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A CRITIQUE OF BIOETHICAL SLOPES

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This thesis is submitted in accordance with the requirements for a completion of a Masters of Arts Degree in Philosophy at the Australian National University.
I declare that this thesis contains my original work and that all sources that have been used have been acknowledged.

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INTRODUCTION

Ethical discussions are no longer limited to philosophers, and ethical writings to philosophical journals. Determinations on issues in applied ethics are being sought and made by government bodies, institutional committees and individuals. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in bioethics, which examines the ethical problems that emerge in medical practice and research, and is now perhaps the most significant area of applied ethics.

This increased interest in bioethics means that common arguments are now being used, or misused, more widely. An example of this is the prevalence of arguments claiming that certain events should not be allowed because they will lead to moral atrocities. This argument has a variety of names but is most commonly known in philosophical literature as the ‘slippery slope argument’.

This argument appears in discussions about euthanasia; the moral status of the embryo (which in turn influences debates on abortion), in vitro fertilisation (IVF) and whether embryos can be experimented on; genetic engineering; and the allocation of medical resources. Because of its versatility the argument has appeared in a variety of different reports on bioethical issues. The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Ethics Committee’s report on the ethics of limiting life sustaining treatment surveys a number of options that have been suggested for deciding whether to withdraw or stop such treatment. It is then claimed that

Many would prefer not to think about the options. Others fear that any such discussions open the way to killing the aged, the no-longer useful, and who next?1

In his paper for the NHMRC’s Round Table Conference on the Ethics of Gene Therapy, Nicholas Tonti-Filippini argues against allowing gene therapy on somatic (non-reproductive) cells in human beings in the

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following way:

Human gene therapy, albeit only on somatic cells, will result in the technological means for genetic probing ... germ cell genetic engineering, eugenics and enhancement genetic engineering.2

A report from Germany on IVF, genome analysis and gene therapy expresses a similar concern.

It is difficult to establish the borderline between therapy and eugenic measures. Diseases cannot reasonably be defined as the deviation from a fixed standard, which would be arbitrary in the last analysis.3

The moral status of the embryo has been one of the concerns raised in reports dealing with IVF and related issues. For example, the Warnock Committee's report addresses the question of until what point in an embryo's development experimentation on it should be allowed. It was argued that it was difficult, if not impossible to establish the existence of a morally significant marker event on the continuum between conception and birth.

While ... the timing of the different stages of development is critical, once the process has begun, there is no particular part of the developmental process that is more important than another ... Thus biologically there is no single identifiable stage in the development of the embryo beyond which the in vitro embryo should not be kept alive.4

These are a few examples of positions and points of view employing the slippery slope argument, which have appeared in public reports. It should, however, be noted that these positions have not been presented with the same depth as occurs in philosophical discussions that use the argument.

This argument is not thought of very highly amongst the group from which it originated. Trudy Govier informs us that 'slippery slope arguments are commonly thought to be fallacious'.5 Max Charlesworth

4. Warnock: 1985 p.65. It should be noted that the Warnock Committee made recommendations on experimenting on embryos despite this being the case.
argues that when we are considering bioethical issues, 'we should refuse to be bullied by the so-called "slippery-slope" argument'.\textsuperscript{6} Marvin Kohl goes further by suggesting that the use of such arguments is an offence to normal people's intelligence.\textsuperscript{7} Beauchamp and Childress express concern about the way the argument has been used when considering bioethical issues.

\begin{quote}
Because of the widespread misuses of such arguments in biological ethics ... there is a tendency to dismiss them whenever they are offered.\textsuperscript{8}
\end{quote}

Yet the argument is still prevalent in many non-philosophical (and some philosophical) discussions, particularly when new bioethical issues arise.

An analysis of the slippery slope argument, focusing on its use in bioethics, is needed, and this is what I shall attempt to provide in the present thesis. In the first chapter I will argue that in fact there are three versions of the argument. In the subsequent chapters, I shall analyse each of the arguments in turn. I shall conclude that there are specific and crucial problems for each of the three versions of the arguments, and that these problematic issues have to be dealt with whenever the argument is used.

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\textsuperscript{6} Charlesworth 1989 p.131.
\textsuperscript{7} Kohl: 1974 p. 50.
\textsuperscript{8} Beauchamp & Childress: 1989 p. 139.