

# ISSA Proceedings 2010 - Persuasive Definitions In Ethical Argumentation On Abortion



## 1. Introduction

Disputants in the abortion debate employ persuasive definitions of the notions *abortion* and *fetus* to plead a pro-life or a pro-choice cause. Pro-lifers define *abortion* as an “unspeakable crime” or as a “deadly sin” and the *fetus* as “an innocent human being” or “a person from the moment of conception” while pro-choicers define *abortion* as “an operation performed to end an unwanted pregnancy” and the *fetus* as a “newly implanted clump of cells” or a “potential human being”.

This paper [i] is concerned with the dialectical and rhetorical effects of the use of persuasive definitions in ethical argumentation on abortion. Using the pragma-dialectical framework (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984, 1992, 2004) within which persuasive definitions may be viewed as a form of strategic maneuvering (Zarefsky 2006), I will show that in ethical argumentation on abortion persuasive definitions mainly function as rhetorical means by which the parties convey an attitude of approval or disapproval of abortion and attempt to gain the audience’s adherence to one position or another. The paper is structured as follows: in section 2 I briefly review some of the most known approaches to persuasive definitions that have been instrumental in the analysis of persuasive definitions in the abortion debate; in section 3 I examine the persuasive definitions used in some excerpts of pro-life and pro-choice argumentative texts focusing on the effects intended by the arguers.

## 2. Approaches to persuasive definitions

Generally, the main function of a definition is to clarify a notion or a term. Ilie (2007) holds that the act of defining “involves processes of identification, categorization and particularization of the entity or phenomenon to be defined. [It] implies the communicative act of making something clear and tangible. [It] entails determining the outline and boundaries of the entity or phenomenon to be defined” (2007, p. 669). Similarly, according to Viskil (1994), the acceptability of

a standpoint depends on the clarity with which "*unknown or obscure terms*" (emphasis in the original) are defined (1994, p. 79).

However, when a definition contains emotionally loaded language, it is no longer a neutral definition but a persuasive one which conveys and stirs attitudes towards the thing that needs clarification. In other words, what a persuasion definition does is to "clarify" things by presenting them in a certain light conveying the attitude of the speaker / writer and seeking to stir similar attitudes in the intended interlocutor or audience.

Persuasive definitions in which terms are defined using emotional language are an essential characteristic of ethical argumentation. Stevenson (1944) has done extensive work on persuasive definitions as employed in ethical disagreements. The author argues that "in any 'persuasive definition' the term defined is a familiar one, whose meaning is both descriptive and strongly emotive. The purport of the definition is to alter the descriptive meaning of the term; [...] but the definition does not make any substantial change in the term's emotive meaning" (1944, p. 210). Persuasive definitions are usually accompanied by the words "true" or "real" used in a metaphorical way which have the force of "to be accepted". Stevenson considers that persuasive definitions are deceptive in the sense that they can serve as argumentation tactics to manipulate an audience, hence he recommends prudence when facing such definitions.

Walton (2005) objects to this view of persuasive definitions and persuasive language as always misleading or fallacious. He argues that "if the purpose of a persuasive definition is to persuade, and if rational persuasion can be a legitimate goal, putting forward a persuasive definition can have a legitimate basis in some cases" (2005, p. 159). Persuasive definitions are placed into a new dialectical framework in which they are evaluated in light of their purpose as speech acts. The author proposes a persuasion dialogue model, "a formal structure with moves and rules in which the aim of each participant is rational persuasion based on the values and other accepted premises of the other party" (2005, p. 177). Within this dialogue, a persuasive definition has the function of an argument and can be considered a legitimate move as long as it contributes to rational argumentation in a given case and helps the dialogue fulfill its collective goal (2005, p. 178).

According to Zarefsky (2006), a persuasive definition is "a non-neutral characterization that conveys a positive or negative attitude about something in

the course of naming it. The name is, in effect, an implicit argument that one should view the thing in a particular way. [T]he definition is put forward as if it was uncontroversial and could be easily stipulated" (2006, p. 404). For this reason, the author considers persuasive definitions "a form of strategic maneuvering" (2006, p. 399). In other words, by means of this type of definition, the speaker can put forward certain values and beliefs without arguing in support of them. This has been called by Zarefsky (1997) an argument by definition.

Macagno and Walton (2008) claim that persuasive definitions often "involve a conflict of values, in which the interlocutor founds his implicit argumentation upon a value that the interlocutor does not share. However, sometimes this conflict of values depends on the interlocutors' arguing about two different realities, two different concepts named in the same fashion" (2008, p. 205).

Dissociation and persuasive definitions are effectively combined in argumentative discourse. As argued by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969), "[definition] is an instrument of the dissociation of concepts, more especially, whenever it claims to furnish the real, true meaning of the concept as opposed to its customary or apparent usage" (1969, p. 444). Sometimes by means of a dissociative definition a new characteristic is introduced as the criterion for the right use of a concept. The authors consider that "a definition is always a matter of choice. Anyone making such a choice, particularly if a dissociative definition is involved, will generally claim to have isolated the single, true meaning of the concept, or at least the only reasonable meaning or the only meaning corresponding to current usage" (1969, p. 448).

According to van Rees (2005), distinction and definition are two speech acts performed in a dissociation. Both speech acts belong to the class of usage declaratives (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984) whose role is to clarify linguistic usage. For a dissociation to be dialectically sound, the two speech acts inherent in it should be performed recognizably that is explicitly, implicitly or indirectly. When the distinction or the definition is just presupposed, the procedural requirements for a dialectically sound dissociation are not met<sup>[ii]</sup>. Thus the distinction or the definition introduced by means of dissociation is meant to be taken for granted with no further discussion (van Rees 2005, p. 388).

In line with Zarefsky (2006), I consider persuasive definitions to be a form of strategic maneuvering which should both clarify or precize things and convey a

certain attitude towards the issue at stake thus achieving dialectical reasonableness and rhetorical effectiveness at the same time (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2002). In argumentative practice, however, persuasive definitions arise from a clash of values as Macagno and Walton (2008) also suggest and serve the interests of the arguers that use them. These arguers may be so strongly attached to their positions which they want to impose that they are more interested in winning the dispute in their favor than in resolving the disagreement. Therefore the strategic maneuvering with persuasive definitions derails when a party's rhetorical aim of naming things in such a way as to convey and stir a certain attitude overrides the dialectical aim of clarifying matters on the merits. In Walton's (2005) terms, the use of persuasive definitions becomes fallacious when it hinders the fulfillment of the general goal of the dialogue where it occurs.

As Stevenson (1944), van Rees (2005) and Zarefsky (2006) point out, the fact that persuasive definitions can be advanced as indisputable arguments which need no further critical testing to be accepted makes them a powerful instrument of persuasion. In my view, persuasive definitions are used in argumentative discourse less for their dialectical potential of clarifying or precisizing things and more for their rhetorical potential to convey the speaker's attitude towards an issue and redirect or influence the interlocutor's or the audience's attitude towards the respective issue.

### *3. Persuasive definitions in ethical argumentation on abortion*

In ethical disputes, defining key terms by means of persuasive definitions has significant implications for the resolution of the differences of opinion. Usually, the core of ethical dilemmas is represented by the conflict between persuasive definitions of the issue at stake. Such a case is the abortion dispute in which the clashing definitions of the key notions of *abortion* and *fetus* make the resolution of the difference of opinion impossible.

In ethical argumentation on abortion, arguers make strategic use of persuasive definitions in order to convey their pro-life or pro-choice attitude towards abortion as well as to redirect or influence the audience's perception of this controversial issue. The present analysis of the use of persuasive definitions in the abortion discourse starts from three major assumptions that I have previously made about the abortion debate.

First of all, the abortion controversy is a case of *deep disagreement* (Fogelin 1985) in which the arguers hold incommensurable positions on the status of the *fetus* and hence on the significance of *abortion* (Mazilu 2009a). The two notions *abortion* and *fetus* may be conceived of in contradictory ways so as to serve a pro-life or a pro-choice interest.

Second, given the fact that the abortion controversy is a case of deep disagreement in which the parties share no common ground of values and preferences and lack a resolution-minded attitude, it appears that both pro-life and pro-choice argumentation is directed at the audience that plays the role of a “third party” in the dispute. The arguers make use of *strategic maneuvering* with dissociation and persuasive definitions aimed more at winning the dispute in their favor by gaining the third party audience’s adherence to one position or another and less at resolving the difference of opinion on the merits (Mazilu 2008b).

Third, the emotional appeal is the main tactic employed by the parties to influence the third party audience’s perception of the reality of abortion (Mazilu 2008a, 2009b).

On the basis of these premises my first hypothesis is that the conflicting persuasive definitions of the notions *abortion* and *fetus* manipulated by the arguers in the abortion debate represent one of the causes of the deep disagreement the parties find themselves in. The persuasive definitions advanced by the two opposing parties convey two “incommensurable” attitudes towards abortion and the fetus. Thus, pro-life activists define abortion as an “unspeakable crime” or as a “deadly sin” and the fetus as “a human being” or “a person from the moment of conception”. Pro-choice supporters, on the other hand, define abortion as an operation performed to end an unwanted pregnancy and the fetus as a “newly implanted clump of cells” or “not a person at least up to a certain moment”. Following Macagno and Walton (2008), I hold that these contradictory definitions “involve a conflict of values” which relies on different perceptions of what human life is. These ways of defining the key notions of *abortion* and *fetus* in the abortion debate have profound dialectical and rhetorical consequences for the resolution of the dispute in case.

My second hypothesis is that persuasive definitions are part of the arguers’ emotional appeal directed at the audience and therefore their main function is a rhetorical one meant to help the arguers win the discussion over in their favor.

Before examining the persuasive definitions of the notions *abortion* and *fetus* in

pro-life and pro-choice argumentation, it is necessary to know what lexical definitions of these notions can be found in various dictionaries. It is interesting to see how the lexical definitions of the two notions have been adjusted to serve a pro-life or a pro-choice interest.

The notion *abortion* is defined as:

*[T]he act of giving premature birth with loss of the fetus in the period before a live birth is possible; the procuring of induced termination of pregnancy to destroy a fetus* (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary); *[T]he intentional ending of a pregnancy, usually by a medical operation"* ([http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/abortion\\_1](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/abortion_1)); *[T]he termination of a pregnancy after, accompanied by, resulting in, or closely followed by the death of the embryo or fetus; spontaneous expulsion of a human fetus* (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/abortion>); *[A] medical operation to end a pregnancy so that the baby is not born alive [=termination]"* (<http://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/abortion>).

As far as the notion *fetus* is concerned, it is defined as:

*[A]n unborn human more than eight weeks after conception* (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary); *[A] young human being or animal before birth, after the organs have started to develop* (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/foetus>); *[A] developing human from usually two months after conception to birth* (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fetus>); *[A] baby or young animal before it is born* (<http://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/foetus>).

### *3.1 Persuasive definitions in pro-life argumentation*

Pro-life argumentation frames abortion as a criminal act by which an innocent human being is deliberately killed. This way of framing abortion is meant to convey the pro-life activists' attitude of disapproval and to influence the audience's perception of this issue. The following pro-life excerpts are illustrative of explicit, implicit and indirect persuasive definitions of the notions *abortion* and *fetus*.

According to van Rees (2005), a definition is made explicit by means of a performative formula of the type "I define" (p. 384). A definition is performed implicitly when there is no performative formula but "the expressions that are used have syntactic and semantic characteristics that make them preeminently fit

for performing the speech act that is intended" (p. 385). An indirect definition is performed by means of expressions which have "syntactic and semantic characteristics that make them preeminently fit for performing *another* (emphasis in the original) speech act than the one intended" (p. 385). A definition is presupposed when no explicit, implicit or indirect speech act is performed. In this case the meaning introduced by the definition is intended to be taken for granted (p.386).

An explicit persuasive definition of abortion can be found in John Paul II's argumentation against abortion as a representative of the Catholic Church.

*(1) The Second Vatican Council defines abortion, together with infanticide, as an "unspeakable crime". (...) 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. 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 one eliminated is a human being at the very beginning of life. 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.*

*(Excerpt from John Paul II Encyclical Letter on the Value and Inviolability of Human Life / Evangelium Vitae, <http://www.newadvent.org/>)*

The arguer as a pro-life advocate makes strategic use of dissociation when he pretends to reveal the "true nature" of abortion: "But no word has the power to change the reality of things". Pro-choice supporters are therefore accused of manipulating the public opinion by promoting the "false nature" of abortion when they call it "interruption of pregnancy". This dissociation between the "true nature" and the "false nature" of abortion is followed by a persuasive definition of *abortion* meant to reinforce the "real" significance of this act: "The Second Vatican Council defines abortion, together with infanticide, as an "unspeakable crime". (...) [P]rocured 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".

Moreover, the uncontroversial human nature of the fetus is emphasized by a

persuasive definition: “The one eliminated is a human being at the very beginning of life. 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”. Putting abortion whose legal status is uncertain on a par with infanticide which is generally considered a crime is a persuasive argumentative tactic meant to evoke negative attitudes in the audience.

Furthermore, defining *abortion* as an “unspeakable crime” or as “the deliberate and direct killing of a human being” where the adjectives “unspeakable”, “deliberate” and “direct” have been carefully selected leaves no room for further debate on the definition. Such a persuasive definition qualifies as an indisputable argument aimed at stirring in the audience an attitude of disapproval of abortion.

The two definitions of the notions *abortion* and *fetus* instantiate what Zarefsky (1997) calls “argument by definition”. By means of this type of argument the speaker advocates values and beliefs that he does not have to defend explicitly. This is the case of our pro-life protagonist who simply stipulates that abortion is a crime and that the fetus is a human being from the moment of conception without supporting his claims with arguments or leaving room for critical doubts from the part of the virtual interlocutor or of the audience. The two definitions are put forward as if they were indisputable facts.

An implicit persuasive definition of *abortion* is present in the following fragment illustrating the Orthodox perspective.

*(2) Interruption of pregnancy, no matter how it is performed, has been always considered a fearful crime. (...) So, we can consider abortion to be premeditated murder; although according to human laws it is not punished, according to God's judgement it will be punished even more harshly than the killing of a man. Abortion is double murder: first, against God who created that being, and then against that soul (...). Abortion is one of the greatest sins which bring about God's wrath on us all. (...) Abortion is a revolting sin. (my translation)*

*(Excerpt from On Abortion, with Father Serafim Man, <http://www.orthodoxphotos.com/readings/avortul/serafim.shtml>)*

The protagonist strategically uses the term “interruption of pregnancy” favored by pro-choice advocates instead of the term “abortion”. By this move, the term adopted from the opposing party, “interruption of pregnancy” is made equal to abortion and is persuasively named a “fearful crime”. Indirectly, the well-known



pro-choice definition of interruption of pregnancy as an operation is cast doubt on. As a result, an interruption of pregnancy should count *in reality* as a “fearful crime” before the audience.

In addition, a distinction is made between the human laws and the divine laws in what punishment of abortion is concerned. According to the speaker, the divine laws are the “real” laws by which the gravity of abortion has to be judged. The next move made by the protagonist is to replace the term “interruption of pregnancy” with the term “abortion” and name it “premeditated murder”, “double murder”, “one of the greatest sins” or “a revolting sin”. All the terms chosen to qualify abortion have the potential to evoke negative feelings in the audience. At the same time, by these persuasive acts of naming the protagonist conveys his attitude of profound disapproval of abortion. These definitions are proclaimed as indisputable facts that need no further arguments in support.

As far as the notion *fetus* is concerned, no explicit definition is provided but we can infer from the context of the murder scenario reproduced in the text that the fetus is considered a human being from the moment of conception. The fetus is referred to by means of a metonymic expression “that soul” which is meant to appeal to the audience’s feelings of compassion. All in all this strategic manner of framing abortion conveys the speaker’s attitude of disapprobation, on the one hand, and attempts at making the audience feel the same way by stirring their fear or compassion, on the other hand.

A persuasive definition of *abortion* is indirectly performed in the following excerpt which illustrates a similar Orthodox position on abortion.

(3) *By abortion we understand the killing of babies in the womb by all kinds of means. Because the fetus has a live soul created by God at the very moment of conception, that is why abortion is so strongly disapproved of by the Church and the Holy Fathers, because life is killed, the soul is lost, both of the killed one and of the one who kills.* (my translation)

(Excerpt from *On Abortion*, with Father Cleopa Ilie, <http://www.orthodoxphotos.com/readings/avortul/cleopa.shtml>)

The protagonist chooses to use an expression that has the syntactic and semantic characteristics of another speech act than the one intended. An assertive speech act (“we understand”) is used instead of the more direct usage declarative

primary performative “we define” or indirect usage declarative “abortion is” with the same purpose of defining abortion.

There are some obvious similarities between this text and the previous one as expressions of the same Orthodox vision. First, the murder scenario in which a murderer, a victim and different methods of killing are involved. Thus, *abortion* is persuasively called “the killing of babies in the womb by all kinds of means”. Second, the notion *fetus* is not given an explicit definition but the context helps us understand that it is considered a human being from the moment of conception: “Because the fetus has a live soul created by God at the very moment of conception”. Moreover, the consequences of abortion for the victim and the murderer are strategically emphasized: “life is killed, the soul is lost, both of the killed one and of the one who kills”.

By this manner of framing abortion as a threat to life, the representatives of the Orthodox Church convey their strong disapproval of abortion and evoke negative feelings in the audience. Therefore the use of structures such as “the killing of babies in the womb”, “life is killed”, “the soul is lost” is a characteristic of religious argumentation which is targeted mainly at the audience’s emotions. The terms employed by the protagonist in depicting this murder scenario belong to the category of terms that according to Zarefsky (2006) “facilitate visualization”. The term “killing” for instance suggests images that can frighten the audience, a fact which might lead to disapproval of abortion on the basis of the emotions evoked by these images. This way of entitling abortion is a very persuasive argumentative tool that may work where rational persuasion is not successful.

The following excerpt puts forward a definition of *abortion* from a double perspective, medical and religious coming from a doctor who fights against abortion.

(4) *Abortion is, from a medical point of view, an operation about which one cannot say that is beneficial. It's the first time in medicine when the doctor-patient relation doesn't have a healing purpose. It's the first time when the doctor-patient relation turns upside down and loses its value, because two healthy patients go to the doctor: one of them leaves in a state of illness, the other one dies. (...) Abortion is, from a religious point of view, an instance of infanticide. How can we prove it? It's very easy to prove it and I'm glad that medicine has reached so far that it can prove today all the stages of abortion but especially why abortion is murder. Lots of films have been made in which one can see what is a human*

*being, how this human being is born, but above all why we believe it is a human being from conception to birth.* (my translation)

(Excerpt from Mrs Christa Todea-Gross, *Conference on Abortion*, Oradea 2004, <http://www.avort.ro/avortul.php>)

Defining *abortion* from this double perspective is not accidental taking into consideration that the author of the text is both a doctor and a pro-life activist. The protagonist takes full advantage of her two roles in order to make her argumentation against abortion more persuasive.

From a medical perspective, *abortion* is defined as “an operation about which one cannot say that is beneficial” because, as the protagonist states, the doctor-patient relation is distorted (“the doctor-patient relation doesn’t have a healing purpose, the doctor-patient relation turns upside down and loses its value”). In support of this statement, the protagonist brings as a major argument the negative consequences that this operation has upon the two patients involved in it, the mother and the fetus (“two healthy patients go to the doctor: one of them leaves in a state of illness, the other one dies”).

As *illness* and *death* are what people fear most, the protagonist strategically selects these two effects of abortion in order to evoke negative feelings in the audience. In this scenario the doctor is considered responsible for what happens to the two “healthy patients” that come to him. Thus, the protagonist makes an indirect plea that doctors should stop performing abortions so that the doctor-patient relation preserve its value.

From a religious perspective, *abortion* is defined as “an instance of infanticide”. Interestingly, no religious argument is advanced in favor of this position as we might have expected. Instead, the protagonist turns to her first role, that of a doctor and tries to support this religious point of view by medical evidence (“I’m glad that medicine has reached so far that it can prove today all the stages of abortion, lots of films have been made in which one can see what is a human being”). This is a strategic move from the part of the protagonist, to make a religious statement and to back it up using scientific support. According to the protagonist, the films that have been made can indisputably prove that the patient killed by abortion is a human being from the moment of conception. Moreover, appealing to films as visual evidence is meant to “facilitate visualization” and thus to persuade the audience more easily.

Framing abortion as an operation which kills a healthy patient or as an instance of infanticide or murder can be considered an argument by definition that conveys the protagonist's attitude of disapprobation and is aimed at arousing the same attitude in the audience.

### *3.2 Persuasive definitions in pro-choice argumentation*

Pro-choice advocates frame abortion as an operation by means of which an unwanted pregnancy is ended at the mother's request. This way of framing abortion is meant to convey the pro-choice supporters' approval of abortion as a fundamental right of a woman and at the same time to influence the audience's view of the issue. The following fragments illustrate instances of implicit persuasive definitions in pro-choice argumentation.

The first excerpt is part of a series of arguments advanced to reject the pro-life position that abortion is a crime on the basis of the premise that the fetus is a human being.

*(5) The fetus is a part of the woman's body, like the bile or the appendix. One cannot take seriously the fact that a human embryo is a real person. Pregnancy is an embryo or a fetus – that is a mass of tissues, a product of conception – not a baby. Abortion is the termination of a pregnancy not the killing of a baby. The fetus may be live, but the same are the ovum and the sperm. The fetus is a potential human being, not a real one; it's the design not the house itself; it's the acorn, not the oak tree. A fetus is not a person before implantation or before the first kick or the first breath. That's the moment when it proves its viability. (my translation)*

(Excerpt from *39 Pro-choice Arguments and Their Refutation*, <http://www.provitabucuresti.ro/argument/39.arguments.pdf>.)

As one can see, the text abounds in persuasive definitions through which pro-choice advocates support their own theory of abortion and of the status of the fetus. These definitions are put forward in such a manner as to be taken as indisputable facts, the virtual interlocutor or audience having to accept them without argument. Regarding the notion of *fetus*, it is implicitly defined as “a part of the woman's body, like the bile or the appendix”. Framing the fetus as a kind of an annex organ that a woman can get rid of without doing herself an injury appears as a strong argument advanced in support of the standpoint that abortion is not a crime but a common operation.

As stated before, persuasive definitions may strategically combine with dissociation for a more effective impact on the audience. Thus, the statement that “One cannot take seriously the fact that a human embryo is a real person” contains a presupposed definition of the *embryo* and a dissociation between an “apparent” and a “real” person. The presupposed definition of the *embryo* is that it is not a person in the “real” sense of the word and consequently, it has only characteristics of an “apparent” person.

Additionally, the term “pregnancy” is made synonymous with the terms “embryo” or “fetus” and is defined as “a mass of tissues, a product of conception – not a baby”. The scientific terms “mass of tissues” and “product of conception” as opposed to the term “baby” are strategically selected for their “disposition to affect” the audience’s cognition not emotions. This is an indirect way of rejecting the pro-life argument that the fetus is a human being / a baby from the moment of conception. From the pro-choice perspective, the equivalence product of conception – human being / baby is inconceivable.

Pro-choice supporters take one step further in arguing in favor of abortion by dismissing the criterion of “liveliness” introduced by their opponents in assigning the fetus the status of a human being : “The fetus may be live, but the same are the ovum and the sperm”. They place the fetus on a par with the elements it is made up of, the ovum and the sperm. As one can notice, the product is not at all viewed as superior to the two elements that have contributed to its appearance. All three are seen as “live” elements but none of them is attributed the status of a live human being.

Another dissociation is introduced between a “potential” and a “real” human being in order to establish the status of the fetus: “The fetus is a potential human being, not a real one”. This dissociation is followed by two analogies between the fetus as a potential human being and the design of a house which is not a house and between the fetus as a potential human being and an acorn which is not an oak tree. All these moves are aimed at deconstructing the pro-life theory of the fetus’ humanity and at changing the audience’s attitude towards abortion as well.

“Viability” is a criterion often employed by pro-choice advocates to clarify the moment when the fetus becomes a human being: “A fetus is not a person before implantation or before the first kick or the first breath. That’s the moment when it proves its viability”. Therefore there is a difference between a fetus before

implantation / the first kick / the first breath and the fetus after these moments. As one can see, this moment of viability is quite relative, it may coincide with implantation, the first kick or the first breath. Choosing one moment or another is not accidental, it depends on the interest which is at stake: granting personhood to the fetus earlier or later during the pregnancy period.

On the basis of these arguments related to the fetus, pro-choice advocates define *abortion* as “the termination of a pregnancy not the killing of a baby”. The term “termination of pregnancy” conveys a positive attitude towards the practice of abortion and seeks to elicit an attitude of approval in the audience as well. By emphatically opposing the two possible interpretations of the abortion act – the termination of a pregnancy vs the killing of a baby – of which the first one is viewed as the correct one, the pro-choice protagonist argues in favor of the moral permissibility of abortion. His persuasive definition of abortion as interruption of pregnancy is intended to be taken as an uncontroversial fact. Since the fetus / the embryo is only “a product of conception”, “a mass of tissues” or “a potential human being” at the most, no criminal act is performed by abortion.

Unlike the pro-life texts in which the emotive meaning of terms is exploited, in the pro-choice argumentation above medical terms such as “fetus”, “embryo”, “bile”, “appendix”, “pregnancy”, “mass of tissues”, “product of conception”, “ovum”, “sperm” or “termination of pregnancy” are strategically selected to convey a scientific view of abortion and of the fetus and to appeal to the audience’s reason. Nevertheless, although not emotional, these terms can evoke positive attitudes towards abortion which is intended to be seen as a simple operation and not as a crime.

The second excerpt is part of “a defense of abortion” in which the protagonist, a philosopher, attempts to prove that the pro-life premise that the fetus is a human being from the moment of conception is false.

*(6) Most opposition to abortion relies on the premise that the fetus is a human being, a person, from the moment of conception. (...) I think that the premise is false, that the fetus is not a person from the moment of conception. A newly fertilized ovum, a newly implanted clump of cells, is no more a person than an acorn is an oak tree. (Excerpt from Judith J. Thomson, A Defense of Abortion, in Philosophy and Public Affairs, vol.1, no.1, Fall, pp. 47-48)*

The protagonist provides an implicit definition of the notion *fetus* as “not a person from the moment of conception”. She further argues that “a newly fertilized ovum, a newly implanted clump of cells, is no more a person than an acorn is an oak tree”. By this manner of defining the fetus, the author conveys her attitude of approval of abortion and at the same time she tries to influence the audience’s perception of the issue. She operates a strategic selection of medical terms in order to define the fetus so as not to make abortion a condemnable act. “A newly fertilized ovum” or “a newly implanted clump of cells” cannot possibly be conceived of as a human being.

The analogy between such an ovum or clump of cells which is not a person and an acorn which is not an oak tree is meant to reinforce the effect of the definition. It is to be taken as an indisputable argument in favor of the moral permissibility of abortion at a very early stage of the fetus’ life. The terms chosen by the protagonist to define the fetus have the potential to evoke positive attitudes in the audience in the sense of viewing abortion as a morally permissible option for an unwanted pregnancy. Moreover, this way of framing the fetus may be considered a form of comfort offered to the women who might have doubts about their decision to have an abortion. As the fetus is not a person from the moment of conception but merely “a newly fertilized ovum” or “a newly implanted clump of cells”, performing an abortion is not a crime.

#### 4. Conclusion

The analysis of some pro-life and pro-choice texts has shed light on how pro-lifers and pro-choicers make use of persuasive definitions to convey their attitude towards abortion and to influence the audience’s perspective on the issue. Two patterns of use have been identified with respect to how the key notions abortion and fetus are defined by the parties and how these are intended to be perceived by a third party, the audience.

Pro-lifers dissociate between the “real” and the “false” meaning of *abortion* focusing on the criminal aspect of this deed. As for the notion *fetus*, pro-lifers do not make any distinction between the fetus as a “potential” human being and the fetus as a “real” human being, in this way human development being seen as a continuous process. In their attempt to persuade the audience that abortion is immoral, pro-lifers may define it as an “unspeakable crime” or “the direct killing of an innocent human being”. The fetus whose personhood represents the key issue in the abortion debate from the pro-life perspective is defined as “a human

being from the moment of conception". The terms used to depict the abortion scenario in which an innocent human being is deliberately killed are highly emotional and are strategically selected to evoke negative attitudes in the audience.

Pro-choicers do not separate any particular aspect from the unitary notion *abortion* but when discussing about the key issues in the abortion controversy, they distinguish between the "real" key question (term II - women's rights, valued positively) and the "false" key question (term I - the status of the fetus, negatively qualified). As far as the notion *fetus* is concerned, pro-choicers make a distinction between the fetus as a "potential" human being and the fetus as a "real" human being when the personhood of the fetus is debated on. Pro-choicers define *abortion* as "interruption of pregnancy" or "termination of pregnancy" and the *fetus* as "a mass of tissues", "a product of conception", "a cluster of newly fertilized cells" or "a potential human being". The terms chosen to frame abortion as an operation by means of which a woman ends an unwanted pregnancy belong to the medical field and they have the role to convey a scientific perspective on abortion.

Pro-lifers make use of "real" definitions based on facts of "essence", the terms *fetus*, *human being* and *person* being considered equivalent. Pro-choicers combine definitions based on facts of usage according to which the term *person* does not apply to fetuses with "real" definitions.

The "incommensurable positions" of the disputants are reflected by the definitions of *abortion* and *fetus* they advance as indisputable facts that cannot be critically scrutinized. The way these controversial notions are defined widens the disagreement space between the two parties and makes the resolution of the dispute impossible. Although dissociation is capable to clarify or precizate things, its use in the abortion debate cannot resolve the contradictions in the starting points of the two parties. Additionally, despite their clarifying potential as dialectical tools, the definitions employed in ethical argumentation on abortion do not clarify the controversial notions *abortion* and *fetus* so as to facilitate the resolution of the dispute, but convey an attitude of approval or disapproval of abortion and function as rhetorical tactics intended to move the audience.

## NOTES

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**[ii]** A dialectically sound dissociation has to concomitantly meet two types of requirements: procedural and material. Procedural requirements are met if the protagonist puts the change in starting points up for discussion in a side-discussion to get the antagonist's acceptance. Material requirements are met if the antagonist accepts the change in starting points brought about by the dissociation the protagonist has introduced (van Rees 2005, p. 387).

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