

A Bridge That Does Not Exist: *Reductio ad Absurdum* and the Socratic Method in Teaching on the Issues of Abortion and Euthanasia

Simona Kragh

ABSTRACT: In the current social and political climate, the conventional notion is that compromise is eminently desirable, the hallmark of reasonableness, and the non-negotiable foundation of democracy. Hence, the only pro-life stance that is considered acceptable is one that includes exceptions. Such a stance would create a “bridge,” a comfortable third option between positions that are portrayed as radical, extreme, and unacceptable. This paper demonstrates the benefits of instructing students on the use of *reductio ad absurdum* and the Socratic Method when considering the topics of abortion and euthanasia. I use these techniques to expose the faulty assumption behind the “bridge” so that students can develop their powers of critical thinking, can take responsibility, and are enabled to make their own choice between the only two logically viable options.

WHEN I FIRST EMBARKED on my career as a professor of Political Science, I was fresh out of some fine graduate programs. They were excellent at providing research and teaching experience, comprehensive in their review of the literature in the field, and unrelenting in the study and application of a variety of analytical methods. I had been exposed in only a limited way to the blatant ideological bias that is now everywhere present and the intent of its proponents to push a political agenda. Yet, even that limited experience was enough to convince me that I would never choose to engage in the same behavior and that I would always try to maintain professional standards of ethics by remaining as objective as possible on controversial issues.

Once given the responsibility for my own classes, I was faced with a dilemma, especially when it came to matters such as abortion, euthanasia, in vitro fertilization, embryonic stem-cell research, and more recently, even marriage. The dilemma was stark: I could either advance views that I knew to be in keeping with my Christian beliefs but at the cost of the perception of

objectivity, or I could remain neutral between pro-life and pro-death positions, but at the cost of my conscience.

The solution to this conundrum emerged as I ventured, with no small amount of apprehension, into the topic of abortion with several of my classes and realized that, in most cases, I was not confronted with a set of students, some of whom opposed abortion and some who supported the practice. Rather, my courses were almost entirely populated by those who favored abortion. The only major difference with the group pertained to their positions on such questions as which circumstances justified abortion and at what stages of pregnancy abortion was permissible. Most of my students would allow abortion in the cases of rape, incest, or threat to the health of the mother, or early in the development of the baby, while the remainder had no qualms with abortion-on-demand, for any reason and at any stage. The former would call themselves “pro-life” while the latter would generally argue the question about what label should be used for describing their position.

Both agreed on one point: we need to compromise. When classes reached this phase in the discussion – in most cases, very quickly – the relief in the air was palpable. For a few, tense moments the debate had the potential of becoming ugly, but now all the fire could be retrained against the extremists – those who showed no consideration for the terrible circumstances that some women face, or no common sense in realizing that, right before birth, a baby is definitely a baby, but that this cannot be said too early in a pregnancy, for there are always questions, like “What if the mother is ill?” and so on.

With this exchange of absurdities and “up-talk” the students had precipitously abandoned the notion that they had to stand on one or the other of the opposing shores where the discussion had started and where they felt vulnerable. They assumed that they had run to a safer, more acceptable position, on the bridge between the two views. Left to their own devices, they would leave the room just as they had entered it: opinionated, but dangerously ignorant of the facts.

Every time this happened, it seemed to me that a teaching opportunity, if there ever was one, was plainly in front of me. I did my duty as a professor and provided information on the historical circumstances surrounding the legalization of abortion and the data concerning its access and consequences. Being a trained nurse, I welcomed the opportunity to explain the absurdity behind the “health of the mother” exception. It did not take me long to realize that evidence, no matter how overwhelming (sometime *because* it is over-

whelming) only angers the most ardent supporters of abortion, triggers accusations of biased and unethical teaching, and leaves the more numerous, tepid “pro-lifers” utterly confused.

A Culture of Amorality

In the prayerful search for a way out of this impasse, I realized that “the bridge” was the problem. Students on both sides of the issue – like most people in the general public – do not want to feel the discomfort of isolation and are more likely to “run for cover” if, in addition to shelter, they can achieve self-righteousness. A bridge between the two opposing views is that perfect place. It represents compromise, the willingness to get along with others, and the ability to sacrifice some part of one’s own views for the common good. The bridge is then perceived not as *an* option but as the *only* option – nay, an obligation. Those who do not reach it, even on the basis of well-substantiated reasons, are painted as outsiders and extremists, possibly unworthy of living in a democracy and certainly undermining it. With this, the discomfort felt on the shores is turned into superiority on the bridge.

We could agree that the run to the bridge is observed often, not only during discussions on abortion. Intuitively, euthanasia engenders the same development, with the “Never” and the “Anytime/for any reason” camps on the shores outnumbered by the “Suffering must be alleviated” contingent on the bridge. Perhaps less obvious is the fact that, since the definition of marriage has been put into question, a bridge had to be built in a hurry, which is exactly what the Supreme Court might have thought it was doing with *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015).¹ Many resent, then and now, what is commonly viewed as the rigidity of the “religious right” that obtusely insists on the need for there to be one man marrying one woman. It is rare, however, to witness support for marriage of anyone to truly anyone else, no matter what the number or the age of the parties involved. With *Obergefell*, not only the discomfort associated

¹ Commonly known as the “gay marriage case,” *Obergefell* has been boisterously celebrated by many and intensely despised by some. The 5-4 decision handed down by the Supreme Court was based on an understanding of marriage “which focuses almost entirely on the happiness of persons who choose to marry.” *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576 U.S. ___ (2015), Docket No. 14-556 (Alito, S., dissenting). Based on the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, the decision makes it in principle impossible to deny a license to individuals seeking what used to be defined as pedophilic, polygamous, polyandrous, bestial unions, or any others.

with the extremes was alleviated, but the supporters of the decision were offered the moral superiority that is the privilege of the enlightened and the compassionate.

The causes that have led large portions of an entire society to define infanticide, the murder of the elderly and infirm, and sexual perversity as acceptable and even desirable are too complex to review here in detail. Even a cursory observation, however, points at one cause and three agents: the loss of their Judeo-Christian roots by the family, the school system, and the media. Having lost their theological center and, therefore, their source of discernment, many families have entrusted the school system and the media with the responsibility of determining right and wrong and of passing that understanding to the next generation. Having refused God as their point of reference, teachers have pushed aside any unwavering moral compass and are often brainwashing instead of instructing. For the same reason, journalists are more often engaged in spreading propaganda than information.²

Regrettably, scholarly studies on the matter are few and far between, a phenomenon that in itself confirms the ideological skew of our educational system. Notable exceptions include, among others, works by think-tanks and interest groups such as the Heritage Foundation, the Family Research Council, and C-FAM. An interesting research report by Horowitz and Laksin³ (2009) details with plentiful examples how narrow the ideological focus has become in many of our universities. The result has been to plunge much teaching to the level of political indoctrination in a dozen renowned institutions.⁴ Those are the halls in which new teachers are instructed.

² For provocative evidence on the behavior of both the public school system and the media, one needs to look no further than their adamant refusal to treat the mere notion of the Judeo-Christian God with any kind of respect, let alone deference, while replacing it on the pedestal of worship with environmentalism, “inclusiveness,” the moral equivalence of all religions, or whatever is fashionable at any particular time.

³ David Horowitz and Jacob Laksin, *One-Party Classroom: How Radical Professors at America's Top colleges Indoctrinate Students and Undermine Our Democracy* (New York NY: Crown, 2009).

⁴ The authors examined the catalogs and a selection of courses in the following universities: Duke University, University of Colorado, Columbia University, Penn State University, University of Texas, University of Arizona, Arizona State University, Temple University, Miami University (Ohio), University of Missouri, University of Southern California, University of California (Santa Cruz).

The media often avoids being blamed for showing a consistently ideological partiality, thanks to studies that use variables and measurements already marred with bias.⁵ Some data, however, such as what is reported in the study by Erickson and Tedin,⁶ suggests that members of the media hold positions much more to the left even of the general liberal population, thereby lending support for the impression that especially the printed and televised media tend to be ideologically skewed.

In essence, we are witnessing the cumulative effect on each individual of the absence of a firm moral point of reference. It is no longer taught by the family and it is degraded by the educational system and the media, who have replaced it with their own idols. For all of this to work, an essential human function has to be silenced: critical thinking. In fact, one of the most consistent characteristics that many of my colleagues and I have observed in the average freshmen is that skills in this area are almost completely dormant. At the same time, one of the most unparalleled satisfactions of teaching resides in waking them up.

How to Blow Up a Bridge

The dormancy of critical thinking skills explains why, once the typical classroom discussion has reached the “bridge stage,” dousing students with data achieves undesirable results. A combination, perhaps in different ratios, of complacent families, teachers, and the media has molded students into becoming willing receptacles of any idea that may be inculcated into them rather than helping them to become discerning consumers of conflicting opinions. Intellectual curiosity is dulled and sensible, civil questioning is

⁵ This is not surprising, given the above mentioned liberal bias of a considerable portion of the American faculty. Some evidence suggests that, in the social sciences and humanities in general, for every nine liberal professors, there is only one conservative. The data is even more skewed for anthropology and sociology, where conservatives are outnumbered thirty to one (Horowitz, Laksin 2009, 6). In the study of the media, for example, a difficult problem to overcome is the identification of errors in the coding of loaded language or visual presentations. Ideologically biased researchers are unlikely to assess either objectively, but critics find it often impossible to point out any prejudice without being accused of pushing a political agenda themselves.

⁶ Robert S. Erickson and Kent L. Tedin, *American Public Opinion: Its Origins, Content, and Impact* (New York NY: Pearson, 2007).

discouraged for the sake of absorbing a one-sided, undisputable view of the world.⁷ Indoctrination sells ideas as *the only* reasonable ideas, the one reliable point of reference. In this context, it is apparent how any opposition to such ideas is perceived as a personal attack.

The lack of critical thinking is why students feel the need to retreat to the bridge of compromise. This is why the first step of my approach entails telling students that the bridge on which they feel so safe does not exist at all. I then hasten to point out that they can choose either side (a welcome relief, after having feared that they would be forced to accept a position that they have learned to see as intolerable), as long as they remain logically consistent.

Through a process of question-and-answer, in keeping with the Socratic Method, I involve the students in the discovery of the assumptions behind the pro-life and pro-death camps. First, going to the original text, the class is invited to realize that the protections guaranteed by the Constitution apply only to those who possess personhood. This leads to a discussion on the definition of the concept, which typically ends with the identification of two camps among the students: one believes that personhood is limited only to certain individuals, with specific characteristics, while the other maintains that all members of the specie *Homo Sapiens Sapiens*, with no exceptions, are persons.

The supporters of the former position are often surprised by the fact that they have to identify a point of reference or an arbiter that will always justly discern who is a person and who is not. On the other hand, they can enjoy the fact (or face the horror, depending on their opinion) that any retreat to a moderate position, one that imposes limits to abortion or euthanasia based on humanitarian reasons, is untenably illogical. This is a position that I allow them to take, as long as they are willing to embrace the entire reasoning, from

⁷ In this case, my observations as a professor are combined with those as a homeschooling mother. I noticed in my first three children, who attended the public school system for three years, the initial signs of dulling of their natural curiosity. Like many other parents, my husband and I registered with relief how our children's intellectual vivacity returned shortly after they were taken out of the schooling system and instructed at home. Similarly, my freshmen classes display a corresponding, although often far more severe, lack of interest in academic pursuits. Luckily, many often enthusiastically return to what I consider the innate human tendency to being inquisitive. After eleven years of observation, my hypothesis is that the students respond in such a way to the application of the Socratic Method and the *reductio ad absurdum* in classroom instruction on a variety of topics.

assumptions to consequences. Those who acknowledge personhood with no qualifiers have to face the fact that all the protections of the Constitution are, by virtue of the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection clause, extended to all persons, even those who were conceived as the result of rape or incest, those whose presence in the womb might cause danger to their mother, and those who are terminally and painfully ill.

Both groups have now taken their first step in *reductio ad absurdum*, the journey to the ultimate consequences of one's premises. Ordinarily, very few students at this point are completely comfortable, but virtually all are thinking critically. In fact, while they labor through the costs of their position, and those of the opposite side, the students are receptive to information. They *want* to know statistics on rape, incest, and untreatable pain during terminal illnesses, on the emotional and physical consequences of abortion, on the real options in cases of maternal illness, and on the principle of double effect.

The Bridge Is Out. Now What?

The lecture on the bridge is only one method of instruction on abortion and euthanasia, but it possesses some interesting characteristics and is likely to produce a number of desirable consequences:

1. It solves the pedagogical conundrum that first spurred this effort. As a follower of Christ, I find that the defense of innocent life is a moral imperative and I will have to give an accounting for any timidity in this regard. At the same time, indoctrination is ethically abhorrent, especially because it is used by the supporters of the culture of death. Illuminating for my students the falsity of "the bridge" is neither cowardly nor blinding to the truth.

2. It does not "pull any punches." Proponents of abortion and euthanasia have been very skilled in presenting both practices in such a sanitized fashion that many people (not only students) view them as harmless. The Socratic Method and *reductio ad absurdum*, by forcing observers to define fundamental concepts often left vague, such as personhood, unmask the practices for what they are: the taking of the lives of innocent persons, also known as murder.

3. A corollary to the first point is that the lecture drops the veil on which pundits and politicians rely to sell an absurd position to an apathetic electorate. A vote given to a logical impossibility now cannot but turn into a disappointment in the future. Many voters – the experienced and the inexperienced – are often surprised by these disappointments and become cynical and even more apathetic. Reversing this widespread lack of political competence cannot be

accomplished with one lecture, but it can be started.

4. The Socratic Method and *reductio ad absurdum* demand the knowledge of data. Instead of being avoided as a threat to their dearly (sometimes desperately) held beliefs, evidence is sought out by the students themselves as a way to buttress their position. In other words, students voluntarily move away from being ideologues and take their first steps toward being scholars.

5. The approach presented forces the assumption of responsibility. The instructor takes no sides, with the exception of insisting on consistency. Supporting either position, pro or against, is up to the students. Once they have identified their own opinion, however, they have to be ready to defend all consequences and, should the occasion arise, act upon them.

6. This type of lecture breaks the tendency popularly known as “dumbing down,” that frequent cause of underdeveloped critical thinking skills that seems to permeate modern pedagogy. Once the students taste the empowerment produced by intellectual curiosity, a seed is planted that is likely to bring much fruit. I will not pretend that this outcome materializes in all cases, but I have seen it enough to justify continuing in this effort. I hope others will join me.