

# ISSA Proceedings 2006 - The Argumentative Construction Of Emotions: The Example Of Indignation In Pro-Life Rhetoric



## 1. Introduction

For a little more than a decade, the field of argumentation studies has seen a growing interest for the topic of emotions. The aim of the present paper is twofold. I will first attempt to tackle the complex theoretical debate which opposes *normative* and *descriptive* approaches (2.).

As far as normative approaches are concerned, the treatment which emotional appeals receive in Douglas Walton's pragmatic theory of fallacies will be the center of my attention (2.1.). I will then look at Christian Plantin's model, which aims not so much at *evaluating* emotional appeals as to *describing* how emotions are argumentatively constructed by speakers (2.2.). In the second part of the paper, I will proceed to a case study and examine a recent example of American pro-life rhetoric (3.). Focusing on a corpus of short essays written by an anti-abortion writer named Larry Bohannon ("Evil in Our Time" and "What About Abortion?"), I will try to capture the essential features of the argumentative construction of a particular emotion - namely indignation.

## 2. What about emotions? Contrasting two lines of thought in argumentation theory

When it comes to emotions, two lines of thought can be distinguished in argumentation theory. From a *normative* point of view, a fully-fledged argumentation theory should be able to *evaluate* emotional appeals - and not merely to *describe* them. Thus, the analyst is to specify the criteria which allow to discriminate between "reasonable" and "fallacious" uses of emotional appeals. From a descriptive point of view, however, the analyst's main task is to provide an accurate description of emotional appeals without necessarily passing judgment on their degree of reasonableness.

### 2.1. Douglas Walton's normative approach: a pragmatic theory of fallacies

I will start by taking a look at normative approaches – which, in my view, are best represented by Douglas Walton’s work on emotions (1992, 1997).

This work can be considered as pioneer work, as it firmly rejects the *negative ontology* which dismisses emotional appeals on the ground that they are emotional appeals and cannot thus be anything but fallacious. Walton claims that “ there is nothing wrong *per se* with appeals to emotion in argumentation, even though appeals to emotion can go wrong and be exploited in some cases ” (1992, p. 257). It is important to notice that Walton does not consider emotional appeals as fallacious *a priori*: in his view, potential fallacies lie in *contextual uses* of emotional appeals, but not in their very *essence*. Far from an essentialist perspective, Walton aims to sort out the “ right ” uses of emotional appeals from the “ wrong ” ones. What is at stake, then, is not the mere linguistic description of emotional appeals, but their explicit *evaluation* in a given context of dialogue. The analyst must ultimately pass judgment and label emotional appeals as “ right ” or “ wrong ” considering the textual and contextual evidence at hand. Walton’s refusal of a merely descriptive approach appears quite explicitly in the first pages of *The Place of Emotion in Argument* : “ [T]his book [...] is a normative analysis of the conditions under which appeals to emotion are used correctly or incorrectly in argumentation ” (1992, p. 28).

This normative approach to emotional appeals is to be situated within the more general framework of Walton’s theory of fallacies. Following the revised version of this theory, arguments are evaluated as “ reasonable ” or “ fallacious ” according to communicative norms rather than according to universal logical standards. Whereas Charles Hamblin (1970) laid considerable emphasis on the criterion of deductive validity and defined fallacies as arguments which seem valid but are not, Walton chooses a more *pragmatic* perspective. He claims for his part that fallacies are “ technique[s] of argumentation that may in principle be reasonable, but that ha[ve] been misused in a given case in such a way that [they go] strongly against or hinde[r] the goals of dialogue ” (1992, p. 18). This definition suggests that in order to pin down a fallacy, the analyst first needs to subsume the context in which speakers are interacting under a *normative model of dialogue* [i] and then determine whether or not a given argument is in compliance with the rules set by this model of dialogue. Walton’s methodology rests on the assumption that each model of dialogue involves specific goals which speakers are bound to pursue conjointly and thus claims that an argument is reasonable insofar as it makes a contribution to these goals. How does this

pragmatic view of fallacy underpin Walton's specific work on appeals to emotion? Walton writes: "[E]motional arguments can be used fallaciously in particular uses so that *they go contrary to the proper goals of [...] dialogue that participants are supposed to be engaged in*. Contrary to the common assumption that an argument based on emotion is not a rational (reasonable) argument, such an argument can be good and reasonable insofar as "good" and "rational" argument is that which *contributes to the proper goals of dialogue*" (1992, pp. 25-27, my emphasis). The degree of reasonableness or fallaciousness of an emotional appeal depends on its fitting a particular model of dialogue and on its contribution to the latter's goals. At this point, I would like to make a general comment on normative approaches. In my view, what these approaches primarily seek to do is to determine whether a given emotional appeal will have positive or negative effects, and this with regard to the ideal progression of the argumentative process which is normatively fixed by a model of dialogue. If emotional appeals have the effect of contributing to the goals of the model of dialogue which speakers are supposed to be engaged in, they will be considered "reasonable". If, however, they have the effect of violating these goals, they will be considered "fallacious". In what follows, I would like to look at an alternative way of approaching emotions in argumentative discourse, which is less *normative* than *comprehensive* - in the same sense that sociology can be comprehensive and study the meaning which social actors *themselves* confer to their actions and, in our case, to their emotions. This perspective draws on Christian Plantin's work (1999, 2004), which I will briefly discuss before engaging in the case study.

## 2.2. Christian Plantin's model: "arguing emotions"

The starting point for Plantin's work on emotions is an empirical observation. In interaction - whether it be public or private -, it is not at all infrequent to see speakers question the value and legitimacy of their addressee's (or someone else's) emotions. These are cases one might label as *disagreements over emotions*. More precisely, we can distinguish between three varieties of disagreement. Speakers may call into question

- (i) an occurrent emotion,
- (ii) a long-term propensity to experience a specific type of emotion (what Jon Elster calls an emotional disposition, 1999, p. 244) and, last but not least,
- (iii) an absence of emotion. Disagreements often lead to sequences in which speakers attempt to explain why they feel what they feel and, in a more normative way, why everyone should feel what they feel. Plantin claims that in such cases,

speakers *argue emotions*, so to speak : they try to establish the legitimacy of certain emotions by showing that the latter are *grounded on reasons*. In other words, speakers offer *argumentative constructions of their emotions* - this, in my view, could be an interesting object of study.

Plantin's stance, which underlines the existence of disputable emotions and which considers the possibility that the latter can be " argued " by speakers, has two main advantages.

(i) It broadens the scope of the concept of argumentation. Usually, argumentative discourse is assumed to bear on specific objects and to pursue specific aims. It is thought to provide reasons for our disposition to entertain certain opinions and for our disposition to act in certain ways. Plantin's work points out that argumentative discourse may also *provide reasons for our disposition to feel - or not to feel - certain emotions*.

(ii) It provides a fruitful alternative to the normative approaches which we have examined above. As we have seen, the latter seek to determine whether an appeal to emotion is " reasonable " or " fallacious ". In this respect, they are primarily interested in the *effects* which an appeal to emotion is likely to produce, with regard to an idealized argumentative process. Plantin's approach, on the other hand, does not ponder whether an appeal to emotion will have positive or negative effects in reference to an idealized argumentative process : its central claim is that appeals to emotion themselves are argumentative and can be studied as such. What is at stake, then, is to examine *how speakers argue emotions - that is : how speakers attempt to establish the legitimacy (or the illegitimacy) of certain emotions*.

At this point, one might well ask what is meant exactly by a phrase such as "arguing an emotion" - a phrase which appears paradoxical at first. The main idea is the following : when an emotion is called into question, speakers have to verbalize the type of situation which, in their view, ensures the legitimate character of the emotion. In other words, when an emotion is not an object of consensus but one of disagreement, speakers present their opponents with a *discursive construction of a situation which ought to make the said emotion appear legitimate - or even compelling*. Here, I would say, following Plantin, that argumentation theory can benefit greatly from the development of cognitive approaches to emotions. A central claim of these approaches is that emotions cannot be reduced to sensations, for they do not only consist of a physiological

arousal, but also involve the cognitive evaluation of a situation. The philosopher Jeff Coulter puts it very clearly: “ Our capacity to experience certain emotions is contingent upon [...] learning to *interpret and appraise matters* in terms of norms, standards, principles, and ends and goals judged desirable or undesirable, appropriate or inappropriate, reasonable or unreasonable ” (Coulter 1979, p.129). This focus on the cognitive component of emotions is characteristic of what is known as *appraisal theory* (Scherer 1999, 2004).

Klaus Scherer, one of its leading figures, explains that a “ central tenet of appraisal theory is the claim that emotions are elicited and differentiated on the basis of a person’s subjective evaluation or appraisal of the personal significance of a situation, object, or event on a number of dimensions or criteria ” (1999, p. 637). Appraisal theories are of great interest, insofar as they remind us that emotions are closely related to a process of evaluation in the course of which the individual interprets events and situations according to a set of criteria. Crucial to appraisal theory is the identification of these criteria, which Scherer calls “ stimulus evaluation checks ” (2004, p. 141) : the novelty of the event, its intrinsic pleasantness, the probability or uncertainty of its outcome, its agency, its being controllable or not and its compatibility with social norms- to name but a few. As Plantin’s work suggests, the cognitive criteria of evaluation which psychologists study in great detail are useful from an argumentative discourse analyst’s point of view. Indeed, they offer an interesting analytical framework to study the *verbal construction of events and situations, as well as its emotional orientation*. What is at stake, as Plantin adequately puts it, is to center our attention on the “ linguistic counterpart ” to the cognitive system of evaluation. As argumentative discourse analysts, the point is obviously not to focus on the cognitive antecedents of emotions and determine how individuals evaluate events and situations : it is to focus on *discourse itself* and to study how speakers verbally construe events and situations when they seek to legitimize an emotion.

### 3. *The construction of indignation in pro-life rhetoric : a case study*

I will now attempt to illustrate this perspective by means of a case study and examine a recent example of pro-life rhetoric. The corpus which I investigate is composed of two short essays (“ What about abortion ? ” and “ Evil in Our Time ”) written by an American anti-abortion writer named Larry Bohannon[**ii**].

#### 3.1 *Challenging the “apathetic” people*

I mentioned the fact that speakers often disagree on the value and legitimacy of a

particular emotion. Here, the author starts by calling into question not an emotion, but rather an *absence of emotion*. He writes :

(1) Many people have become apathetic about abortion. Since [people] have already been born, abortion is no threat to them personally. (“ What about abortion ? ”)

The adjective “ apathetic ” describes a person who is no longer able to feel any emotion on a given subject. The explanation which the author gives for this general apathy is interesting. It focuses on one of the most emotionally relevant criteria (especially in the case of emotions such as fear[**iii**]) - *whether or not an event affects the well-being of the individual* - and suggests that in the case of abortion, this criterion cannot easily be played upon. Since abortion can hardly be construed as a personal “ threat ” to the audience’s safety, the writer has to turn to other criteria. I will examine a few of them in some detail - namely : the kind of event which abortion supposedly is (3.2.), the kind and number of people which it affects (3.3. and 3.4.), the agents which it can be ascribed to (3.5.) and the other events which it can be compared to (3.6.).

### 3.2 Kind of event

As I have argued earlier, the aim of a descriptive approach is mainly to describe how speakers verbally construe events when they seek to trigger - or even to legitimize - an emotion. In the present case, we might ask : how exactly is abortion depicted in pro-life rhetoric ? What light do pro-life rhetors try to shed on it ? Let us start with the following example :

(2) Abortion is an intentional violent act that kills an unborn baby. (“ What about abortion ? ”)

This sentence - or rather this definition - contains everything in a nutshell, as it were - that is : it exemplifies the criteria of evaluation which the author is going to rely on in his construction of indignation. The noun “ act ” and, most of all, the adjective “ intentional ” show abortion not just as something that merely happens, but as an *action for which responsibility can be ascribed to one or several agents* - I will return to this important issue when I discuss the agency criterion. Let us look at the expression “ to kill an unborn baby ” and its emotional effects. By the sole use of the verb “ kill ” (i.e. *to make sth/sb die*), the author seeks to heighten the fact that abortion is a matter of life and death : a living creature ceases to exist. Moreover, this living creature is designated by means of a noun (“ baby ”) which tends to emphasize its human dimension - I will also return to

this issue in a moment. For now, contrast this expression with another expression which is used – not by pro-lifers, obviously, but by pro-choice advocates – in order to refer to abortion : “ To terminate a pregnancy ”. The verb “ terminate ” refers to an action which involves the ceasing of something, but unlike the verb “ to kill ”, it does not specify that it is *life* which ceases in the process. “ Pregnancy ”, as far as it is concerned, refers to a physiological state –the state of being pregnant. The word allows to avoid a direct reference to the *being* which develops in the woman’s uterus. Thus, the expression “ to terminate a pregnancy ” conveys the impression that it is a *physiological state* which is acted upon (“ terminated ”), and not a living creature. Of course, we know that acting on *this* physiological state inevitably affects a living creature. Yet those two expressions – “ to kill an unborn baby ”, on the one hand, and “ to terminate a pregnancy ”, on the other – do not shed the same light on abortion : one of them prepares for the construction of indignation.

### 3.3 *Kind of people affected*

Let us now examine the expressions which the author uses in order to refer to the *kind of people affected* by abortion– or rather the kind of *beings*, if we, as analysts, wish to remain as neutral as possible. The author mainly uses noun phrases such as “ an unborn baby ” (or simply “ the baby ”) and “ our unborn children ”. These expressions are crucial to the construction of indignation, as they tend to *humanize* the beings which are affected by abortion. It is safe to say that the first image that comes to mind when one hears the word “ baby ” or “ child ” is that of a *born* baby or child – and not that of an embryo or a fetus. The author also relies on the main cultural connotations which are suggested by the use of these lexical units: “ babies ” and “ children ” are *innocent* (they can do no wrong) and *weak*, thus needing our protection. These connotations sometimes appear quite explicitly in the text : the author claims that abortion affects the “ weakest and most defenseless among us ”. One will notice the prepositional phrase “ among us ” and the use of the deictic “ us ”, which suggest that the “ baby ”, however “ unborn ”, *already* belongs to the same community as the speaker and his addressees.

In his designation of the beings which are affected by abortion, the author follows two principles which, according to Friedrich Ungerer (1997, p. 314), are crucial to the process of “ emotional inferencing ”: the principle of *proximity* (“ Focus on what is close to the reader ”) and the so-called *homocentric principle* (“ Focus on what is life-endangering [...] for human beings ”). The first principle is best

illustrated by the use of deictics and, more specifically, by the use of first-person possessive determiner (“ *our* unborn children ”), whereas the second principle is best illustrated by the use of nouns such as “ baby ” and “ children ”.

### 3.4 *Number of people affected*

In his study on “ Emotional language in news stories ”, Ungerer also notes that “ as far as *number* is concerned, the emotional impact of human death and calamity seems to get stronger as the number of people involved increases ” (1997, p. 315). This comment seems to apply to the pro-life construction of indignation. The author repeatedly points to the number of abortions which have been carried out in the United States and thus to the number of beings affected by them. What is striking is that the bare use of numbers does not seem to have enough emotional power. Quite systematically, the author has to put it into perspective and back it up with thought experiments. Let us look at the following example :

(3) Since [1973], some 40 million abortions have been committed in this nation. This is almost a third of the number of live babies born during the same time. If you go to a high school graduation ceremony this year, consider that one third of the class is missing. (“ Evil in Our Time ”)

The problem, as far as the construction of emotions such as pity and indignation is concerned, is that beings which grow in a woman’s uterus may suffer from what one could label as a *deficit of reality*. Since they have not been born and since their existence has not yet fully received what the French sociologist Luc Boltanski (2004) calls a *confirmation* (through the official giving of a name, for instance), they may appear less real than other beings and thus less able to qualify as victims in a rhetorical enterprise. In this case, saying that they are “ 40 million ” won’t help much. In this respect, the thought experiment seeks to enhance the emotional effect produced by this number. The mention of a “ class ” at a “ high school graduation ceremony ” calls up images of young adults – that is : beings who not only have been born, but have developed a social identity –: it strives to make up for the potential lack of *reality* of the beings which have not lived beyond their mother’s womb by focusing the audience’s attention on what they *could have been*.

### 3.5 *Agents*

When they verbally construe an event in order to legitimize an emotion, speakers often investigate the *causes* of this event. More precisely, they try to identify one



(or several) agent(s) who could be held responsible for the happening of this event. Psychologists speak of an appraisal criterion of “ agency ” (Scherer 2004, p. 141). This criterion appears to be essential in the case of indignation. According to Ortony, Clore and Collins, this emotion belongs to the class of *agent-based* (or *attribution-of-responsibility*) emotions, which they define as follows : “ [T]here are [...] important qualitative differences among emotions that depend on *how* we believe salient events to have come about. [...] The situations in which people find themselves or in which they find others are frequently viewed as *resulting from actions of one sort or another*. Responsibility for these actions is *often attributed to an agent*. Thus, the Agent-based emotions are Attribution-of-responsibility or, simply, the Attribution emotions ” (Ortony, Clore et Collins 1987, p.134, my emphasis). From an argumentative discourse analyst point of view, one can say that the construction of indignation not only requires the speaker to depict the ordeals experienced by individuals, but also to ascribe the responsibility for these ordeals to other individuals. I will take a close look at the linguistic expressions which categorize individuals as agents and I will examine which *motives* and which *kind of responsibility* the author ascribes to them.

The first group of agents consists of individuals who physically perform the very act of abortion. Note that these individuals are never referred to by means of expressions which would point to their medical qualifications or to their belonging to a health institution (e.g. “ doctors ”, “ physicians ”) and would thus give them some respectability. In the text, they appear as “ abortionists ” - a word which usually denotes a person who *illegally* performs an abortion. This choice of words gives the impression that all abortions are illegal. Let us examine the following example, in which the author ponders on the motives which could account for the “ abortionists’ ” actions:

(4) What motivates an abortionist ? What must they think as they slash and tear a baby apart or plunge a knife into its neck ? Somehow, abortionists have become callused to the reality of their actions. (“ What about abortion? ”)

What is striking is that the two questions are left unanswered. The author fails to find proper motives for the “ abortionist’s ” behavior. The idea is that the action performed is so horrendous that it cannot be accounted for. In the absence of motives, the only explanation lies in the “ abortionist’s ” lack of sensitivity to the suffering of others and even to his lack of awareness of what is *really* happening - as shown by the expression “ callused to the reality of their actions ”.

This rhetorical move is not without danger: the depiction of “ abortionists ” as unaware of the reality of their actions could lead to consider them as irresponsible - e.g. not accountable for their actions. This explains why the author has to come up with *conscious* motives in order to show that the “ abortionist ” is indeed the agent of his action and can thus be blamed for it. This shows in the following example, where the author discusses “ partial-birth abortion ”:

(5) Anyone can see that [partial-birth abortion] is only a very cynical attempt by the abortionist to kill the baby, collect his fee and not be charged with murder. (“Evil in Our Time”)

Here, the text not only offers a moral - or even legal - qualification of the action (it is a “ murder ”), but also ascribes a reprehensible *motive* (greed) to the agent, not to mention a longing for impunity. This sentence encapsulates all the ingredients for indignation.

The second group of agents consists of individuals who do not physically perform the act of abortion, but ideologically support it. They are generally referred to as “ pro-abortion activists ”, but the author often focuses on a sub-category: “ the Feminists ”. As it was the case earlier, the author investigates their *motives*. His strategy is to question the sincerity of the beliefs and values which these agents profess:

(6) The pro-abortion activists always claim that they are protecting the lives of women by maintaining abortion rights. You can rest assured that their efforts have nothing to do with protecting the lives of women. It has everything to do with maintaining their political power. (“ Evil in Our Time ”)

Here, the writer suggests that there is a disjunction between the motives which the agents publicly advocate and the motives which secretly drives them - in other words : there is a disjunction between these agents’ *overt* and *covert* motives. The overt motive appears noble on the surface - “ protecting the lives of women ” -, but it is undermined by the shameful and self-centered covert motive - “ maintaining [one’s] political power ”. The same accusation goes to the Feminists, whose belief in a fundamental “ struggle ” between men and women is subordinated to their determination to “ increase their political power ”. It should be underlined, at this point, that the writer does not systematically question the sincerity of the agents’ beliefs : he concedes that there are indeed “ true believers ” on the pro-choice side.

The third and last group of agents consists of individuals who support abortion not because they adhere to an ideology which transcends their personal interests, but rather because abortion serves these personal interests. The author refers to this group of agents as the “ convenience crowd ”:

(7) [Many men] want the freedom to have irresponsible sex and abort any “ mistakes ”. They want to escape the paying of child support by destroying the evidence. Tragically, there are probably many parents in this group. They want to be able to abort any “ mistakes” made by their teenage girls. (“ Evil in Our Time ”)

Abortion allows these agents not to take responsibility for their actions. It should be noticed that the author centers his attention on “ men ” and “ parents ”, but does not explicitly integrate women into this “ convenience crowd ”. “ Men ” and “ parents ” are accused of pushing towards abortion solely because it is more convenient for them - it allows the former to enjoy their sexuality with no regard for the consequences and the latter to preserve their family’s good reputation. Women, on the other hand, are in this rhetoric never presented as *agents*, but rather as the very *victims* of the agents who compose this “ convenience crowd ”:

(8) Millions of young and frightened mothers have been pressurized to choose abortion to help man escape responsibility and embarrassment “. (“ What about abortion ? ”)

This refusal to depict women as autonomous beings who could deliberately have recourse to abortion is significant. It shows, in my view, that pro-life rhetoric relies on a stereotypical image of woman according to which it is in her very *essence* to become a mother. If, in certain circumstances, women are not willing to become mothers, it can only be due to external “ pressures ” (pressures exerted by others), but certainly not to the exercise of their own free will.

To sum up, we can say that this example of pro-life rhetoric points to three different groups of agents :

- (i) individuals who are physically responsible for the very act of abortion and who are led by greed,
- (ii) individuals who support abortion in the name of an ideal (for example : a feminist ideal) - even if the author casts a doubt on the sincerity of this ideal and hints at a possible disjunction between the agents’ overt and covert motives - and, eventually,
- (iii) individuals who encourage abortion solely because it serves their personal

interests.

### 3.6 Analogies

When “arguing” an emotion and verbally construing a situation, speakers will often point out the latter’s similarities with other situations which are assumed to be emotionally relevant within a particular culture. As Plantin has it, an “event provokes emotions if it can be linked with domains that are socially or personally connected with emotions” (2004, p. 271). In what follows, I will examine the role and functioning of analogies in our sample of pro-life rhetoric. I will concentrate on the following example, which draws a parallel between abortion and both the Nazi genocide and the slave trade :

(9) It is ironic that the same people who support abortion today criticize the ideologies that supported other great evils in the past such as the German holocaust or slavery. They cannot see the similarities between their own ideology and those they criticize. For example, the supporters of slavery during the 1800’s widely argued that slavery was good for slaves. They said it was better to be a Christian slave and go to heaven than to be a heathen in Africa. Today, abortion supporters say that is it better for babies to be aborted than to grow up in a home where they are unwanted. [...] Just because an unborn baby is unwanted today does not mean that it is destined to be unwanted for the rest of his life. The supporters of the final solution in Hitler’s Germany made similar arguments when they advocated exterminating the mentally ill and others. (“ Evil in Our Time ”)

According to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1971, p. 372), analogy is better described as a *resemblance of relationships* than as a *relationship of resemblance*. Indeed, an analogy does not usually confine itself to suggesting that two elements are alike (*A resembles B*). It comprises *four* elements and claims that *the relationship between A and B resembles the relationship between C and D (A is to B as C is to D)*. A and B are usually referred to as the *theme* of the analogy and C and D as its *phoros*. The phoros (the relationship between C and D) is an object of consensus and the point of the analogy is, ideally, to *transfer this consensus from the phoros to the theme* (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1971, p. 382). In the present case, the idea is that abortion supporters are to “ babies ” what “ supporters of the final solution ” were to “ the mentally ill and others ” or what “ the supporters of slavery ” were to “ slaves ”.

At this point, one may ask what exactly is the relationship which is supposed to be similar in the case of A and B, on the one hand, and in the case of C and D, on the

other. One notices that it remains largely unexplained or, at least, unspecific. What allows the author to put abortion, slave trade and the Nazi genocide in the same basket, as it were, is the general idea that someone does something cruel to someone else while claiming that it is for their own good. The author's strategy is not to go into detail and actually demonstrate that the three relationships are similar to a high degree: he does obviously not mention the numerous differences between the three cases. The effect which the use of analogy seeks to create is rather a *transfer of emotional consensus*. The text brings up two domains where an emotion like indignation is culturally stabilized: the role of the analogy is to transfer the obviousness of this emotion to the domain of abortion.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to outline the main issues of the debate which, within the field of argumentation theory, sees an opposition between *normative* and *descriptive* approaches to emotions. I have argued that normative approaches, such as Douglas Walton's pragmatic theory of fallacies, are primarily interested in the *effects* which emotional appeals are likely to produce, with *regard to an idealized argumentative process*. If emotional appeals have the effect of contributing to the goals of the model of dialogue which speakers are supposed to be engaged in, they will be considered "reasonable". If, however, they have the effect of violating these goals, they will be considered "fallacious". Drawing on Christian Plantin's work, I have pleaded for a more comprehensive stance which, starting with the observation that speakers often disagree on the legitimacy of certain emotions, is mainly interested in their attempts to show that some emotions are grounded on reasons and that some are not. This involves a systematic description of the *verbal construction of events and situations* which speakers elaborate. The analysis of the sample of pro-life rhetoric was conducted in such a perspective. My intention was to examine what light pro-life rhetors shed on abortion when they try to stir the "apathetic" people and legitimize a feeling of indignation. This was done through a careful study of the linguistic expressions which indicate what kind of event abortion is thought to be, what kind of beings it is thought to affect, what kind of agents it is thought to be imputable to and, eventually, what other events it is thought to be similar with.

#### NOTES

[i] Walton defines six main models of dialogue : the critical discussion, the inquiry, the negotiation, the deliberation, the quarrel and the information-seeking

dialogue (see 1997, pp. 163-164).

**[ii]** The two essays appear on a website (<http://www.abortionessay.org>) which hosts pro-life writers and contains numerous essays opposing the practice of abortion. The choice of this corpus calls for an important remark. At the present stage, I have no claim to representativity - that is: I cannot say whether or not the argumentative strategies which I examine in these essays are representative of pro-life rhetoric on a more global scale. This is an exploratory research which I hope to be able to pursue in the future.

**[iii]** In their classification of emotions, which is based on how individuals appraise events, Ortony, Clore and Collins argue that fear is essentially a reaction to the anticipated consequences of an event - and more precisely to the consequences of this event for the self (1987, p. 19).

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