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**CHRISTIANITY, EPISTEMIC PEER DISAGREEMENT, AND THE
ABORTION DEBATE**

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Abstract: The question of the morality of abortion has long been the subject of intense, sometimes acrimonious debate. Even people within the same religious or philosophical tradition often disagree on the issue. For example, there are Christians who are “pro-choice” and there are Christians who are “pro-life.” Both sides marshal biblical, theological, and philosophical arguments in support of their positions. The substance of the abortion debate seems to reduce to one tricky question: when does personhood begin? Christian experts in various fields, such as theology, biblical studies, ethics, and philosophy, have protracted disagreements over this question. In this article we will apply insights from the current literature on epistemic peer disagreement to the abortion issue. We will assume that there is only one correct answer to the abortion question. However, after making a crucial distinction between rationality as understood by internalists versus externalists, we will argue that there is more than one rational answer to the abortion question, since there is more than one rational way to weight evidence. We will conclude that, in a case of disagreement between two Christians who are epistemic peers with regards to the morality of abortion, both parties can be rational in adhering to their respective positions, but that this does not entail or even support ethical relativism.

Key words: abortion, Christianity, Bible, theology, peer disagreement, epistemology, personhood, rationality, pro-choice, pro-life

1. Introduction

The question of the morality of abortion has long been the subject of intense, often acrimonious debate. Even people within a single tradition disagree on the issue. This is reflected in the prominent role played by the issue in recent highly-publicized votes in Poland and the USA, nations with a significantly Christian heritage. Some voters who self-identified as Christian were “pro-choice” while others were “pro-life.” In this article we will apply insights from the current literature on epistemic peer disagreement to argue for the following two theses: 1. In a situation of disagreement between two Christians who are epistemic peers with regards to the morality of abortion, both parties can be rational in adhering to their respective positions, and 2. This does not entail or even support ethical relativism.

Several caveats are in order. What interests us in this article is the rationality of competing views on the abortion issue when these views are held by Christians. Hence there are many aspects of the abortion debate that we will not be discussing, either because they do not directly pertain to the question of rationality or because they are not directly relevant to the debate among Christians. Additionally, since our focus is ethical rather than judicial, we will not explore whether abortion should be legal or illegal. The question of the relationship of morality to legislation is very important but is much too large of an issue to address in this article.

2. Christian Positions on Abortion

Although one sometimes gets the impression that Christianity speaks with one voice when it comes to the question of the morality of abortion, there is actually a long history of disagreement among Christians on this issue. In every period of Christian history there has been both opposition and toleration of abortion (Castuera 2017, 216). Although there is no mention of abortion in the New Testament (even though it was common in Roman society), the *Didache*, a Christian document dating to the second century, opposes both abortion and infanticide, stating “Do not abort a fetus or kill a child that is born” (Ehrman 2003, 419). There is, however, a more specific question about when a fertilized egg becomes a “fetus” that the *Didache* does not address. The modern distinctions between zygote, embryo, and fetus were not made in the first century, and ancient Greek sources reveal the belief that what was developing in the womb was not considered to have a soul until one to three months after conception. It would be hasty to assume that the prohibition of abortion in the *Didache* applies all the way back to conception without first determining the early Christian understanding of the point in time when what is developing becomes an “embryo.”

The anti-abortion sentiment expressed in the *Didache* is reflected in statements by many other early Christians. St. Augustine (345-430 CE), certainly a seminal Christian thinker, opposed abortion because he viewed it as a form of murder. However, he was of the opinion that a fetus is not a person until it develops to the point where it has a human rather than a vegetative or animal soul, following the Greek view. Hence he seems to have held that abortion during the first trimester is not murder (Robinson, 2013).

In contemporary Christianity one can find ardent advocates of pro-life and pro-choice positions, with various intermediary positions that allow for abortion under specific circumstances. It has been well documented that Christian attitudes on the issue change over time (Hoffman and Johnson 2005, 161-182). This diversity of opinion is due at least in part to the variety of factors taken into consideration as Christians form and formulate their positions on moral issues.

3. Biblical Considerations

Christian positions on abortion are influenced by scriptural considerations, theological doctrines, and philosophical presuppositions. The fact that the relevant biblical passages can be interpreted in a variety of ways has contributed greatly to the diversity of positions on the issue. For example, Exodus 21:22-25 says:

If men strive, and hurt a woman with child, so that her fruit depart from her, and yet no mischief follow: he shall be surely punished, according as the woman's husband will lay upon him; and he shall pay as the judges determine. And if any mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

Interestingly, both pro-life and pro-choice advocates use this passage in support of their position. The former interpret it as saying that if a man causes a woman to give birth prematurely but there is no harm to the infant, then the offending man will pay a lesser penalty than if the injury results in harm to the infant. But if the offense results in the death of the child, the penalty that the man must pay is his own life. This imposition of the death penalty is taken as an indication that the life of the fetus is valued in the same manner as the life of an adult.

However, pro-choice commentators point out problems with this interpretation. The pro-life interpretation depends on construing the phrase “if any mischief follow” as referring to ill effects suffered by the fetus or infant. However, Stanley Isser explains that historically there

were two separate Jewish legal traditions concerning the law of Exodus 21:22-23, one that saw the most severe penalties as based on damage to the woman and another that held that the most severe penalties were based on damage to the embryo (Isser 1990, 31). It can be argued that the penalties imposed better fit injuries to the mother than a fetus or infant, for a fetus or infant would not have teeth to lose, so “tooth for tooth” seems particularly problematic to the pro-life interpretation, but the likelihood of damage to the eye, hand, foot, or skin of a pre-natal infant as a result of such an altercation also seems less than the likelihood that the mother would suffer such injuries. So it could be that the death penalty recommended here is punishment for injury resulting in the death of the mother rather than death of the fetus or infant.

The pro-choice reading of this passage interprets it as imposing a smaller penalty at first because there is less harm to the women and a larger penalty only if there is more significant harm to the women, like the loss of a tooth or an eye, and the death penalty if she loses her life. This seems like a reasonable interpretation of the passage. However, this passage occurs very early in the Hebrew Bible and is not necessarily the Bible’s final word on the issue. There is contextual evidence that the moral precepts taught in this passage are provisional rather than normative for all times.

As another example, many pro-life Christians believe that Jeremiah 1:4, 5 unambiguously supports their position. It says, “Then the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations.” Some think that because God knew Jeremiah before he was born, Jeremiah must have been a person (in the sense relevant to the abortion debate) prior to his actual birth. This seems to them to entail that not only the fetus but even the zygote is a person. And because taking the life of an innocent person is murder, they conclude that abortion is murder.

But of course if this interpretation of these verses is correct, then it would imply that Jeremiah was a person (in the relevant sense) even prior to conception, since God, who is omniscient, knew Jeremiah from eternity past. If that’s the case, then the personhood of Jeremiah would seem to be independent of his physical body, which leads to difficult questions about the relationship of the death of the body to the death of the person and perhaps fatally undermines the use of this passage in the pro-life cause, which is usually predicated on the conviction that abortion ends not merely the life of a collection of tissues but the life of a person. However, if Jeremiah was a person before having a body, then it seems possible that he remains a person after the demise of his body, too. If this is correct, then abortion would end the life of the body but not the life of the person. But then the difference between the pro-choice belief that abortion kills only a collection of tissues and this version of the pro-life position, which holds

that abortion kills the body but does not kill the actual person, seems to reduce to mere semantics.

4. Theological Doctrines

In addition to biblical arguments, Christians also employ theological doctrines in support of their preferred positions in the abortion debate. For example, the traditional Christian view is that Jesus was both fully God and fully human. Some pro-life Christians are concerned that if a fetus is not a person, then while the future Jesus was growing in Mary's womb he was both divine and something else, but that something else was something other than human. As one author put it, "There are enormous Christological problems that arise if one assumes that the pre-born are not persons, not truly human. If none of us are persons before birth, then that means that, for nine months, the being contained in the Virgin's womb is fully God and fully something else, but not human" (Damick 2012).

Here pro-choice Christians can point out that this argument conflates the concepts of humanness and personhood in a way that is problematic. Being "human" and being a "person" are not the same. A human organ carefully preserved in a donor bank is human but is not a person. God, according to Christian theology, is a person but not human. These are distinct concepts that this argument depends on equivocating. Hence the pro-choice response to this seems quite plausible: the embryo that was developing in Mary's womb could be human without being a human person.

Another doctrine that is taken to have implications for abortion is the teaching that each living human person bears the image of God (*imago dei*). This doctrine is perhaps the root of the biblical prohibition of murder, for Genesis 9:6 states, "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man." There appears to be some sense in which ending a life dishonors God himself, defacing his image reflected by the living human person. Hence if a fetus is a living human person who reflects God's image, to end its life would be as immoral as is ending the life of a human adult.

It cannot simply be assumed, of course, that a fetus is a living human person without begging the question. Hence the implications of this doctrine for the abortion issue are less obvious than one might suppose. Since whether a fetus is a living human person is a philosophical question, such philosophical issues must also be examined.

5. Philosophical Presuppositions

Three important concepts that are used and sometimes confused in the abortion debate are "life," "human," and "person." Those who are pro-life sometimes argue as if showing that the life of the fetus begins at conception is sufficient to show that abortion is a form of murder. Pro-

choice advocates may respond to this by pointing out that the sperm and egg are alive prior to conception, that conception does not create life. They may also point out that while being alive may be a necessary condition to being a human person, it is not a sufficient condition. This is because something can be alive without being a human person. Furthermore, something can be both alive and human without being a human person – a statement that needs elaboration.

Pro-life advocates frequently make a big point of showing that the fetus is human, often proffering an array of medical data that strongly supports this conclusion. Since the pro-choice side is not arguing that the fetus is anything other than human, this is of dubious value. Pro-choice Christians accept that the fetus is human as well as that it's alive. However, something can be human and alive without being a living human person. An unwanted growth, like a mole or a cancerous tumor, is both human and alive, but it is not a person and therefore no one objects to having it removed.

What is at the heart of the abortion debate – but not always recognized as such – is the issue of the personhood of the fetus (Reitan 2016, 279). When pro-life Christians argue that a fetus is human they sometimes say “a human,” in the sense that it is a distinct, living, human person. Likewise when they say that it is “a life.” They are convinced that to some important degree the fetus is a person in a way comparable to how an adult is a person and that ending the fetus' life is morally similar to ending the life of a human adult. Pro-choice Christians, on the other hand, generally believe that a fetus does not have full personhood. This is the most critical disagreement in the debate. There are even some people who are prepared to grant the personhood of the fetus while still maintaining the morality of abortion under certain circumstances (Thomson 1971, 47-66).

If this is so, then the relevant question to be answered is, “When does personhood begin?” This is a difficult question, though. To answer it, we may need to answer another difficult question: what is personhood? These questions may not be impossible to answer, but they require a degree of metaphysical and logical technicality that goes beyond what most in the debate are trained to handle, biblically, theologically, and philosophically. An objective adjudication of the disagreement on how to interpret biblical passages relevant to the abortion debate is not easily achieved. Examination of the relevant theological and philosophical considerations yields a similar result: while these issues may not be irresolvable, such resolution involves considerable time and mental effort and has as of yet not been achieved with anything even faintly approaching unanimity. Even professional Christian thinkers – Bible scholars, theologians, ethicists, and philosophers – disagree on which position Christians should adopt. This gives rise to questions relating to the rationality of those who

hold firmly to their beliefs on abortion in light of the persistent disagreement among experts in the field.

5. Epistemic Peer Disagreement

The question of the epistemic status of the parties to such a disagreement has been the subject of much discussion in recent philosophical literature. See, for example, the following multi-author works: Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield, eds. *Disagreement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); David Christensen and Jennifer Lackey, eds. *The Epistemology of Disagreement: New essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Diago E. Machuca, ed. *Disagreement and Skepticism* (New York: Routledge, 2013); and Michael Bergmann and Patrick Kain, eds. *Challenges to Moral and Religious Belief: Disagreement and evolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

In this conversation the term “epistemic peers” is used to describe persons who have the same knowledge of a given topic and who have equal intellectual abilities. “Peer disagreement” refers to the state wherein epistemic peers have irreconcilable doxastic attitudes on a given topic. One question discussed in the literature is whether it is possible for both parties in a peer disagreement to be rational in their doxastic attitudes. These concepts and this question are applicable to the abortion debate. If two people having equal cognitive abilities and the same knowledge base relevant to abortion, then they are epistemic peers. If they have irreconcilable doxastic attitudes about abortion and the various issues that underlie the abortion debate, then they are involved in an “epistemic peer disagreement.” Is it possible that they are both being rational, or do the laws of logic or some other principle entail that only one of them can be rational?

Prima facie it would seem that two people who are epistemic peers regarding the moral status of abortion should be in agreement. If they are not, one might expect that either they are not peers or one of them is not being completely rational. According to Peter van Inwagen, however, there are counter-examples to this. One example that he gives is his own extended dialogue with friend and epistemic peer David Lewis on the question of compatibilism, the view that freedom of the will and determinism are somehow reconcilable. According to van Inwagen, he and Lewis held opposing views on this issue and engaged in a lengthy correspondence to the point where van Inwagen is convinced that Lewis was familiar with all of the arguments and pertinent considerations with which van Inwagen was familiar. He is also convinced that Lewis is as philosophically capable as he himself is. Hence he concludes that both he and Lewis are probably rational in their beliefs, even though their beliefs seem irreconcilable. If this is the case, then this is an example of epistemic

peers who are in disagreement. And since both are expert thinkers and well versed in the evidence, it seems that both are very likely justified in their beliefs. Hence it seems that both are believing rationally (van Inwagen 2010, 10-28).

How can this be the case? Earl Conee has offered a possible explanation for rational peer disagreement (Conee 2010, 69-90). He argues that rationality involves a judgment not simply of the evidence justifying some belief, but also of how various pieces of evidence fit together and affect each other, and epistemic peers may weigh these considerations differently.

One might suppose that if a person is aware of two seemingly cogent arguments supporting the pro-life position and ten seemingly cogent arguments undermining the pro-life position then that person should reject the pro-life position. However, that would be an overly simplistic view of evidential belief justification. For if the two arguments supporting the pro-life position are particularly robust, such as one's own vivid and unmistakable experiences, clear revelation from God, or what seem to be the conclusions of sound deductive argumentation, and if the ten arguments are considerably less robust, such as second-hand reports, inferences of only moderate probability, and the like, then the two arguments could justly be seen as having greater authority than the ten. This is an example of weighting evidence: more weight is given to each of the two than to any of the ten, and cumulatively (in this example, at least) to the two together than to the ten *en ensemble*.

In informal settings this process of weighting evidence happens naturally, and numerous illustrations of this from many domains could be provided. In conservative Protestant theology, for example, a clear statement of the Bible generally trumps all other evidence. This applies to the discussion of peer disagreement because it helps us understand how epistemic peers can accept the same data as both veridical and relevant and yet justifiably arrive at incompatible conclusions. According to Conee, two people can be true epistemic peers and yet disagree because their positions are not based simply on the awareness of individual arguments but on an intricate and perhaps even subjective evaluation of how all of the arguments fit together. He also points out that epistemic peers may share the same doxastic attitude on a subject but with different degrees of certainty (Conee 2010, 71, 86). Thomas Nagel reaches a conclusion similar to Conee's and explains that differences in the assessment of evidence and arguments inevitably involve differences of judgment. Nagel says that in most significant cases reasonable belief is not strictly determined by the grounds that can be explicitly offered. This is "why there can be reasonable disagreement – disagreement in judgment – even among those who are in general agreement about what kinds of grounds are relevant to the matter at hand, and what the evidence and arguments in the case are" (1987, 234-235).

These conclusions apply to peer disagreements on the moral status of abortion because they can help us to understand how and why very well-informed Christians can disagree on the issue. Peer disagreement can sometimes be caused by the inherent nature of the subject matter being discussed. As David Christensen put it, “disagreement flourishes when epistemic conditions are bad” (2007, 214). When evidence is meager or conditions hamper cognitive access to a matter, disagreement flourishes. However, sometimes peers disagree even without such extenuating circumstances. They disagree not because of any epistemic deficiency or because of any deficit of character (such as dogmatism, disingenuousness, or even misplaced loyalty), but rather because they are making different evaluations of how the relevant data and arguments fit together. Thus peer disagreement isn’t necessarily caused by failure to be fully rational on the part of one or the other of the parties involved.

6. Rationality

A consideration that is relevant to this discussion is what it means for someone to rationally believe something. Here the familiar debate over internalism and externalism raises its head. This debate has been pushed to the forefront by Alvin Plantinga, whose books *Warrant: The current debate* (Plantinga 1993a) and *Warrant and Proper Function* (Plantinga 1993b) champion externalism. (For a concise introduction to the issue, see Poston 2017.)

If the question “is person X rational in believing S” is asking whether the evidence that X has in favor of S sufficiently outweighs the evidence that X has against S, regardless of whether the total evidence relevant to S is for or against S, and even if there is much more evidence against S of which X is not aware, then rationality is being viewed in an internalist fashion. According to Robert Audi, a key aspect of internalism is that justification is tied to consciously “accessible elements,” such that one is consciously aware of the subject matter grounding his or her justification (Audi 2011, 273).

In contrast to this, if the question “is person X rational in believing S” is asking whether X is rational in believing S *all things considered*, i.e. asking whether the sum of all the evidence relevant to S (including both that of which X is aware and that of which X is not aware) on balance supports S, then rationality is being viewed in an externalist fashion. Clearly how one defines “rationality” determines when one thinks someone is being rational. When Conee argues that epistemic peers can rationally disagree on an issue because rationality involves evaluating and weighting of diverse evidence and argumentation that is very complex and may be somewhat subjective, he seems to be viewing rationality in an internalist fashion, for one does not evaluate and weight evidence of which one is not aware.

An externalist perspective on peer disagreement has been offered by Alvin Goldman. Goldman makes a distinction between *epistemic objectivism*, the belief that one epistemic system can be more correct than another and that some single system could be the most correct, and *epistemic relativism*, the belief that there are many “fundamentally different, genuinely alternative epistemic systems” (Goldman 2010, 191). (Here Goldman is quoting Paul Boghossian. See Boghossian 2007.) He offers as an alternative to these what he calls *objectivity-based relativism*, which is the belief that even though one epistemic system is potentially the most correct, beliefs are justified for the one holding to them according to the epistemic system that person has adopted.

In the terminology made popular by Reformed Epistemology, “objectivity-based relativism” seems to be saying that a person’s beliefs can be justified even when they are not warranted. Plantinga affirms the possibility of justification without warrant and sometimes seems to reserve the term “justification” for discussing internalist rationality while using “warrant” when discussing externalist rationality (Plantinga 1990, 68-69). If this interpretation of Goldman’s “objectivity-based relativism” is correct, then several conclusions follow: 1. One would be justified in believing S when the preponderance of evidence that one has supports S. 2. One who is justified in believing S may not be warranted to believe S. 3. One will not know whether or not one is warranted to believe S.

This schematic of rationality results in the following possibilities. 1. One party to a peer disagreement could be justified in believing S while the other party is justified in believing ~S. 2. The party justified in believing S may or may not be warranted to so believe. 3. The party justified in believing ~S may or may not be warranted to so believe. 4. Neither the party that believes S nor the party that believes ~S is in a position to know whether she is in a position to know if S is true, since neither is in a position to know if her belief is warranted.

This view is compatible with the position taken by van Inwagen and Conee that epistemic peers can rationally disagree. Epistemic peers can be equally justified in holding incompatible beliefs even if it is not possible for them both to be warranted in holding incompatible beliefs. If we understand rationality as relating to justification rather than warrant, in a case where both parties are justified in their beliefs both parties are also rational in their beliefs. And there seems to be good reason for thinking that rationality is tied to justification, for if rationality is tied to warrant, and if it is not possible to know when a belief is warranted, then it is not possible to know when a belief is rational. But that would seem to lead to the problematic conclusion that we can never know when beliefs are rational. Hence there seems to be a *reductio ad absurdum* argument against tying rationality to warrant (van Fraassen 2002, 64-109).

Returning to the abortion debate, in a situation of epistemic peer disagreement on the moral status of abortion, this analysis of rationality

yields the following possibilities. 1. One person can be justified in believing that abortion is moral while another is justified in believing that it is not moral. 2. The person justified in believing that it is moral may or may not be warranted to so believe. 3. The person justified in believing that it is not moral may or may not be warranted to so believe. 4. Neither the person who believes that it is moral nor the person who believes that it is not moral is epistemically positioned to know *whether she is in a position to know* if her belief is true, since neither is in a position to know if that belief is warranted.

Care is being taken here not to assert that neither party is positioned to know if her belief is true. Instead, what is being affirmed is that neither party can be apodictically certain that her belief is true.

In the end, we grant that it is rarely the case that a person experiences a complete overhaul of belief and intuition about the abortion issue. “There are some convictions that run so deep within us (or *some* of us, at least) that they are nearly immune to change” (Kirsch 2013, 98). But we argue that this realization should not negatively color the disagreeing parties’ opinions of each other or of the debate as a whole. There can be rational disagreement, even if disagreeing peers aren’t able to come to a resolution of the issue.

6. Conclusions

In contrast to the conclusions depicted above, discussions of the morality of abortion have tended to focus on attempting to defend or repudiate specific arguments in order to show which view is more rational or (less commonly) advocating an ethical relativism according to which the disagreement is not seen as a dispute about objective facts and hence does not involve incommensurable positions. The former seems to presuppose that the abortion debate has a single correct answer. The latter seems to deny that there is an objective truth of the matter. Here we see the long-standing and quite familiar disagreement over ethical absolutism vs. ethical relativism. Absolutism is often taken to entail that there is only one rational position on the issue, while relativism is frequently seen as facilitating the possibility of multiple rational positions because there is no single position that is objectively correct. This article presents a third option.

The rationality of accepting one ethical position over others in light of the evidential support that can be furnished for both sides has received little attention. But the abortion debate does seem to involve epistemic peer disagreement and hence should be viewed in light of this epistemological discussion. This article attempts to support the following points relevant to the abortion debate. 1. In a situation of disagreement between two Christians who are epistemic peers with regards to the morality of abortion, both parties can be rational in adhering to their

respective positions. 2. This does not entail or even support ethical relativism.

Van Inwagen, Conee, Goldman, and Nagel, each in his own way, argue that one party to a peer disagreement can be justified in believing something while the other party is justified in believing the opposite. Epistemic peers can be equally justified in holding incompatible beliefs, even in a situation where only one of those beliefs can be true. For if rationality is related to (internalist) justification rather than (externalist) warrant, as seems likely, then in a case where both parties are justified in their beliefs both parties are also rational in their beliefs. Without embracing ethical relativism these philosophers seem to have laid out a coherent theory of rational peer disagreement that is applicable to ethical disagreements. Hence the first goal of this article has been accomplished: it has been shown that Christian epistemic peers on the morality of abortion can be rational in adhering to irreconcilable positions.

The second point that this article set out to sustain can now be addressed as well. The epistemological approach to rational peer disagreement reflected in this study does not reject the concept of objective moral truth. Consequently it does not reject the possibility of one position on the abortion debate being true and other positions being false. What it does is show that rational disagreement is possible even without embracing ethical relativism. It is hoped that this will increase the respect that disagreeing parties on the abortion debate have for each other without undermining their passion for moral truth.

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