STRATEGIC USE OF DISSOCIATION IN ETHICAL ARGUMENTATION ON ABORTION*

Simona Mazilu

Abstract: This paper is concerned with the dialectical and rhetorical consequences of the use of dissociation in ethical argumentation on abortion. Disputants make strategic use of dissociation to advance their standpoints, to establish the starting points of the discussion and to argue in favor or against abortion as well. From the pragma-dialectical perspective (van Rees 2002, 2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2006), dissociation is defined as an argumentative technique by which a unitary concept is divided into two different concepts of which one is intended as positive while the other one as negative. The analysis of a religious text on abortion shows that by means of dissociation abortion can be conceived of as "an unspeakable crime" or "the deliberate killing of an innocent human being" as opposed to "interruption of pregnancy", the term preferred by pro-choice supporters. I claim that the protagonist uses dissociation as a rhetorical strategy aimed at persuading both the interlocutor and the audience.

Keywords: dissociation, strategic maneuvering, dialectical (un)soundness, fallacies

1. Introduction

The paper deals with the dialectical and rhetorical consequences of the use of dissociation as a strategic move for the resolution of an ethical dispute on abortion. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969: 190) conceive of dissociation as an argumentative scheme by means of which a unitary concept is split up into two new concepts, of which, one (term II) is perceived as more important, more essential than the other (term I). Dissociation is used to resolve a contradiction present in the original concept by distinguishing various aspects within that concept. One step further in accounting for dissociation is taken by pragma-dialecticians who explore the dialectical and rhetorical potential of dissociation for strategic maneuvering in argumentative dialogue. In their view, by means of dissociation, a speaker can clarify or delineate his / her position with respect to the matter under discussion and at the same time choose those aspects that serve his / her purpose of winning the argument (van Rees 2002, 2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2006).

I start from the premise that ethical argumentation on abortion can be reconstructed as an argumentative exchange between protagonist and antagonist over the standpoint *abortion is / is not a crime*. The protagonist and the antagonist in an ethical dispute over abortion are supposed to pursue two goals at the same time: to resolve the difference of opinion (dialectical goal) and to win the argument in their favor (rhetorical goal). They are involved in a process of strategic maneuvering so as to keep a balance between these two objectives. Within this process, dissociation is a strategic move used by disputants to lead the discussion in a direction favorable to their standpoint.

The paper is structured in two main parts. The first part deals with the pragma-dialectical approach to *dissociation* and its dialectical and rhetorical potential for *strategic maneuvering* (van Rees 2002, 2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2006). The second part is concerned with how dissociation works in ethical argumentation on abortion. For this aim, I have chosen an excerpt from John Paul II's *The Gospel of Life* (1995) in which abortion is defined as "an unspeakable crime". Using the ideal model of a critical discussion proposed by pragma-dialectics (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984, 2004), I will try to reconstruct the dispute in

*This research has been conducted in the framework of the PN II – PCE – Ideas 1209/2007 Project, coordinated by "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați, Romania and financed by the Romanian Ministry of Education, Research, and Youth.

BDD-A9794 © 2008 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:58:29 UTC)

the text in the form of an argumentative exchange in which disputants maneuver strategically with dissociation. I will focus upon the dialectical and rhetorical effects of the use of dissociation in all the stages of the critical discussion, at the same time critically evaluating dissociation as dialectically sound or unsound.

2. The pragma-dialectical approach to dissociation

Association and dissociation are the two main argumentative schemes discussed by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca in their influential treatise on argumentation, *The New Rhetoric* (1969). Complementary to association, dissociation "assumes the original unity of elements comprised within a single conception and designated by a single notion. The dissociation of notions brings about a more or less profound change in the conceptual data that are used as the basis of argument" (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 411-412). The technique of dissociation serves to resolve an incompatibility or a contradiction that an initial concept gives rise to.

According to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, through dissociation our conception of reality is remodelled because an original term is split up into two new terms, term I which corresponds to "appearance" and term II which corresponds to "reality". The "appearance-reality" pair is the prototypical example of conceptual dissociation that the authors provide. The two terms of the couple are not equally valued. Thus term I "correspond to the apparent, to what occurs in the first instance, to what is actual, immediate, and known directly. […] Term II provides a criterion, a norm which allows us to distinguish those aspects of term I which are of value from those which are not" (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 416). In other words, term I equals illusion or error whereas term II is equal to coherence, reality and value.

Unlike Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca who conceive of dissociation as an argumentative scheme, van Rees in line with other pragma-dialecticians (Garssen 1997, Grootendorst 1999) views it as an argumentative technique whose "argumentative potential is based on the fact that the two concepts resulting from the separation of the original notion are portrayed as non-equivalent: the one is represented as more important or more essential than the other" (van Rees 2005a: 383). Among other aspects of dissociation, van Rees has shown interest in its dialectical and rhetorical potential for strategic maneuvering in a critical discussion aimed at solving a difference of opinion.

At this point a few words about the concept of strategic maneuvering are necessary in order to understand what strategic maneuvering with dissociation consists in. The pragma-dialectical concept of *strategic maneuvering* has been introduced to reconcile rhetoric with dialectics by integrating rhetorical insights into a dialectical framework of analysis (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2002). When engaged in argumentative discourse, people simultaneously pursue two goals: on the one hand to solve the difference of opinion in a reasonable way and on the other hand to have things their way or to win the discussion in their favor. In this attempt at maintaining a delicate balance between the dialectical and the rhetorical aims pursued in every stage of the resolution process, arguers make use of strategic maneuvering (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2002: 135).

Strategic maneuvering has three aspects – selection from the *topical potential*, adaptation to *audience demand* and choice of the best *presentational devices* - which combined, lead to a party's dialectical and rhetorical success in a dispute over a difference of opinion. The topical potential represents a "set of relevant alternatives available" in a particular stage of the critical discussion. Adaptation to audience demand in each stage refers to relating to the audience by complying with their values and preferences. Presentational devices such as rhetorical figures are meant to effectively convey the rhetorical moves made by disputants in each dialectical

BDD-A9794 © 2008 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:58:29 UTC)

stage of the resolution process. Therefore, for optimal dialectical and rhetorical results in an argumentative discourse, disputants have to make the best choice from the topical potential available in each dialectical stage, to adapt to the audience's expectations and to use the most appropriate presentational devices.

However, the two objectives simultaneously pursued by the parties in the dispute are not always in perfect balance for various reasons. Arguers can neglect the persuasive objective for fear of being considered unreasonable or, on the contrary, they may pursue only the rhetorical goal of winning the discussion in the detriment of the dialectical aim. Neglecting persuasiveness does no harm to the other party, it is perceived as bad strategy but not as being fallacious. Instead, neglecting the commitment to the critical ideal by allowing one's rhetorical moves to overrule the dialectical ones is harmful to the other party. As the two authors state, "the strategic maneuvering has got 'derailed' and is condemnable for being fallacious. All derailments of strategic maneuvering are fallacious and all fallacies can be regarded as derailments of strategic maneuvering" (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2002: 142).

This view of fallacies as derailments of strategic maneuvering and not as mere errors of logic, is helpful in accounting for those fallacies that are not immediately apparent by establishing criteria according to which argumentative behaviour can be evaluated as sound or unsound.

As mentioned before, van Rees (2002, 2005b) has drawn on the potential of dissociation as a dialogue technique used in solving differences of opinion. As the author maintains, both the protagonist and the antagonist can make use of dissociation in various stages of a critical discussion: in the confrontation stage, in the opening stage, in the argumentation stage and in the concluding stage with both dialectical and rhetorical effects for the resolution of the conflict. Dissociation is defined as "a move which brings the discussion back to the opening stage, since [it] brings about a change in the starting points of the discussion. This is because through dissociation an existing and accepted conceptual unity which in some way or another serves as a point of departure for the discussion, is broken up" (van Rees 2005b: 37).

By dissociation a unitary concept is split up into two new concepts of which one may be subsumed under a new term, the other one subsumed under the original term which is redefined or under another new term with its own definition, the original term being abandoned in this case. The author argues that two main speech acts are performed in dissociation - distinction and definition - both of them belonging to the category of usage declaratives whose function is to clarify linguistic usage. These two speech acts may be performed explicitly, implicitly or indirectly and sometimes they are just presupposed. No matter how they may be performed, distinctions and definitions serve to create new usage.

Through the two usage declaratives inherent in it, dissociation is "a powerful instrument to clarify discussions and to structure our conception of reality" (van Rees 2005a: 391). Its potential for strategic maneuvering between dialectical reasonableness and rhetorical effectiveness in all the stages of a critical discussion derives from this very function: to clarify concepts and resolve contradictions. Dialectically, dissociation may enhance reasonableness by means of the two usage declaratives inherent in it – distinction and definition – which ensure "optimal clarity and precision" (van Rees 2006: 474) in the various stages of a critical discussion with a view to solving the difference of opinion. Rhetorically, by dissociation the protagonist or the antagonist can choose those standpoints or starting points that best serve their interests in the dispute.

Van Rees has formulated two types of requirements that have to be met by a dialectically sound dissociation: procedural requirements and material requirements. *Procedural* requirements are met when the protagonist puts the change in starting points up for discussion

BDD-A9794 © 2008 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:58:29 UTC)

in a side-discussion to get the antagonist's acceptance. *Material* requirements are met when the change in starting points introduced by the protagonist is accepted by the antagonist. If both types of requirements are met, a dissociation is judged as dialectically sound. If one of the two types of requirements is not met, a dissociation is considered dialectically unsound.

3. Strategic use of dissociation in ethical argumentation on abortion

This part of my paper is concerned with the use of dissociation as a way of strategic maneuvering in ethical argumentation on abortion. To illustrate how dissociation works in this type of argumentation I have chosen an excerpt from John Paul II's *Evangelium Vitae* (1995) in which abortion is considered an "unspeakable crime".

Using the pragma-dialectical model of a critical discussion (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992, 2004), I will try to reconstruct the text as an argumentative exchange between the actual protagonist (John Paul II) and a virtual antagonist (supporters of abortion) before a virtual audience.

As already known, dissociation can be used for strategic maneuvering in all the stages of a critical discussion. I intend to discuss the dialectical and rhetorical effects of dissociation in the stages where it is used, showing how the protagonist strategically employs the topical potential, how he strategically adapts his argumentation to the expectations of the other party / audience and how he strategically makes use of the most appropriate presentational devices. Moreover, on the basis of how the two speech acts inherent in dissociation – distinction and definition – are performed and of whether the procedural and the material requirements are met, I will show if the use of this argumentative technique can be considered dialectically sound or not.

John Paul II, from now on the protagonist in the critical discussion that I am going to reconstruct, holds that abortion is a crime because the one eliminated is a human being. The virtual antagonist in the text implicitly rejects this standpoint by arguing that abortion is not a crime because the fetus is not a person from the moment of conception. The protagonist puts forward the following argumentation in support of the aforementioned standpoint.

> "Your eyes beheld my unformed substance" (Psalm 139:16): The unspeakable crime of abortion
> Among all the crimes which can be committed against life, procured abortion has characteristics making it particularly serious and deplorable. The Second Vatican Council defines abortion, together with infanticide, as an "unspeakable crime".
> But today, in many people's consciences, the perception of its gravity has become progressively obscured. The acceptance of abortion in the popular mind, in behaviour and even in law itself, is a telling sign of an extremely dangerous crisis of the moral sense, which is becoming more and more incapable of distinguishing between good and evil, even when the fundamental right to life is at stake. Given such a grave situation, we need now more than ever to have the courage to look the truth in the eye and to call things by their proper name, without yielding to convenient compromises or to the temptation of self-deception. In this regard the reproach of the Prophet is extremely straightforward: "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness" (Is 5:20). Especially in the case of abortion there is a widespread use of ambiguous terminology, such as "interruption of pregnancy", which tends to hide abortion's true nature and to attenuate its seriousness in public opinion. Perhaps this linguistic phenomenon is itself a symptom of an uneasiness of conscience. But no word has the power to change the reality of things: procured abortion is the deliberate and direct killing, by whatever means it is carried out, of a human being in the initial phase of his or her existence, extending from conception to birth.
> The moral gravity of procured abortion is apparent in all its truth if we recognize that we are dealing with murder and, in particular, when we consider the specific elements involved. The one eliminated is a human being at the very beginning of life. (…)
> It is true that the decision to have an abortion is often tragic and painful for the mother, insofar as the decision to rid herself of the fruit of conception is not made for purely selfish reasons or out of convenience,

BDD-A9794 © 2008 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:58:29 UTC)

but out of a desire to protect certain important values such as her own health or a decent standard of living for the other members of the family. Sometimes it is feared that the child to be born would live in such conditions that it would be better if the birth did not take place. Nevertheless, these reasons and others like them, however serious and tragic, can never justify the deliberate killing of an innocent human being.

As well as the mother, there are often other people too who decide upon the death of the child in the womb. In the first place, the father of the child may be to blame, (…). Nor can one overlook the pressures which sometimes come from the wider family circle and from friends. (…) Doctors and nurses are also responsible, when they place at the service of death skills which were acquired for promoting life.

But responsibility likewise falls on the legislators who have promoted and approved abortion laws, (…) on the administrators of the health-care centres where abortions are performed. (…) Finally, one cannot overlook the network of complicity which reaches out to include international institutions, foundations and associations which systematically campaign for the legalization and spread of abortion in the world. In this sense abortion goes beyond the responsibility of individuals and beyond the harm done to them, and takes on a distinctly social dimension. It is a most serious wound inflicted on society and its culture by the very people who ought to be society's promoters and defenders. (…)

Some people try to justify abortion by claiming that the result of conception, at least up to a certain number of days, cannot yet be considered a personal human life. But in fact, "from the time that the ovum is fertilized, a life is begun which is neither that of the father nor the mother; it is rather the life of a new human being with his own growth. It would never be made human if it were not human already. This has always been clear, and (…) modern genetic science offers clear confirmation. (…)

Furthermore, what is at stake is so important that, from the standpoint of moral obligation, the mere probability that a human person is involved would suffice to justify an absolutely clear prohibition of any intervention aimed at killing a human embryo. (…) "The human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception; and therefore from that same moment his rights as a person must be recognized, among which in the first place is the inviolable right of every innocent human being to life". (…)

Given such unanimity in the doctrinal and disciplinary tradition of the Church, Paul VI was able to declare that this tradition is unchanged and unchangeable. Therefore, by the authority which Christ conferred upon Peter and his Successors, in communion with the Bishops--who on various occasions have condemned abortion and who in the aforementioned consultation, albeit dispersed throughout the world, have shown unanimous agreement concerning this doctrine--I declare that direct abortion, that is, abortion willed as an end or as a means, always constitutes a grave moral disorder, since it is the deliberate killing of an innocent human being. This doctrine is based upon the natural law and upon the written Word of God, is transmitted by the Church's Tradition and taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium.

No circumstance, no purpose, no law whatsoever can ever make licit an act which is intrinsically illicit, since it is contrary to the Law of God which is written in every human heart, knowable by reason itself, and proclaimed by the Church.

(Excerpt from John Paul II's Evangelium Vitae Encyclical Letter on the Value and Inviolability of Human Life (1995) http: //www.newadvent.org/)

In what follows I am going to deal with dissociation as a way of strategic maneuvering in the reconstructed stages of this ethical dispute over abortion focusing on the dialectical and rhetorical consequences of the use of this argumentative technique. I will also evaluate the protagonist's strategic moves in terms of dialectical soundness.

Confrontation stage

The confrontation stage of a critical discussion consists of three successive moves: the protagonist puts forward a standpoint, the antagonist casts doubt on this standpoint or criticizes it by advancing the opposite standpoint and the protagonist maintains or withdraws his standpoint.

In our case, the protagonist as a representative of the Church, brings forward the standpoint that abortion is a crime: *"Among all the crimes which can be committed against life, procured abortion has characteristics making it particularly serious and deplorable. The Second Vatican Council defines abortion, together with infanticide, as an 'unspeakable crime'"*. By means of dissociation, from the unitary concept of abortion, the term "procured

BDD-A9794 © 2008 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:58:29 UTC)

abortion" is split off and negatively qualified as "particularly serious and deplorable". The other dissociated term, "accidental abortion / miscarriage", remains implicit and should be viewed as "less" negative than the other one.

This dissociation enables the protagonist to delineate a particular standpoint ("procured abortion is a crime") from the background of other possible standpoints ("abortion of any kind is a crime"). In other words, the protagonist strategically selects from the topical potential available at this stage the particular issue of "procured abortion" that helps him fight against abortion in general. The notion of "procured abortion" implies that abortion is something that the mother "obtains" with the help of other people. Therefore, besides the mother, others can be held responsible for this crime, too. The choice of this particular standpoint anticipates the fact that among the crucial aspects touched by the protagonist in his argumentation will be the implication of the whole society in this act.

In my view, the protagonist strategically adapts the formulation of his standpoint more to the virtual audience, especially to Christian believers, and less to the virtual opponent (pro-choice supporters). A major religious authority, the Second Vatican Council, is appealed to by the protagonist in order to back his standpoint up more convincingly. By an explicit definition, *"The Second Vatican Council defines abortion, together with infanticide, as an 'unspeakable crime'"*, the protagonist expresses his own viewpoint through the opinion of this authority. I claim that this definition should be regarded as a persuasive definition meant to "plead a cause" in Stevenson's terms (1944) and to change views on the matter of abortion.

As far as the presentational devices are concerned, the protagonist makes use of emotional language which has better chances to appeal to the audience than rational language. Among the rhetorical figures skilfully used by the protagonist to present his standpoint in a light that will favor his future argumentation, the opposition death vs. life (*"among all the crimes which can be committed against life"*) and the analogy between abortion and infanticide are extremely persuasive. Adjectives such as "serious", "deplorable" and especially "unspeakable" negatively qualify abortion as one of the worst deeds a human being is capable of.

The second move of the confrontation stage belongs to the antagonist, in our case a virtual one, who is supposed to criticize the standpoint of the protagonist by presenting an opposing standpoint of the type *abortion is not a crime*. To this criticism, the protagonist reacts by either maintaining his standpoint or withdrawing it. Certainly, our protagonist chooses the former alternative and goes on to set the starting points from which his argumentation will proceed.

Opening stage

Generally, in the opening stage, the protagonist and the antagonist establish together the common starting points as well as the concessions on the basis of which they will defend their standpoints. As argued by van Rees (2006), dissociation can be used in this stage to propose or to criticize a starting point.

In the present ethical debate, the protagonist makes strategic use of dissociation in proposing as starting point the controversial terminology related to abortion and its effects on people's perception of this deed: *"Especially in the case of abortion there is a widespread use of ambiguous terminology, such as 'interruption of pregnancy', which tends to hide abortion's true nature and to attenuate its seriousness in public opinion"*. The protagonist dissociates between the "false nature of abortion" and the "true nature of abortion". The former term which remains implicit is attributed to the virtual opponent's interpretation and is qualified as negative while the latter is positively connoted since it represents the real interpretation of what abortion is.

BDD-A9794 © 2008 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:58:29 UTC)

The dialectical effect of dissociation at this stage is that the protagonist selects a specific starting point to defend his standpoint from a range of other possible starting points. From the topical potential available at this stage, the protagonist picks up a concept which involves a contradiction or an ambiguity, namely "interruption of pregnancy", and which calls for a proper re-definition: *"we need now more than ever to have the courage to look the truth in the eye and to call things by their proper name, without yielding to convenient compromises or to the temptation of self-deception"*. A dissociative distinction between truth and falsity is indirectly performed by means of the expressions *"we need (...) to look the truth in the eye and to call things by their proper name"* which also represent indicators of dissociation because of their separating function. By this dissociation, the pro-choice supporters' definition of abortion as mere "interruption of pregnancy" is replaced by a new one which includes the criminal aspect of this operation: *"But no word has the power to change the reality of things: procured abortion is the deliberate and direct killing, by whatever means it is carried out, of a human being in the initial phase of his or her existence, extending from conception to birth"*. "Reality of things" is another indicator, this time of value, signalling a dissociation between reality and appearance. "Interruption of pregnancy as a crime" represents the new dissociated aspect of the initial concept of "interruption of pregnancy" which brings about a change in the starting points of the discussion.

We suppose that the virtual antagonist's starting point in the debate would be that there is no terminological ambiguity related to the notion of "interruption of pregnancy" which is an operation that cannot be considered a crime. Since there is an incompatibility between the two parties' starting points, a side-discussion meant to solve it has to be held.

According to the ideal model of a critical discussion, the proponent of the dissociation has to put the change in the starting points up for discussion in order to get the acceptance of the antagonist. If the protagonist starts a side-discussion on the respective change in starting points and the antagonist accepts this change, then the protagonist can use the dissociation in the main discussion. In this way, the dissociation meets both the procedural and the material requirements and therefore can be judged dialectically sound. If the change in starting points is not accepted by the antagonist and the protagonist still uses the dissociation as if it had been accepted, then a violation of the starting point rule (rule 6) for critical discussion occurs: "Discussants may not falsely present something as an accepted starting point (…)" (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992: 193). As a consequence, the use of dissociation by the protagonist is regarded as dialectically unsound or fallacious.

In our case, the protagonist indirectly suggests (*"we need ... to look the truth in the eye and to call things by their proper name"*) that the notion of "interruption of pregnancy" should be clarified in its new aspect, fact which gives us the impression that he is going to have a side-discussion to solve the incompatibility in the starting points of the main discussion. Put simply, he turns this change in starting points into a standpoint that should be argued for in a side-discussion. In this way, the dissociation used would meet the procedural requirements, the first condition it has to fulfil in order to be judged dialectically sound. The antagonist's acceptance of the change in starting points represents the second condition (the material requirement) that a dialectically sound dissociation has to meet. In my opinion, our protagonist maintains the dissociation in the main discussion without the antagonist's acceptance of the change in starting points: *"But no word has the power to change the reality of things"*. Such a strong claim from the part of the protagonist shows that the antagonist's view on the new starting point is not taken into consideration at all. The change in starting points introduced by dissociation is presented by the protagonist as self-evident, fact which leaves no room for a possible different option from the part of the antagonist: *"The moral*

BDD-A9794 © 2008 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:58:29 UTC)

gravity of procured abortion is apparent in all its truth if we recognize that we are dealing with murder and, in particular, when we consider the specific elements involved". Thus, the argumentation of the protagonist will proceed from this false mutually shared starting point.

Therefore, we can say that the protagonist uses the dissociation as if the change in starting points, namely that interruption of pregnancy involves a criminal aspect, had been accepted by the antagonist. Put simply, the protagonist violates the starting point rule for critical discussion by falsely presenting the new dissociated aspect as an accepted starting point. As a result, the protagonist's use of dissociation at this stage can be considered as dialectically unsound.

Moreover, the protagonist reveals the real truth about the notion of "interruption of pregnancy" by means of a persuasive definition in which the term "interruption of pregnancy" is replaced by the term "abortion": *procured abortion is the deliberate and direct killing, by whatever means it is carried out, of a human being in the initial phase of his or her existence, extending from conception to birth"*. This reformulation of the initial standpoint contains the major argument that underlies ethical argumentation against abortion: the one deliberately and directly killed by an abortion is a human being.

Another dialectically unsound move of the protagonist is the indirect *ad hominem* attack that he launches upon the opposing party. The latter is indirectly accused of manipulating the public opinion through an ambiguous terminology *"yielding to convenient compromises or to the temptation of self-deception"*. By means of this attack, the protagonist tries to discredit the other party in the eyes of the audience, in this way consolidating his own position.

Although dialectically unsound, from a rhetorical point of view, the use of dissociation at this stage is an extremely powerful instrument since it enables the protagonist to choose a starting point which makes the defence of his standpoint easier, on the one hand, and which is capable of changing the intended audience's view on the issue, on the other hand. The protagonist strategically adapts his starting point to the expectations of the audience by indirectly talking about values such as good and evil in terms of facts: abortion should be seen as a "material" attack of evil against good within "an extremely dangerous crisis of the moral sense". Emotional appeal is the main means used by the protagonist to persuade the audience that abortion is a murder in its essence despite the ambiguous terminology manipulated by its defenders. Of great persuasive effect is the quotation from the Bible which draws on the opposition good vs. evil and which qualifies as a strong ethical argument: *"(...) the reproach of the Prophet is extremely straightforward: 'Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness' (Is 5:20)"*.

As concerns the presentational devices employed by the protagonist, we can mention hyperbole (*"The acceptance of abortion (...) is a telling sign of an extremely dangerous crisis of the moral sense, which is becoming more and more incapable of distinguishing between good and evil, even when the fundamental right to life is at stake"*), antithesis (*"incapable of distinguishing between good and evil"*), imagery (*"the deliberate and direct killing (...) of a human being"*), etc. These devices are meant to make things present to the mind in Perelman's terms, in our particular case to bring a change of perspective on the controversial issue of abortion.

Argumentation stage

In the argumentation stage of a critical discussion, the protagonist connects the starting points established in the opening stage to the standpoint by means of applying an argument scheme. The antagonist can attack the relationship between standpoint and argument by asking critical questions.

BDD-A9794 © 2008 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:58:29 UTC)

In our case, the protagonist applies an argument scheme based on a causal relationship: abortion is a crime because *"the one eliminated is a human being at the very beginning of life"*. This connection is criticized by the virtual antagonist who, by means of dissociation, attacks the second term of the relationship, namely the argument that the fetus is a human being. As clearly shown in the text, the protagonist acknowledges the existence of this doubt from the part of the antagonist: *"Some people try to justify abortion by claiming that the result of conception, at least up to a certain number of days, cannot yet be considered a personal human life"*. The antagonist dissociates between two stages in the life of the fetus: "at least up to a certain number of days" when the fetus is not a "personal human life" and the period after a certain number of days when the fetus becomes a human being. By distinguishing the first stage from the second one, the antagonist points out that the protagonist's standpoint that abortion is a crime cannot be supported by the argument that the fetus is a human being. This argument does not hold for the entire period of time the fetus is in the womb, but only for part of that period that is *after* a certain number of days. In other words, the antagonist claims that abortion is not a crime because the fetus is not a human being at least up to a certain number of days.

The dialectical effect of attacking the second term of the argument scheme by means of dissociation is that an alternative interpretation of the second term of the relationship is provided (van Rees 2006: 482). In the present debate, a possible alternative interpretation of the second term of the relationship would be that, contrary to what the protagonist claims, the fetus might indeed not be a personal human life at least up to a certain number of days. Rhetorically, an attack on the second term of the relationship through dissociation is very powerful in the sense that it can change the audience's perspective on the validity of the argument scheme employed by the protagonist. By claiming that the fetus is not a person at least up to a certain number of days, the antagonist suggests that the conclusion drawn by the protagonist that abortion is a crime holds only for an aspect, that stage in the life of the fetus after a certain number of days.

Consequently, by providing an alternative conclusion namely that, since the fetus is not a person at least up to a certain number of days, abortion is not a crime, the antagonist evades further argument on the other aspect of the issue, the period after that number of days when the fetus becomes a human being.

The protagonist reacts against this dissociation by supporting his standpoint with the following arguments: "*But in fact, from the time that the ovum is fertilized, a life is begun which is neither that of the father nor the mother; it is rather the life of a new human being with his own growth. It would never be made human if it were not human already. This has always been clear, and (...) modern genetic science offers clear confirmation"*. He argues that the antagonist's distinction between the two stages in the period of time spent by the fetus in the womb does not hold because from the very moment of fertilization the life of a new human being begins. Therefore, the protagonist rejects the antagonist's argument that up to a certain number of days the result of conception is not a person. By means of dissociation, he separates the fetus as an individuality from the mother and the father in order to emphasize the fact that abortion is an attack against a human life.

From the topical potential available at this stage, the protagonist selects for his defence arguments from authority and emotional arguments. "Modern genetic science" is one form of authority invoked by the protagonist to give more credibility to his argumentation. By the appeal to this form of authority, he points out that there is no contradiction between science and religion in this matter. Moreover, by the appeal to the authority of science, the protagonist strategically adapts his argumentation to the audience that is supposed to trust scientific

BDD-A9794 © 2008 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:58:29 UTC)

arguments. Another form of authority invoked by the protagonist is the institution of the Church in various forms: the word of God, the Christian Tradition, the texts of Sacred Scripture, the Fathers of the Church, the Papal Magisterium, etc. The protagonist's strategic appeal to the authority of the Church is adapted to the Christian believers whose faith, one the one hand, and whose strong stand against abortion, on the other hand, need to be reinforced.

Emotional arguments combined with factual arguments are strategically used to describe abortion in terms of a wound inflicted upon the whole society: *"[abortion] is a most serious wound inflicted on society and its culture by the very people who ought to be society's promoters and defenders"*. As already anticipated by the term "procured abortion", alongside with the mother there is a whole series of people and institutions to be held responsible for abortion. These social entities, whether individuals or institutions, are judged on the basis of their actions: *"legislators who have promoted and approved abortion laws, (...) the administrators of the health-care centres where abortions are performed, (...) international institutions, foundations and associations which systematically campaign for the legalization and spread of abortion in the world"*. The protagonist dissociates between the individual dimension and the social dimension of abortion in order to underline the fact that abortion should be regarded as a serious problem of the human civilization: *"In this sense abortion goes beyond the responsibility of individuals and beyond the harm done to them, and takes on a distinctly social dimension"*. "In this sense" and "distinctly" function as explicit indicators of the dissociation between the two aspects of abortion introduced by the protagonist. The second term of the dissociation is the marked one, that is, it is qualified as even worse than the first term.

Among the presentational devices used by the protagonist, the most effective ones are the metaphor of the corrupted system that enables the spread of abortion and the enumeration of all the entities involved in this "network of complicity". By means of these presentational devices the protagonist makes the audience face "the immense threat to life" that abortion stands for.

Concluding stage

In the concluding stage of a critical discussion, the protagonist and the antagonist establish together the outcome of the argumentation put forward by the protagonist in the previous dialectical stage.

In our case, the protagonist points out that the arguments he advanced lead to the conclusion, unanimously agreed upon by the representatives of the Church, that *"(...) direct abortion, that is, abortion willed as an end or as a means, always constitutes a grave moral disorder, since it is the deliberate killing of an innocent human being"*. So, from the protagonist's point of view, in light of the argumentation in the preceding stage, there is no doubt that the fetus is a human being and therefore abortion is a crime.

From the topical potential available at this stage, the protagonist strategically invokes the authority of the Church which seems to have the last word on the matter of abortion: *"This doctrine is based upon the natural law and upon the written Word of God, is transmitted by the Church's Tradition and taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium"*.

According to van Rees (2006), the use of dissociation in this stage enables the disputants to precizate which is the right interpretation of the standpoint debated upon in the argumentation stage. Our protagonist reinforces his standpoint by precizating that abortion is an "intrinsically illicit" act which no counter-argument of any kind could ever make licit. In my view, the protagonist dissociates between "intrinsically illicit" and "extrinsically illicit" acts to better clarify the nature of abortion, the former aspect being valued as worse than the

BDD-A9794 © 2008 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:58:29 UTC)

latter: *"No circumstance, no purpose, no law whatsoever can ever make licit an act which is intrinsically illicit, since it is contrary to the Law of God which is written in every human heart, knowable by reason itself, and proclaimed by the Church"*.

Rhetorically, by the use of this dissociation, the protagonist chooses the interpretation that suits his purpose that is to convince the audience and not the antagonist of the fact that abortion is a crime.

4. Conclusions

As I have shown in the analysis above, the argumentative technique of dissociation is strategically used by the protagonist (and also by the virtual antagonist) in various stages of the ethical debate on abortion with specific dialectical and rhetorical consequences for the resolution of the difference of opinion.

In the confrontation stage and in the opening stage, dissociation enables the parties to select those standpoints and those starting points respectively that are easier to defend and that serve their rhetorical aim of persuading the audience.

In the argumentation stage, by means of dissociation the connection between standpoint and argument, more precisely the second term of the argument scheme, can be attacked by the antagonist who wants to show that the argument is irrelevant to the standpoint advanced by the protagonist.

In the concluding stage, dissociation can be used to give a more precise interpretation of the standpoint in light of the arguments leveled in favor or against it.

As regards the evaluation of the use of dissociation in this ethical debate, I have pointed out that, in the opening stage, our protagonist makes use of a dialectically unsound dissociation when taking the criminal aspect of interruption of pregnancy as a self-evident change in the starting points of the discussion without the acceptance of the antagonist. Although dialectically unsound, rhetorically, this strategic move enables the protagonist to further the discussion in the direction he wants and from the starting point he wants.

On the basis of the argumentative text discussed above, I claim that strategic maneuvering with dissociation in an ethical dispute can be put to good use if a certain controversial notion is clarified in a side-discussion and by taking into account the other party's view of the matter. On the contrary, it can be put to bad use if a certain aspect of a controversial concept is imposed upon the other party and the proponent continues the discussion as if the change in starting points caused by dissociation had been accepted.*

Simona Mazilu
Politehnica University of Bucharest
"Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați
simona.mazilu@gmail.com

References

van Eemeren, F. H., Grootendorst, R. 1984. *Speech Acts in Argumentative Discussions*. Dordrecht, Holland / Cinnaminson: Foris Publications.

van Eemeren, F. H., Grootendorst, R. 1992, *Argumentation, Communication, and Fallacies*. Hillsdale, N. J.: Lawrence Erebaum.

van Eemeren, F. H., Houtlosser, P. 2002. Strategic maneuvering. Maintaining a delicate balance. In F. H. Eemeren and P. Houtlosser (eds.), *Dialectic and Rhetoric. The Warp and Woof of Argumentation Analysis*: 131-159. Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

BDD-A9794 © 2008 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:58:29 UTC)

van Eemeren, F. H. and Grootendorst, R. 2004, *A Systematic Theory of Argumentation. The Pragma-Dialectical Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Garssen, B. 1997. *Argumentatieschema's in pragma-dialectisch perspectief. Een: theoretish en empirisch onderzoek*. Amsterdam: IFOTT.

Grootendorst, R. 1999. Innocence by dissociation. A pragma-dialectical analysis of the fallacy of incorrect dissociation in the Vatican document 'We remember: A reflection on the Shoah'. In F. H. van Eemeren, R. Grootendorst, J. A. Blair and C. A. Willard (eds.), *Proceedings of the 4th Argumentation.* 286-289. Amsterdam: Sic Sat.

Perelman, Ch. and Olbrechts-Tyteca, L. 1969. *The New Rhetoric. A Treatise on Argumentation,* translated by J. Wilkinson and P. Weaver. Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press.

van Rees, M. A. 2002. Argumentative functions of dissociation in every-day discussions. In H. V. Hansen, C. W. Tindale, J. A. Blair and R. H. Johnson (eds.), *Argumentation and its Applications*. OSSA'01. CD-ROM.

van Rees, M. A. 2003. Indicators of dissociation. In F. H. van Eemeren, J. A. Blair, Charles A. Willard and A. F. Snoeck Henkemans (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Fifth Conference of the International Society for the Study of Argumentation*: 887-893. Amsterdam: Sic Sat.

van Rees, M. A. 2005a. Dialectical soundness of dissociation. In D. Hitchcock (Ed.), *The Uses of Argument: Proceedings of a Conference at McMaster University*: 383-392. Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation.

van Rees. M. A. 2005b. Dissociation: A dialogue technique. Studies in Cummunication Sciences: 35-50.

van Rees, M. A. 2006. Strategic maneuvering with dissociation. *Argumentation* 20: 473-487.

Stevenson, C. L. 1944. *Ethics and Language*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

BDD-A9794 © 2008 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:58:29 UTC)