

Emotions and pro-life campaigns

According to Socrates, one of the founding fathers of western philosophy, the dialogue is the way to have illuminate ideas. The Socratic method has been a starting and ending point in thousands of scientific questions. Why is this in first sight so simple method of investigation so crucial to us even nowadays? The reason is also quite simple: both parties of the dialogue get a chance to express their opinion and by using logic and reasonable arguments they try to reach an understanding or a common good. Mutuality builds both truth and society. Is that all there is?

The opposite of an dialogue is a monologue. In a monologue, one of the two sides speaks and tries to convince the other party of their point of view. Truth is reached in conversation and the only way to do so is to give equal chance of participation to both sides. When we use reason in dialogue we refer to the objective, we refer to the universal. Justice and just decisions are made when we take the general into consideration. Refusing to look for reason and going into another direction, be it emotions or tradition as I will try to show later on, we deprive one of the parties of this chance of equal participation. Even when emotions are somehow influenced by society and its cultural norms, they are still a subjective experience. Using them makes a monologue out of the discussion – a one-sided listing of opinion. One cannot argue with emotions – once they are conceived, they are a complete entity. The process of their creation might be open to discussion and to others' influence but when they are already being experienced by us, we can only express and not discuss or change them entirely. In this way we can say that using emotions in a conversation – one that is seeking the truth and the common knowledge – is not a just tool. It privileges one side and takes the opportunity of arguing to the other. In the following paper I will try to see how this is empirically proven in the case of “pro life” campaigns against abortion. I will examine a recent case to which I was a witness and I will try to see if the somewhat abstract reasoning can relate to reality.

The Stop Genocide Campaign

A couple of weeks ago there was an anti-abortion campaign in front of the Social Studies faculty. The campaign was named “Stop Genocide!”, from which we can already divine the statement of the activists: “Abortion is like genocide”. The main part of the campaign was an exposition in which the activists compared images of genocide with images of aborted embryos. The images were horrific, there were pictures of stacked emaciated bodies in concentration camps, the face of a dead child between the wrecks of a building and the remains of bodies in a mass grave. Next to the images of genocide were pictures of embryos, combined with the number of weeks in which the pregnancy was aborted. The pictures were bloody and with the obvious intention to not be pleasant

to look at.

While passing the exhibition, I noticed the way the comparison between abortion and genocide was made. Instead of giving reasonable arguments why abortion is analogue to genocide, the protesters used the similarities between two pictures to make their point clear. One of the photographs showed a dead child with his arm in a very unnatural position. The image next to it pictured a hand and an arm of an aborted embryo. The part that stands out most in both of the two pictures was a lower arm and a hand, which made the two images visually similar. The analogy between abortion and genocide was based on the similarities between two images instead of an actual analogy between abortion and genocide.

Why did the protesters pick this approach? Instead of using reasonable arguments to show that abortion and genocide are similar, the protesters choose to use images. And not just random images, but images that evoke strong emotional responses. I think it is safe to assume that almost everyone who looks at images of stacked bodies, dead children or bloody aborted embryos will feel a broad range of emotions, including horror and disgust. Instead of actually comparing genocide with abortion, the protesters tried to associate the emotions connected to genocide with abortion. Not reason but emotion was what the protesters tried to influence their supposed public with.

But what is it exactly that the protesters try to influence? In my opinion, there are two things they tried to achieve. The first objective is to change the general opinion of the public. At this moment, abortion is legal in the Czech Republic. Next to the exhibition there was a stand where you could sign a petition to change the abortion law. The only way people are going to sign the petition is when they actually are against abortion. The second objective they try to achieve is to change people's actions. The protest was right in front of Social Studies faculty of the university. If the protesters moved two blocks away, they would have stood on one of the most crowded squares in the centre, which would have given them a larger audience. Why would they pick this position? Social Studies students are typically girls in their early 20's, the main group of people that usually have an abortion¹. When you are against abortion, you can either fight it or fight the people who stand behind it. The former we can relate to the dialogue to the talk of ideas and at least moderately objective reality, the latter to the monologue, to the logical fallacy of *ad hominem* arguments and subjective arguments.

1 According to the Guttmacher institute (<https://www.guttmacher.org/>) 58% of the American women that have an abortion are in their 20's.

Influencing

There are several ways in which you can influence the opinion or actions of people. One of the ways is to use reasonable arguments and to go into a dialogue with the people that you are trying to convince. Presenting a falsifiable theory to a critical public is the approach of the scientific world. Usually a scientist performs a research to gather the required arguments to support his conclusion and discusses the results with other researchers in journals and on conferences. By using reasonable arguments and logic, he dives into a discussion with the people whose opinions are to be changed or influenced. The others can either agree with your arguments and you will find a mutual understanding or disagree with you and try to show a possible fault in your argumentation. In both ways, the influence happens through a dialogue, both parties get the opportunity to express their opinion and often a mutual understanding or common good (outside of the strict scientific world) is found.

Another way to influence a person is by referring to something or someone. This is an approach that is very often used in our daily life. A month ago, my mother called me to ask whether I came home for Christmas. When I expressed my doubts about the matter, she tried to influence my decision by saying that I had been there every year and my grandmother would be so disappointed if I would not be there. By giving this argument, my mother referred to tradition (I had been there every year) and authority (my grandmother would be so disappointed). In contrast to reasonable arguments, this way of influencing happens through a monologue. I am able to lead a discussion neither with the past (the routine of going back home which becomes a tradition to be respected in my mother's words), nor with a position of authority that stands out of my reach. My mother did not want to exchange ideas about the topic or come to a mutual understanding, she she just wanted me to come home for Christmas.

The last way to influence someone is by creating emotions about the topic. This is the approach the pro-life protesters chose. By associating the emotions connected to genocide with abortion, they created emotions about abortion with the intention to change the opinion of the public and the actions of the 20 year old female students that might consider an abortion. One of the companies that also uses this idea is Coca-Cola. Although it may seem strange to compare a pro-life campaign with a Coca-Cola commercial, the method they use to influence their public is very similar. In one of their latest campaigns, Coca-Cola tried to connect a coke with situations that are associated with happiness. Their commercials showed people being happy who were either drinking a coke or there was something with the Coca-Cola logo in the scene. By putting their drink or logo in a scene that evokes a lot of emotions, they try to associate the evoked emotions with their product. This is

similar to the approach of the pro-life campaign, where they try to associate the emotions of genocide with abortion. Similar to the pro-life campaign, the analogy between coca-cola and happiness is not based upon reasonable arguments, but on images that evoke emotions.

In my opinion, this way of influencing someone is the ultimate monologue. In the case of referring to someone or something there is still the option to question or overrule the aspect that is being referred to. In the case of my mother, I could have replied that my boyfriend would really want me to stay with him (which could overrule my grandmothers opinion) or that I did not think Christmas is important enough to come back home (questioning the importance of the tradition). In the case of emotions this is different, at the moment that you have a an emotion about a certain topic, there is nothing to argue about. Emotions are per definition subjective, they are captured within an individual and differ from person to person. When someone tells you he is sad about moving to another country, there is nothing to debate. The moment you feel horrified or disgusted while looking at these images, there is no reaction you can give to the protesters. The creation of emotions about a certain topic leaves no room for arguments or reasoning.

Emotions and opinions

So what is the problem with using emotions to influence someones opinion? Let's go back to the Coca-Cola example. In a way, I always get thirsty when looking at one of their commercials. I see happy people drinking, I would like to be in their place and therefore, I would also like to drink a Coca-Cola. It is well known that TV commercials try to manipulate you into buying products. With these commercials, Coca-Cola does not want to show you that a Coke makes you happy, they actually want you to buy more Coke. They are using an analogy between Coca-Cola and happiness for a personal goal, their profit. I think the same holds for the pro-life campaign. I am wondering whether all the protesters actually believe that abortion is the same as genocide. I think that most of them just want to change your opinion about abortion. They are using the emotions of genocide to achieve their own personal goal, a change in the abortion law. In the way that TV-commercials are trying to manipulate you into buying their product, I belief that the pro-life campaign is trying to manipulate you into a different opinion about abortion.

What makes this problem even more serious is that the manipulation is based on emotions.

Emotions are subjective and experienced as authentic. At the moment you feel an emotion, this can be seen as a personal truth. Emotions are descriptive, when you feel sad, you are sad, when you feel in love you are in love. At the moment you feel horror when looking at those pictures, you are horrified about abortion. But as I stated before, at the moment you have a feeling there is nothing

left to discuss. Your opinion about abortion is based on your own subjective emotions. There is no way to falsify these emotions. At the moment you feel them they are there, even though they might be based on a false association. Contrast this to influencing by using reasonable arguments and dialogue where you are always able to disprove false statements of the people who are trying to influence you using reason. In contrast with emotions, reasonable arguments are objective. There is the possibility of critique which is non-existent in the previously discussed case.

Pro-Life campaigns

The exhibition that I passed in the front of the university is not the only pro-life campaign that uses this strategy. Most pro-life campaigns we encounter do not try to influence the public opinion by using reasonable arguments and dialogue, but by referring to someone or addressing emotions. In some protests against abortion the signs are held by children. Are those children the determined critiques of abortion they appear to be or are they simply a device to give the protests a stronger emotional impact? It does not matter that much what the sign is actually saying, the fact that with abortion the children would not have been there holding the sign is what makes the biggest impact. This impact is, again, not based on reason and arguments but based on guilt and other emotions.

Another often used argument against abortion is religion. Abortion is against God's will, and therefore it should be illegal. This is a great example of influencing peoples opinion using authority I discussed earlier. When you accept God as an authority, there is nothing left to discuss. The only way the dialogue can move on now, is by questioning God as an authority figure. This is a completely different discussion.

Why do most pro-life campaigns use traditions, authority and emotions to influence their public and make their point? I think there are several explanations that can be thought off. Of course we can see the strategical value of using them when there is no search for universality and mutual agreement but only influence and practical goals. Another argument which probably deserves to be discussed in a much longer paper written by much more prepared people is the link between the origin of conservatism and this sort of argumentation. Without any doubt we can say that most pro-life protesters are considered to be conservative. As Russel Kirk very nicely stated in '*The Conservative Mind*², conservatives resists "Logicalism" in society. In '*Reflections on the Revolution in France*³, Edmund Burke, one of the main founders of conservatism, opposed conservatism with innovation. He disagreed with the French idea of Enlightenment – the rationalization and

2 Kirk, R. (2001). *The conservative mind: from Burke to Eliot*. Regnery Publishing.

3 Burke, E. (1790). *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Dodsley, London.

disillusionment of society, and thus rejected total reason as the base for life and the government and in our case we can as well say - discussion. This relation is not to be judged or deemed as something but it is certainly there to be seen.

Conclusion

I started from a theoretical effort to distinguish between reason and emotions as tools for reaching the truth in a discussion. For this I used abortion as it is a very important topic that influences the whole of society as well as people's private lives. The decision to have an abortion or not is on a completely different level than doubting between buying a Coke or a Pepsi. I think that when dealing with such important matters, it is very important to have an open and clear dialogue in society. By using emotions as an influence, the pro-life protesters 'mislead' the public in the same way big companies 'mislead' people into buying their product. Laws should try to serve the common good, something that is beneficial for everyone or at least most members of the society. By using reasonable arguments instead of emotions, people can go into a dialogue to find the 'right' decision about this complicated topic. Here I tried not to make any conclusions on the topic and the content – it is to other people to judge “pro-life” campaigns as right or wrong. My intention was to analyze the form of leading a discussion and the formation of a judgment. Even if we cannot completely evade subjectiveness in opinion and decisions, we can always strive for objectiveness in the manner of their creation.