A common argument against the destruction of embryos develops a theme from Donald Marquis' “Why Abortion is Immoral”. Marquis argues that abortion is morally wrong for the same reason that killing an adult is morally wrong inasmuch as it equally well deprives the adult of a future of great value like ours. According to what I shall call the Trajectory Argument—an argument which is often encapsulated in the “you were an embryo once, too!” retort—there exists a causal trajectory from a specific embryo to me. If it is morally wrong to kill me, then it would have been morally wrong to kill the embryo which initiated the causal trajectory that terminates with me. Since the trajectory that results in me is a necessary condition on my existence, each stage on the trajectory backward-inherits any moral value I enjoy. If it's wrong to kill me today, it would have been wrong to kill me yesterday, and so on. Generalizing, it is morally wrong to kill any embryo since doing so obliterates a trajectory that otherwise would have terminated with something it would be wrong to kill. Presumably something like the Trajectory Argument is what opponents of embryonic stem-cell research have in mind when they object to the destruction of embryos because embryos, regardless of whether we view them as persons or not, begin the biological history of a person.

Let us try setting the argument out. For the sake of simplicity, let time $t = [1,n]$ be discretized into finitely-many arbitrary but equal time-spans such that $t=n$ is the current time-span, or 'now', and $t=1$ is the time-span of conception when the trajectory initiates.
The Trajectory Argument

1. For any X, if it is morally wrong to kill X at t, then it would have been morally wrong to kill X at t-1.

2. It is morally wrong to kill J at n.

∴ 3. It is morally wrong to kill J at 1.

∴ 4. For any X, if it is morally wrong to kill X at n, then it is morally wrong to kill X at 1.

This way of casting the Trajectory Argument won't do, however, because premise (1) is false. The moral-normative property J has of its being morally wrong to kill him is not inductive in the sense in which having the property at one time implies having it at another. Counterexamples are plentiful. The fact that it is morally wrong to kill me now does not imply it would have been morally wrong to kill me yesterday, since yesterday my killing may, alas, have been the only alternative to killing all the children in a school-bus in some hopefully extraordinary circumstance. In general it is morally wrong to kill me without sufficient reason: Sometimes reasons suffice, other times they do not.

Perhaps, then, what matters for the Trajectory Argument is not any particular stage on the trajectory but the trajectory itself. Since it is morally wrong to kill me now, I have a fortiori escaped extraordinary circumstances in which sufficient reasons would have obtained to kill me. My trajectory inherits my moral value in such a way that it would have been morally wrong to obliterate my trajectory for the same reason that it is morally wrong to kill me now, whatever that reason may be. But to assert that it would have been morally wrong to obliterate my trajectory is to assert, at least, that it would have been morally wrong to remove any conditions necessary for it, including, especially, by destroying the embryo that initiated the trajectory.
Intuitively, an assassin sent to kill me might avoid a great deal of fuss and bother by traveling back in time to destroy the embryo that was to become me; yet, on this understanding of the Trajectory Argument, it would be just as morally wrong for the assassin to destroy that embryo with the intention of obliterating my trajectory as it would have been for him to forthrightly kill me since the end result, my non-existence, is the same in either case.

**The Trajectory Argument, Step 1**

1. For any X, if it is morally wrong to kill X at n, then it would have been morally wrong to remove any condition necessary for X's trajectory.

2. It is morally wrong to kill J at n.

3. Therefore, it would have been morally wrong to remove any condition necessary for J's trajectory.

4. Destroying the embryo that initiated J's trajectory is to remove a condition necessary for J's trajectory.

5. Therefore, for any X, if it is morally wrong to kill X at n, then it would have been morally wrong to destroy the embryo that initiated X's trajectory.

This is better. All that proponents of the Trajectory Argument need do now is argue that the fact that it is always morally wrong to kill a person at some point in their lives—except, perhaps, in a few outlandish cases that could doubtless be contrived in a mad philosopher's laboratory—can be used to infer that it is morally wrong in very nearly every case to destroy embryos.
The Trajectory Argument, Step 2

6 For any X and some time t, it is morally wrong to kill X at t.

\[ \therefore \quad 7 \] For any X, it would have been morally wrong to destroy the embryo that initiated X's trajectory.

8 If, for any X, it would have been morally wrong to destroy the embryo that initiated X's trajectory, then it is morally wrong to destroy embryos.

\[ \therefore \quad 9 \] It is morally wrong to destroy embryos.

Premise (8) gets right to the heart of the matter: If it is morally wrong to destroy an embryo and thereby eliminate a trajectory that would otherwise have resulted in a person it would have been morally wrong to kill outright, then it is morally wrong to destroy embryos, full-stop.

This short bit of reasoning, however, embodies a fallacy. I'm not sure where in the growing pantheon of fallacies the particular mistake belongs, or even what to call it, but it is an identifiable mistake.

Consider my assassin. His intention is to kill me now. As a time-traveler, he can disrupt either proximate causes for my continued existence—my respiration, say—or distal causes like the conception of the embryo that became me. Though less messy, stopping the creation of that embryo is morally wrong because doing so has the same outcome as directly strangling me. The moral wrongness of bringing about my nonexistence implies the moral wrongness of eliminating any necessary condition on my trajectory.

To be sure, my time-traveling assassin is an overachiever. It is careless to say that he kills me by destroying the embryo that would become me, since at t=1 he is not destroying the embryo that would become me. Rather, he is destroying the embryo that became me—presumably no
embryo is _fated_ to become some one person. The interplay between genetic and environmental factors could just as well have led to an altogether different person. A single embryo initiates multiple trajectories: Many of them stop abruptly; others result in other, possibly similar persons; one trajectory happens to result in me. At t=1 all the possible outcomes obtain, including me, so in destroying this embryo the assassin is causing not only my non-existence but the nonexistence of all the other persons resulting from the many possible trajectories initiated by this one embryo. In disrupting a distal cause of my existence, my assassin has intentionally disrupted the cause of many possible persons.

It is unclear whether my assassin's overachieving strengthens the trajectory theorist's case or not, since it is hard to see how merely possible persons have moral value. Still, even though the overachieving assassin may not be any _more_ morally blameworthy than had he simply strangled me, he is nevertheless _at least_ as morally blameworthy. The trajectory theorist's case is not thereby weakened by there being many possible trajectories. Indeed, let us grant that it would be morally wrong for an assassin to travel back in time with the intention of disrupting a distal cause of me—as morally wrong as it would have been for him to strangle me. Let us accept, in other words, the soundness of the first step of the Trajectory Argument.

The problem for the Trajectory Argument lies in the reasoning that underwrites Premise (8). To see the problem, contrast the following two cases. Suppose, in the first case, that my assassin is a pacifist. He is frankly horrified at the violence required of disrupting any proximate causes of my continuing existence. Yet it would be equally against his nature to slip my mother a morning-after pill at t=1. He's just _not_ that sort of assassin. Instead, he goes further back in time and conspires to befriend my father and interest him in someone other than my mother. The
end result is the same—he has thereby brought about my nonexistence—and everyone is happy. Granted, he has ensured that I never would have existed; yet, since I in fact never exist, I can't object.

Contrast the case of the pacifist assassin with a second case, the case of the meddling friend. Suppose the woman who would have been my mother has a close and protective friend who disapproves of the man who would have been my father. The friend convinces my would-be mother to avoid my would-be father, and she ends up settling down with someone else. The friend has thereby ensured my nonexistence. Is the friend my assassin?

Crucially, the moral wrongness of disrupting the relationship that might have resulted in the embryo that might have resulted in me derives from the moral wrongness of intentionally bringing about my nonexistence. I anchor one end of a particular trajectory. Wanting to eliminate me, the assassin tracks the trajectory backward and eliminates it, thereby eliminating me. The meddling friend does no such thing. There is no intention on her part to bring about my nonexistence. She has no way of knowing about me: I don't exist.

Premise (8) asserts that the moral impermissibility of destroying the embryo that happened to become me suffices for the moral impermissibility of destroying any embryo. This is an illicit generalization. The reason why it would be morally wrong to destroy the embryo that became me—namely, to bring about the nonexistence of an actual person, me—does not extend to the act of destroying some arbitrary embryo now since there is no particular person destroying the embryo now is intended to, or even would, eliminate. At most there are a range of possible persons, and we surely have no more moral duty to any one of those possible people than the meddling friend has to me.
To press the argument, the trajectory theorist might assert that every embryo is fated to become some one particular person. That is, the trajectory theorist might hold that each embryo initiates a *unique* trajectory, and destroying the embryo amounts to intentionally eliminating the terminus of that trajectory—presumably a morally valuable person. But this is absurd: Trajectories are either possible or actual; none are *necessary*.

It may be morally wrong to destroy embryos, but the fact that I was once an embryo can't be used to show it.