the future of value view, so described, is weaker in one respect than the 'because they are human beings' view or the 'because they are persons' view.

Also, there are problems with the notion of a future like ours. 'Like' is a vague predicate. In what respects must a future be like the future of a standard postnatal human being in order to count as a future like ours? I have never bothered to discuss the answer to this question. In standard contexts in which the expression 'future like ours' has been used such an answer has not been necessary. We—that is, the readers of this essay—have the sorts of futures of value that make it wrong to kill us. The futures of the fetuses who were earlier stages of us contained everything that ours contain (and more). (I assume we are biological organisms!) If our futures are sufficiently valuable to make it wrong to kill us, then the futures of those fetuses also are sufficiently valuable to make it wrong to kill them. It is unnecessary, for the purposes of *this* argument, to specify the features a future must have so that it is a future like ours.

Nevertheless, the rabbit issue arises again. Even if one grants that the arguments for the future of value view show that the kinds of futures of value possessed by human beings at any age are sufficient to make it wrong to kill them, why not say that rabbits have futures of value *enough like* ours that it is wrong to kill them? If one could say that, then there seems to be a problem with the future of value theory.

It is possible to resolve these matters in a way that seems principled and that probably reflects the understanding of the argument by most readers of the 1989 essay, even in the absence of the following analysis. Let us call our (ie, yours and mine, readers) futures of value 'p-futures of value'. P-futures are the kinds of future lives that can be characterised as the lives of persons. I have a p-future. The fetus I once was had a p-future. (Note that this claim is a simple consequence of the way 'future of value' was defined and well-known facts.) According to what I shall call 'the narrow view' valuable futures are futures like ours as long as they are p-futures of value. Therefore, an entity will have a p-future of value if and only if it has a p-future like ours, a result that fits with Strong's understanding of the future of value account.

Given the narrow view, what can we say about Strong's alleged counterexamples to the future of value account? The terminally ill patients with lives containing some pleasures have p-futures of value. The difference between us and them is that their prospective p-futures are much shorter than ours. Therefore, this counterexample fails. The severely retarded human beings to whom Strong refers do not have p-futures of value. Therefore, the p-future of value theory does not imply that it is wrong to kill them. It follows that the p-future of value theory does not account for this case, as Strong rightly claims. Of course, those, like Strong, who believe that our being persons *now* makes it wrong to kill us cannot account for the wrongness of killing severely retarded human beings either. Strong might suggest that, like infants (on his view, not mine), there are other reasons why it is wrong to kill humans who are severely retarded.[1] However, if a move of that kind is permissible for Strong, it is also permissible for an adherent of the p-future of value view.

A distinction may illuminate this issue. In contrast to the p-future of value view, that is, the narrow view, call the unqualified future of value view 'the broad view'. According to the broad view, one has a future of value just in case, if not killed, one's future will consist, on balance, of experiences one

will value. On the future of value view (whether narrow or broad) these experiences need not be experiences it would be rational to value nor they need by experiences one values *now*. Therefore, on the broad view, it would be wrong to kill Strong's severely retarded humans on the assumption that their future lives would consist of simple pleasures not outweighed by the burdens of living. The broad view would underwrite a response to Strong's retarded person objection. One could then argue that the broad version of the future of value view is superior to Strong's account that makes it wrong to kill individuals at a particular time because they are persons at that same time. However, this advantage comes with a huge price tag: We have our problem with rabbits, and perhaps even mosquitoes, again.

Where does this leave us? Two versions of the future of value view, a narrow version and a broad version, can be described. In each version we can understand 'a future of value' and 'a future like ours' so that the expressions are equivalent. This deals with Di Nucci's concerns. When expressions from different versions are mixed, trouble ensues. With both versions of the future of value view, we can construct a defense of the wrongness of human abortions. Those who are attracted by defenses of the moral permissibility of abortion in terms of the fetus's lack of personhood will be most challenged by the narrow version of the future of value view, for the narrow version incorporates the moral importance of personhood. In addition, the narrow version does not even suggest that killing rabbits or mosquitoes may be wrong. Therefore, let's stick with the narrow version of the future of value view in what follows.

ALTERNATIVES

Reproductive freedom clearly is a very important good. Even if the p-future of value view turns out to be no more vulnerable to Strong's objections than Strong's own view, we would have good reasons for rejecting the p-future of value view if there were satisfactory accounts of the wrongness of killing compatible with reproductive freedom. Strong claims that there *apparently* are such accounts. He cites Jeff McMahan's account as an example.[7] Strong characterises McMahan's account as the view that 'killing is wrong because it involves a failure of respect for the worth of the victim' (McMahan, p243). As an alternative to the future of value view this won't do. The future of value view can be described in the same way on at least one reasonable understanding of 'respect for the worth of the victim'.

However, McMahan's actual view (that Strong underdescribes) is a genuine competitor to the future of value view. McMahan agrees with Warren Quinn that the wrongness of killing persons is based on a person's capacity for autonomy. However, McMahan knows this is not specific enough. How is it so based? McMahan apparently endorses the following as the best account of how the wrongness of killing is based on respect:

> One possibility is suggested by Quinn's claim that the main reason why killing a person is wrong is that this contravenes the autonomous and authoritative determination of the person's will that one not kill him.[7] (p257)

Clearly no fetus possesses an autonomous will. On the assumption that killing a human being seriously victimises her only if this 'main reason' applies, McMahan's view makes room for the moral permissibility of abortion. If McMahan's view is correct, the future of value view—with its implication concerning abortion—should be rejected.

McMahan's view is subject to many counterexamples. Consider all those human beings with inadequately treated bipolar disease. Some of these human beings become greatly depressed and, as a consequence, attempt suicide. It is wrong to kill such persons even if they have made up their minds to kill themselves.

This class of counterexamples can be broadened. Consider those human beings with inadequately treated bipolar disorder who have not made up their minds to kill themselves but, because they are greatly depressed, say that they don't believe that life is worth living. They are not in the process of trying to commit suicide, but, as a result of their severe depression, they don't get out of bed. They say sincerely that they are indifferent to whether their lives continue or not. They also lack the autonomous determination of their wills to continue to live—or to do much of anything. Yet, surely it is wrong to kill them.

Consider another case. Suppose I have a suicide pill that, when put in your drink, causes you no longer to want to live. Suppose I put such a pill in your drink. Then you will lack the autonomous will to continue to live. Nevertheless, surely it is wrong to kill you.

Consider still another case. Suppose Fred has been indoctrinated into a strange religious cult in which he has pledged loyalty to its charismatic leader. Because of concerns about what is going on in the cult, the authorities close in. Fred, and all his fellow cult members, obey the command of the leader to commit suicide. Because Fred's death was not contrary to the authoritative and autonomous determination of his will, McMahan's view implies that it would have been morally permissible to kill Fred. It plainly isn't. Accordingly, McMahan's view is subject to many counterexamples.

Suppose one responds to these counterexamples by arguing that all of these cases are cases of irrational behaviour and we have only the obligation to respect the *rational* will of others. This response does not rescue McMahan's theory. If we have only the obligation to respect the rational will of others, then since the people in these counterexamples lack the rational will to live, we lack the obligation not to kill them. But we do have the obligation not to kill them. As a result the counterexamples to McMahan survive.

Note that the counterexamples to McMahan's theory are cases that the p-future of value theory accommodates in the right way. We believe that after most depressed psychiatric patients receive proper treatment, after the effects of the suicide pill wear off and after people enslaved by strange religious cults are rescued, most will be able to lead lives that they will judge in the future to be valuable to them. We believe that enabling them to live such lives is the reason we should intervene. This way of thinking about the matter supports the p-future of value theory.

Note also that none of the counterexamples to McMahan's theory involve rational suicide. Decent arguments are available for the claim that it is morally permissible to assist people whose suicides are rational. No such argument is available in the cases mentioned above.

In addition, McMahan's account of the wrongness of killing does not account for the wrongness of killing children. This difficulty does not concern the disputed issue of infants' right to life. Our view of how we ought to treat a 5 year old, whether with respect to ending her life, or in some other way, is not, for a number of reasons, based on the autonomous and authoritative determination of that 5 year old's will. We do not have the duty to respect the autonomy of a 5 year old because we do not believe that 5 year olds have autonomous wills. If we did believe that 5 year olds have autonomous wills, then since we do have an obligation to respect the autonomous will of others, we would not believe that treating children paternalistically is ever appropriate. But we do believe that, under a variety of

circumstances, it is appropriate to treat 5 year olds—indeed even older children—paternalistically. Otherwise, we would not, for instance, have mandatory school attendance laws. Therefore, it is not the case that we have the duty to respect the autonomous will of 5 years olds. It is worth noting, in addition, that paternalism towards children is justified by appeal to the moral importance of a child's future to that child and the moral importance of one's future is the basic moral consideration that lies behind the future of value view. All these considerations show that Strong's belief that McMahan's account of the wrongness of killing is a credible alternative to the future of value view is false.

Strong also claims that Dean Stretton also has offered a credible alternative to the future of value view.[8] He does not offer even a cursory description of Stretton's account. The Stretton account to which Strong refers is the same as McMahan's account, as Stretton freely admits. Therefore, it suffers from the same problems.

Strong claims that Gerald Paske has also offered a credible alternative to the future of value view. Paske claims that the wrongness of killing is based on the fact that we are persons.[9] This all by itself is not enough. The p-future of value view takes the moral importance of personhood seriously. According to the p-future of value view it would be wrong to deprive *anyone* of a life of that quality! Therefore, in order to evaluate Paske's theory, we need to ask: Why is the fact that we are *now* persons morally crucial? Here is Paske's answer:

> Persons, and only persons, can conceptualise a distant future in which they are a participant. Only persons can anticipate and deliberately shape their own future. Only persons can desire and possess the freedom to shape their own self, their own life, their own future. Only persons can have their long-term plans frustrated by their untimely death. One aspect of the seriousness of death for a person is the loss of an anticipated, intended, longed-for future. No non-person can be harmed in this way. It is the loss of this sort of a future that constitutes a common—but not a universal—harm arising from death. Thus, the harm constituted by the loss of *our* future presupposes that we are persons. This, in brief, is the explanation of why psychological states have moral importance.[9]

Paske's account has two interpretations: a weak interpretation and a strong interpretation. Consider first the weak interpretation. On the weak interpretation we can understand Paske as claiming that the wrongness of killing persons is based on the fact that persons have the *capacity* to have hopes, and plan and desires. The trouble with this version of Paske's view is that the *capacities* of persons are not *sufficient* to explain why it is wrong to frustrate the realisation of their desires, such as the desire to live, by killing them. Persons have the *capacities* to desire many state of affairs that they do not actually desire. Consider a case alluded to by a referee of this essay. Suppose I am terminally ill, suffering from agonising pain that cannot be controlled and ask to be killed. Considerations in favour of the view that it is morally permissible to kill me have great force. In the first place, under these circumstances I lack a future of value. In the second place, I want to die, and there is always a moral presumption in favour of respecting the wishes of others. The fact that I have the capacity to want to live is, morally speaking, utterly irrelevant.

This suggests that we should adopt a strong interpretation of Paske's view. After all, the capacities of a person to desire and plan and anticipate are significant only because they make possible the *actual* plans, anticipations, and intentions of persons. We surely have a (defeasible) obligation not to frustrate the actualisation of the *actual* desires and plans and hopes of persons. One way of frustrating the actualisation of all of an individual's desires and plans and hopes is to kill her. Therefore, the strong version of Paske's view supplies us with an argument against killing people. Since fetuses have no actual desires and plans and hopes, we lack an obligation to end the lives of fetuses, or so goes Paske's argument.

This view is inadequate for some of the same reasons that McMahan's view is inadequate. It permits killing those with untreated bipolar disease who, because of their disease, have given up their previous desires, plans and hopes. It permits killing you if you take the suicide pill and lose all hope for your future. It permits killing those who are in the grip of a religious cult and whose sole desire is to obey their charismatic leader so that they can achieve bliss in the hereafter. Therefore, Paske's view is not a credible alternative to the future of value view.

Paske's view is not a plausible account of why it is wrong to kill children. We view the plans and hopes of many children as, well, childish. The way we treat children, with respect to their education, or their health and safety, or their lives is based on our concern for their futures. The future of value view fits far better with this attitude than Paske's view. A final verdict on whether Paske's view can be expanded and adjusted to deal with this concern requires a defense of Paske's view that does not now exist.

Strong seems to endorse a view like Paske's. According to Strong:

> … the fetus is not deprived of *everything* that the adult is deprived of in being killed. Specifically a fetus is not deprived of the continuation of its plans and projects. … On this view, a morally significant part of the wrongness of killing an adult is that it deprives the person of the continuation of those projects.[1]

Notice that the view that Strong affirms in this passage is not quite the same as the strong version of Paske's view. After all, an action that deprives another of the fulfilment of her plans and projects is presumptively wrong—although there are many considerations that can override the presumption. This is not at all incompatible with the view that our having a p-future of value is sufficient to make it wrong to kill us. Therefore, although the strong version of Paske's view is incompatible with the future of value view, the view that Strong affirms in this passage is not. The view that Strong affirms in this passage is not a credible alternative to the p-future of value view because it is not really an alternative to the p-future of value view at all.

Strong also affirms a somewhat different view:

> … the value of the adult's future involves a continuation of the adult's projects … a fetus is not deprived of the sort of valuable future an adult is deprived of in being killed.[1]

Strong's view does not show what he supposes. Consider the following personal example. I am now sitting at my computer trying to make an account of the wrongness of killing as clear as I can make it and to discuss clearly views that contrast with it. I agree with Aristotle that this contemplative life makes my life *very much* worth living.[10] That value to me now seems utterly independent of what I wanted or failed to want when I was a younger adult. Therefore, it seems to me that if I had been killed at that time I would have been deprived of (a slice of) the same kind of valuable future than I would have been deprived of if I had been killed when I was a fetus.

Of course, some people cherish their memories more than I do. Surely it is, *ceteris paribus*, wrong to deprive those people of those *future mental experiences* that we call 'memories'. A fetus whose life is ended will not suffer such a deprivation. It does not follow that if someone's future experiences will not involve memories or if those memories will not be very important to

them, it is not wrong to deprive those individuals of their future experiences. After all, future mental experiences that have nothing to do with memories can be as valuable to an individual at a later time as those that do. Furthermore, the future of value view can account for why it is wrong to deprive people (or fetuses) of their futures when what they would value most in a slice of their futures are their memories.

All these considerations show that neither McMahan's view, nor Stretton's view, nor Paske's view, nor Strong's own view is an account of the wrongness of killing that is a credible alternative to the p-future of value view. Furthermore, the case of the terminally ill patient that Strong claims is a counterexample to the future of value view is not an actual counterexample to the p-future of value view at all. This leaves us with Strong's severely retarded human being counterexample.

This counterexample is odd. Of course, if it is wrong to kill a severely retarded human being, then, on the assumption that a severely retarded human being is not now a person and never could be, the p-future of value view does not account for that wrongness. Nevertheless, Strong's own view cannot account for that wrongness either.

Here is another problem. Only two accounts of the wrongness of killing with which I am acquainted account for the wrongness of killing severely retarded human beings. The first is the broad version of the future of value account. Surely Strong will reject that account, because it does not incorporate the moral importance of the life of a person and Strong believes that the moral importance of the life of a person is a crucially important part of the morality killing. The second is the view that killing a human being is wrong *just because* she is a member of our species. Good reasons exist for rejecting such a view. They are well-known.[11] It is clear that Strong rejects this view. However, he has one reason for accepting it that the rest of us do not have.

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