

A taxonomy of pro-abortion ideas: A good diagnosis is the basis of a good solution

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Abstract: The public debate on abortion appears at an impasse, with both sides having established their primary arguments. This work aims to classify pro-abortion arguments into a taxonomy, examining them in relation to the pro-life stance on the dignity of life and the soul. The taxonomy reveals that pro-abortion arguments, focusing on social, subjective, and emotional dimensions, often sidestep the core philosophical question of life and soul. By tracing the philosophical foundations of these arguments, particularly around individualism and consequentialism, this study seeks to highlight that even the strongest pro-abortion argument remains philosophically weaker than the pro-life stance grounded in the immaterial soul's existence from conception.

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THE PUBLIC DEBATE OVER ABORTION SEEMS ALMOST AT A DEAD END. Both sides have already shown their arguments. The problem here is how to prove what the truth is. The strength of the pro-life arguments lies in the dignity of living beings and the existence of an immaterial soul. The pro-abortion arguments, we will see, point to social, subjective, and emotional issues. All are compelling reasons; otherwise, there would be no debate. The core of the conflict is that the only pro-abortion argument that attacks the argument of life and soul is hidden behind a pseudo-scientific argument, of a supposed demonstration that there is no life and, therefore, there is no soul either. We say pseudoscientific because neither logic nor science can prove the non-existence of something.

The idea of organizing the pro-abortion arguments into a taxonomy allows us to see that they do not point to the strongest pro-life argument, which is the existence of a human soul from conception, an issue that we will not see here, but that philosophy has demonstrated. The taxonomy of pro-abortion arguments also allows us to trace the philosophical roots of the arguments and recognize the philosophical ideas that underpin the pro-abortion arguments.

In this modest work we intend to order the pro-abortion arguments in a taxonomy, not to respond to them. They are ordered according to their truth and forcefulness. We start with the weakest arguments, trace the philosophical assumption behind them, and move on to the strongest. We hope to show that the strongest in favor of abortion is weaker than the central argument in favor of life, which is the existence of the soul at the beginning of life.

The strongest argument in favor of abortion is based on the social problem of unwanted pregnancies. We will see that there are ideas of individualism, nihilism, and consequentialism behind the strongest argument in favor of abortion, even more than the liberal-libertarian or materialist argument.

The number of countries that allow abortion on "free request" is worrying. It seems that it is increasingly "logical" to be in favor of abortion.

It is possible to identify two different pro-abortion arguments, one deeper than the other. The first is the idea that there is no life present in the embryo, or at least no sensory perception of life. For adherents of this idea, the evidence of cardiac manifestation or the movements of the embryo is

enough to see the evidence that there is a human life there. This group, nonetheless, approves of abortion under certain conditions and before the time when it is possible to "show" that there is already life. This group respects human life when it is evident. Most countries in the world have this legal position on abortion.

The second argument in favor of abortion is that it is not relevant, or avoided, whether there is soul or life there. It does not matter whether or not life begins at a point, but whether it is a desired outcome. This argument, although held by a minority of people, is more worrying because it supposes that life loses value, is relativized, or its respect is not relevant. The consequence of this argument is that adherents think that it is appropriate and legal to kill people under certain circumstances, such as poverty, sadness, health hazards, or lack of hygiene, among others. It is also worrying that the number of countries adopting this position is growing rapidly. It is essential to increase and improve the teaching of the existence of the soul and of human life from conception.

There is a big difference between these two arguments. Belief in the possibility of a human embryo without human life may seem very naïve. But it exists. And the belief or the idea that one human life is below another is serious.

Humans are rational beings. We act according to how we think. The action of pro-abortion people depends on what they think. Most people are not philosophers. But the conception of life is a philosophical question. People act according to philosophical ideas, whether they know it or not. This is why a taxonomy of the philosophical ideas behind pro-abortion arguments is important.

Background in Chile

This work began in 2013 when Chile began to legally introduce abortion. From the 90s and the first decade of 2000–2010, the pro-abortion movement was reduced to culture and the streets. Since 2013, Chile has followed the same path as the rest of the world.

This year (2024) the President of Chile announced in his annual account before Congress that he would make every effort to move forward with a "free abortion" bill.

Arguments of Form

Arguments in favor of abortion can be separated into "form" and "content." In terms of form, we classify them into:

- Testimonials
- Scientists (or pseudoscientists)
- Social policy

They are called "of form" because they do not discuss the "content," that is, whether or not there is life, whether or not there is a soul. They simply respond to testimonies either from those who have suffered from botched abortions, or that their lives were "ruined" by not having an abortion or by clandestine abortions, etc.

Then there are the scientists or rather pseudoscientists of form, because they do not discuss whether there is life or soul, but they are reduced to affirming that the perception of the heartbeat or brain activity begins at certain times: for some at three months for others at six, it depends on the scientist. That is why they are called pseudoscientists of form.

Finally, there are those who resort to figures that show deaths from poorly performed or clandestine abortions, figures of pregnancies in contexts of poverty compared to those who have a better economic condition, or even assertions that other countries are ahead of the curve, and therefore we must hurry. As can be seen, they do not discuss the substance or "content" either, whether or not there is life and whether abortion is just and good.

It must be said that feminism operates across these arguments of form. It is not a group in itself but it is behind, as if strengthening, and excluding men from the debate, without going to the content or substance of the plot.

Arguments of Content

Now, let's look at the content of the arguments themselves, those that enter into the discussion of contents or values, of whether there is life, soul or not.

These two groups consider that, although there is life or soul, there is a greater good than it. That is, there may be people within each one who think that the fetus or embryo is a living, human being, with an immaterial soul, and others who think that it is not. It is irrelevant. They are reduced to two groups:

- The mother prevails over the fetus.
- Women must have autonomy over their own bodies.

If we look closely, both arguments allow us to think that there is life or not. These arguments are put forward regardless of whether there is life or not. These are the most worrying.

Both content arguments historically stem from the notion of "reproductive rights" and, in short, from a conception of freedom as the absence of coercion. Let's look in detail at the formal arguments and those of content.

Testimonials

This set of arguments revolve around the idea that abortion is not a moral issue in itself, but its consequences are moral. For example, we will see that the socio-political problem of women dying in illegal abortion facilities is used to reinforce the idea that abortion is the only solution to this moral or social problem. That's all. The moral problem is not abortion itself, but its consequences of inequality. All kinds of testimonials are used. The woman who is saved from a clandestine center, the data of the WHO and the United Nations, the testimony of some doctors who say that a woman can die from abortion, or some testimonies of women who survive abortion and do not have bad psychological consequences.

This whole group of arguments are not arguments per se. Those are only meant to be proof of an argument. The underlying premise is, once again, that there is no life in the womb. And even if there is, it has less value than the mother's. Why would one life have less value or less right than another?

The idea behind this is "autonomous morality." The term is especially associated with the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, who distinguishes between autonomous morality and heteronomous morality. For Kant, moral autonomy is the capacity of the human being to act according to moral laws that he himself gives himself through reason. According to this view, genuine morality arises when people act out of respect for the moral law, not out of fear of punishment or the expectation of reward. This moral law is universal and is expressed in the categorical imperative, which can be summed up in Kant's famous sentence: "Act in such a way that the maxim of your action can become a universal law": "Autonomy of the will is the property of the

will by which it is a law to itself (independently of any property of the objects of volition). The principle of autonomy is, therefore: to choose only in such a way that the maxims of your choice are also included as universal law in the same volition." (Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, Section II) If we mix the idea that human morality does not derive from broader principles prior to the human being himself with the idea of the overvalued value of subjective feeling, the idea is engendered that various testimonies represent objective veracity. The philosophical currents that opposed the rationalism of the Enlightenment centuries will live until today. Our age is an era that, despite being based on science and technology, in moral matters is anti-rationalist, to the extreme, emphasizing feeling, emotion and the "I." Authors such as Goethe, Friedrich Schlegel, and Novalis, although they are not widely read these days, have influenced our way of thinking. On the other hand, the existentialism of the late nineteenth century and reinforced in the twentieth century, by authors such as Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and especially Nietzsche, focus on individual experience, personal freedom, and human emotions, especially in the context of anguish, the absurdity of life, and the search for meaning. In this framework, emotions and personal choices are seen as key to the authenticity and meaning of life. "Feeling is all; the name is sound and smoke, beclouding Heaven's glow" wrote Goethe (*Faust*, translated by Bayard Taylor, Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1871). For his part, Sartre maintained the following: "man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does."¹

Testimonies as arguments are a very typical phenomenon in our current society, philosophically connected to "sensualism," which was strongly influenced by Condillac, a philosopher of the eighteenth century. According to Condillac, people "do not have any sensation that they did not have at the first moment. They come to perceive what it is that they already intuited at first, selectively attending to each of its parts in turn, and then observing how these parts relate to each other. "Selectively attending" means that you first have an "idea" or "conception" in your mind. A conviction that begins in reason, and then you use your emotions to reinforce reason. This is what is

¹ Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Translated by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956).

commonly referred to as "justification." You have already chosen something and you're looking for reasons to support what you've already chosen. Condillac wrote a *Treatise on the Sensations*, dedicated to the princes of his time. He gives more importance to sensations than to intelligence to find reasons. He is the father of sensibility in our time. That's why reasoning with him doesn't work. All kinds of testimonies used by arguments in favor of abortion are sensualistic; they come from Condillac's philosophy.

The operation of forming an image of a previously experienced object is not memory but "imagination," says Condillac. Imagination becomes possible once a perception has become familiar from a series of previous experiences. That is why the insistence on data shows the ugliness of abortion, and when talking about the evil of abortion, it works more than this type of argument in favor of abortion. Can it be more horrible than abortion? Even for those who are in favor of abortion, it is horrible. But if you give more importance to imagination or sensualism (the senses and imagination) than the truth of reason, you will get more results in favor of abortion.

Scientific or pseudoscientific arguments

Incredibly, it is possible to hear pro-abortion doctors and scientists say that:

"The value that each one gives to the embryo is absolutely an individual matter," which is contradictory to the scientific desire for objectivity.

"It is not a question of values." ²

We must seek the greatest amount of "safety and quality of abortion." ³

The scientific part of this argument is given by the data or the laws compared in the countries with the most "advanced" laws, or the regulations of the World Health Organization (WHO). Even for those who are in favor

²<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/05/06/social-and-moral-considerations-on-abortion/>

³ National Academies of Sciences, Division of Medicine, Board of Health Care Services, Board of Population Health, Public Health Practice, Committee on Reproductive Health Services, Evaluation of Safety and Quality of Abortion Care in the United States. "The Safety and Quality of Abortion Care in the United States." (2018).

of abortion, there is no agreement on when life begins, whether it is at one, three, or six months. But it is irrelevant. The scientific part lies in the data or figures of deaths due to poorly done abortions or events of that nature. That is why it is possible to call them pseudoscientists.

When science is separated from philosophy, it is not that philosophy becomes subjective or that science becomes the only source of truth. When science is separated from philosophy, neither philosophy delivers truths, nor does science. But today it is thought that philosophy responds to subjective questions and that science is the source of objective truths. Which is not the case. Science stripped of philosophy does not deliver any truth. It does not explain anything. That is why the "scientific arguments" in favor of abortion do not answer when life begins, but rather concern themselves with ensuring that abortion is safe and covers a wide social range. Science here is at the service of ideology.

These ideas about the subjectivism of science are already found in philosophies such as pragmatism. This is what William James, the father of pragmatism, maintains: "The true is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as the right is only the expedient in the way of our behaving".⁴

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Europe saw how the great late-medieval peoples began to decline. In response, imperialist sentiment was exalted in an effort to conquer the rest of the world, and domestically nationalist sentiment and the idea of races superior to others was emphasized. The philosophical current that fed these feelings with concepts was called "vitalism." Authors such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were its most famous representatives. They also took the biology of Darwin's evolutionism, and the German physiology that indicated that everything was "will to power," e.g., when a plant destroys the nutrient of the one next to it to survive. This vitalism also had other representatives, but under the same ideas of power struggle in a scientific key, it was said, for example: "the truth is that we change without ceasing, and that the state itself is nothing but change."⁵ Science is thus far from philosophical truth, no longer interested in raising

⁴ James, William. *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. New York: Longmans, Green, 1907.

⁵ Bergson, Henri. *Creative Evolution*. Translated by Arthur Mitchell, New York: Henry Holt, 1911.

the human being towards total truth, but rather science is at the service of the fashion of the day, as vitalism maintains. The “scientific” will depend on the opinion of the masses. Its purpose will be to “justify”—with facts and figures—what needs to be justified. It will not shed more light on the truth or hold moral positions.

Positivism is also noteworthy here. It is that philosophical current where authors such as Comte, Bernard, Mill, and Spencer are found, the current that tends to separate science from philosophy and let go of the ends of philosophy that are the search for truth, and reduce them to mere opinion. Positivism is not a particular philosophical school, but an attitude towards metaphysics, such as that of Hume, who says that the only truth that can be attained by the human being is scientific truth. But what is this scientific truth for Comte, the most emblematic positivist?

In the positive stage, the human mind, recognizing the impossibility of obtaining absolute notions, renounces the search for the origin and destiny of the universe and renounces the knowledge of the ultimate causes of phenomena, to devote itself only to the discovery, with the well-combined use of reasoning and observation, of their effective laws, that is, of their invariable relations of succession and resemblance. This means that the only function of science is to look for the effectiveness of things, how they work. Therefore, it is not important whether abortion is good or bad; the important thing is how to avoid a social problem such as unwanted pregnancies. But effectiveness, in a sense, is relative. Therefore, the positivist conception of science is also positivist. Another thing that we can find in other positivist philosophers such as Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, and the neopositivism of the members of the Vienna Circle, e.g., Carnap, Schlick, or Hempel.

The socio-political problem

This is the most common argument. This argument responds to the woman who does not want to be a mother and who is going to have an abortion anyway. And the facts show that this is true: some 25 million women die annually from clandestine abortions, according to WHO. But it is a logical error to draw a moral conclusion from a fact or a non-moral premise. This happens when it is said that “women will have abortions anyway; So, abortion is good.” This is not a simple logical fallacy. It is known that this is a fallacy. But it is affirmed in the same way. The philosophy behind this

desired error is Hume's sentimentality. This Scottish philosopher was the one who most rejected Greek metaphysics, the one that was capable of sustaining all ethical and moral judgment on the very foundations of reality, led by Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. For Hume, metaphysics was "superstition."⁶ His philosophy, then, does not start from "being" but from the human being as the ultimate and only foundation of action. He himself makes it clear: "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them."⁷

The underlying problem with socio-political arguments of form is that they are not properly arguments. And in the "emotivist" mentality, where objective causality does not take place, it becomes not only an "argument" but the strongest and most convincing. Because it is not disputed whether it is wrong or right to allow abortion. It is based on the "fact" that many countries already allow it, or that the death figures are so high that it is better to approve it. In other words, it is true that the number of maternal deaths is reduced by legalization, but that does not resolve whether abortion itself is right or wrong. But this logic does not matter. The pro-abortion proponents use data to advocate abortion as a solution to a social problem. It's social because the data show that many poor women die.

Three sub-arguments emerge from this argument:

Safe and quality abortion. Derived from the above, the next step is to offer a safe and quality abortion. So suddenly we are no longer discussing whether abortion is "good or bad" but we are all now agreeing that it is better that it is "safe and of quality."

Equal access. Equality of access also stems from socio-political problems. Equal access becomes a matter of the state and politics and leaves behind the moral problem – which was not talked about or discussed enough, or as they often say: "We do not have time to discuss it."

Discussing the beginning of life is frivolous. (while thousands of women die in clandestine hospitals, they argue). Already locked in emotionalism, we

⁶ Romanillos, A. M. A. (2016). Hume and metaphysics: between logical positivism and Kant's critical philosophy. *Cauriensia. Annual Journal of Ecclesiastical Sciences*, 11, 349-382.

⁷ Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888.

reach this point. We don't have time to talk about frivolity, while thousands of women die in sordid places, they say. Again: they do not argue about the morality of abortion. Its objective is to solve the socio-political problem—"emotivist" from the philosophical point of view—of the death of thousands of women.

On the arguments in favor of abortion because of their content, we said that we have:

- The mother's life prevails over that of the fetus.
- Women should have autonomy over their own bodies.

Let's look at both.

How can there be more dignity in one person over the other? Investigating the philosophical roots of pro-abortion arguments allows us to decipher this question. Here two philosophical currents come together: on the one hand, utilitarianism and on the other, liberalism.

Utilitarianism considers morality to be that which maximizes the general welfare or minimizes suffering. From this perspective, some authors argue that in situations where the mother's life or health is at risk, the mother's well-being prevails over that of the fetus, because the mother has an autonomous, conscious, and socially integrated life, while the fetus has not yet reached the same level of cognitive or social development.

Peter Singer, a contemporary utilitarian and well-known animal rights advocate, has argued in his works on ethics that the moral status of the fetus is different from that of an already born person. Singer argues that the rights of a fully developed person, such as the mother, can have greater moral weight than the rights of a being in early stages of development: "If we compare a severely defective human infant with a nonhuman animal, a dog or a pig, for example, we will often find the nonhuman to have superior capacities."⁸ Similarly, John Stuart Mill argued that: "the principle of utility requires that human beings, in circumstances of serious difficulty, should be free to act in the way which best suits their own condition of well-being."⁹ Although Mill does not directly address the issue of abortion, his defense of individual autonomy and the pursuit of well-being, in combination with the

⁸ Source: Singer, Peter. *Practical Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

⁹ Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty*. London: Longman, Roberts & Green, 1859.

principle of utility, is applied in many discussions of reproductive rights, where the well-being and freedom of the mother is prioritized over that of the fetus in critical situations.

Conclusion

This work is part of a larger design, that of deepening an understanding of these arguments and responding to each of them.

These reflections are based on the premise that people who are in favor of abortion are in favor of abortion out of ignorance or malice. In both cases, pro-abortion people deserve to be treated as people, which means correcting and understanding them in a true dialogue that seeks the truth.

If one looks at all the arguments in favor of abortion, both form and content, the rational demonstration of the existence of the soul seems to be the most unobjectionable way to present the truth, rather than reducing pro-life arguments to emotive, subjective, or testimonial questions only. Human reason, despite the ravings that we find in the history of philosophy, is ready to reach the truth of created things. This is the path that shows us the taxonomy of the philosophical arguments behind the pro-abortion arguments.