

Lexical Indicators of Dissociation in Ethical Argumentation on Abortion

Introduction

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

The present paper is concerned with how dissociation manifests itself in ethical argumentation on abortion focusing on the lexical indicators of this technique that can be found in argumentative texts pro and against abortion. In ethical argumentation on abortion, dissociation is strategically used to define the dispute object, abortion, to establish the starting points of the discussion and to argue in favor or against abortion as well. By means of dissociation, both the protagonist and the antagonist attempt at creating a new perspective on the dispute object, the audience's attention being drawn to those aspects that can have double significance.

The paper is structured in two main parts. The first part is devoted to the notion of dissociation and its indicators from the pragma-dialectical perspective (van Rees 2003). The second part aims at investigating what lexical indicators are used in ethical argumentation on abortion to signal the presence of this argumentative technique.

I. Theoretical background

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

dissociation serves to resolve an incompatibility or a contradiction that an initial concept gives rise to.

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

Unlike Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca who conceive of dissociation as an argumentative scheme, van Rees in line with other pragma-dialecticians (Garssen 1997, Grootendorst 1999) views it as an argumentative technique whose "argumentative potential is based on the fact that the two concepts resulting from the separation of the original notion are portrayed as non-equivalent: the one is represented as more important or more essential than the other" (2005a: 383). Dissociation is defined as "a move which brings the discussion back to the opening stage, since [it] brings about a change in the starting points of the discussion. This is because through dissociation an existing and accepted conceptual unity which in some way or another serves as a point of departure for the discussion, is broken up" (2005b: 37).

Among other aspects of dissociation, van Rees has shown interest in investigating the textual indicators of this argumentative technique. Starting from the definition of dissociation as a technique of separating a single unitary concept into two concepts to which different values are assigned, van Rees (2003) makes a classification of the clues for dissociation that can indicate the use of this technique in a discourse. The author mentions that none of these clues unambiguously indicates the use of dissociation but a combination of them definitely signals the presence of this argumentative technique in a text. Van Rees identifies three main groups of clues which derive from the three major features of dissociation: separation, negation and value.

The first group of clues results from separation: "from a single unitary concept one or more parts or aspects are separated and are brought under a different denominator" (2003: 888). Van Rees offers as an example a context in which the separation of "jury sports" from the concept of competitive sports is explicitly signaled by the indicator "except": "sports are sports except jury sports". According to van Rees the sentence represents "a quasi-definition of sports, through 'except' separating what does not belong there" (*idem*). Other indicators of separation are present in the

sentences stating that jury sports should be distinguished from “the real sports events” and that “they shouldn’t be made into competitive games” (*idem*).

Precization and definition are also clues for dissociation because they are performed to clarify the new meaning or content of a term after being dissociated. The example provided by the author is a fragment from a newspaper article in which the notion “nationality” is separated into “cultural” and “constitutional nationality”. By the use of “we should precizate” the writer of the article performs an explicit precization before distinguishing between the two aspects of the Dutch nationality. Precization in its turn can be signaled by the use of “a reference to the possibility that a term can be interpreted in various ways” (*idem*). Expressions such as “in the meaning of” or “in the sense of” serve as clues for precization. Van Rees offers as an example a fragment in which the presence of the dissociation of the term “fraudulent declaration” into “the technical sense of the word” and another sense is signaled by the indicator “in the sense of”. Pointing out that there is “confusion” between the two aspects of a concept is another indicator of the necessity for precization. The author provides an example in which the speaker explicitly underlines the confusion between “genetically identical” and “identical” in order to reject the viewpoint that human cloning should not be allowed as it leads to identical people.

Another clue for dissociation is represented by words and expressions which introduce a distinction: “distinction”, “difference”, “not the same as”, “something else than” (*idem*). According to van Rees, these indicators fall into two categories: explicit and semi-explicit. Explicit distinction occurs when “the speaker or writer separates so many words that a distinction must be made” (*idem*). Van Rees gives as an example of explicit distinction a fragment from a newspaper article in which the concept “allowing the violation of legal regulations” is split up into two different concepts: “tolerance” and “anticipating a change of law that everybody thinks should be put into effect”. This dissociation is introduced by the expression “is something quite different from” which in pragma-dialectical terms represents a usage declarative, a speech act by means of which a precization or clarification is performed. A semi-explicit distinction is not introduced by a usage declarative but “is presupposed and as such referred to” (*idem*). One of the examples provided by the author is taken from a newspaper article in which the concept of “sponsor” is separated into “solid”, “bona-fide financiers” and “opportunist sponsors”. This separation is presented as self-evident by means of the indicator “the difference”.

There are cases, as the author suggests, in which dissociation occurs by means of an implicit distinction between the two aspects in which a unitary

concept is split up. In this sense, following Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969), van Rees mentions paradox ("She loved beautiful clothes, but was not vain"), tautology ("You've got beer and you've got Grolsch") or opposition of synonyms ("the difference between pleasure and delight") as indirect indicators for dissociation (2003: 889).

The second group of clues identified by van Rees derives from the function of dissociation "to resolve a contradiction or paradox. The speaker asserts that a statement in which a term occurs is true in one interpretation of that term and denies its truth in another interpretation. Through this denial dissociation functions as a critical technique" (*idem*). In this category the author includes: explicit ("it is not a question of") and semi-explicit (concessive and replacement "but") indicators of dissociation. One example of explicit use of an indicator of negation is discussed by van Rees with reference to a fragment from a newspaper article in which the term "agreement to encounter the press through public relations officers appointed for the task" is split off from the unitary concept "bar on public speaking" by means of the expression of denial "it is not a question of".

The combination of "but" and negation is, according to van Rees, an indicator for opposition which signals the presence of dissociation. The author distinguishes between concessive "but" and replacement "but". In the case of concessive "but", "the negation following the connective, the speaker agrees with the statement that he criticizes in one of the dissociated interpretations, but not in the other" (*idem*). An example of concessive "but" is identified by van Rees in "She loved beautiful clothes but was not vain" in which the speaker agrees with one aspect of the dissociated term and disagrees with the other aspect. In the case of replacement "but", "the negation preceding the connective, the speaker rejects the statement that he criticizes in one of the dissociated interpretations, and replaces it with a statement in the other interpretations" (*idem*). An example of replacement "but" is identified by van Rees in "not in the technical sense of the word, but in the sense of cooperating in giving a patently false impression of things with regard to my tax declaration" (*idem*). In this instance of replacement "but", the speaker rejects one aspect of the dissociated term and replaces it with a statement containing the other aspect of the respective term.

The third group of clues derives from "the fact that the two dissociated concepts are valued differently. The one is considered more important or essential than the other" (2003: 890). Following Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969), van Rees points out that expressions such as "real", "pseudo" or "true" serve as indicators of dissociation. She gives as an example the dissociation between "jury sports" and "the real sports events" which is signaled by the use of "real". Another example is the dissociation

between “sponsors” and “opportunist sponsors”, the former term being qualified as positive, the latter as negative.

Another clue for dissociation van Rees takes from Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca is the pair theory-practice. Expressions such as “in theory” vs. “in practice”, “theoretically speaking” vs. “practically speaking” function as indicators of dissociation. An example of dissociation signaled by the indicator “practically speaking” is found by van Rees in a dialogue in which the practical implications of a policy are split off from the unitary concept of policy.

Besides value scales of the essential-incident and real-pseudo type, as van Rees argues, “often a second value scale is applied to the two members of the dissociated pair, in which the one member is valued as good, the other as bad” (*idem*). Not always the term viewed as essential or central is assigned a positive value. So, it is possible for peripheral or incidental terms to be valued positively and for central or essential terms to be valued negatively.

Nevertheless, van Rees emphasizes the fact that “none of these clues in itself points unambiguously to dissociation” (2003: 891). A combination of clues for the different functions of dissociation – separating, denying, qualifying – strongly indicates the presence of this argumentative technique. Moreover, there are cases of dissociation in which no explicit or semi-explicit clues are present. In such cases, clues for possible dissociations should be looked for in the context.

II. Lexical indicators of dissociation in ethical argumentation on abortion

This part of the paper is concerned with how dissociation manifests itself in ethical argumentation on abortion and what lexical indicators there are for this technique in ethical argumentative texts pro and against abortion.

In ethical argumentation on abortion, *abortion* and the *fetus* are two concepts which are based on contradictions such as “interruption of pregnancy” vs. “deliberate killing” and “newly fertilized ovum” vs. “innocent human being”. Arguers in an ethical dispute over abortion try to solve these contradictions by means of dissociation which can be performed explicitly, implicitly, indirectly or just presupposed. Therefore the lexical indicators of dissociation may sometimes be easily identified in the text while other times they have to be searched for in the context.

II. 1. Lexical indicators of dissociation in pro life argumentation on abortion

From the pro life perspective, abortion is considered a crime because the fetus holds the status of a human being or a person from the very moment of conception. In their argumentation, opponents of abortion accuse pro

choice advocates of misleading people by the use of ambiguous terminology meant to hide "abortion's true nature". In other words, pro life supporters pretend to be the only ones capable of showing what abortion really is. Dissociation is strategically used to point out the difference between the two views of the concept of abortion as a "crime" vs. "interruption of pregnancy", the former being considered the real interpretation.

In the following fragment, a combination of the three types of clues for dissociation - separation, negation and value - strongly indicates that this argumentative technique is used.

Among all the crimes which can be committed against life, procured abortion has characteristics making it particularly serious and deplorable. The Second Vatican Council defines abortion, together with infanticide, as an "unspeakable crime". (...) But today, in many people's consciences, the perception of its gravity has become progressively obscured. The acceptance of abortion in the popular mind, in behaviour and even in law itself, is a telling sign of an extremely dangerous crisis of the moral sense, which is becoming more and more incapable of distinguishing between good and evil, even when the fundamental right to life is at stake. Given such a grave situation, we need now more than ever to have the courage to look the truth in the eye and to call things by their proper name, without yielding to convenient compromises or to the temptation of self-deception. (...) Especially in the case of abortion there is a widespread use of ambiguous terminology, such as "interruption of pregnancy", which tends to hide abortion's true nature and to attenuate its seriousness in public opinion. Perhaps this linguistic phenomenon is itself a symptom of an uneasiness of conscience. But no word has the power to change the reality of things: procured abortion is the deliberate and direct killing, by whatever means it is carried out, of a human being in the initial phase of his or her existence, extending from conception to birth. The moral gravity of procured abortion is apparent in all its truth if we recognize that we are dealing with murder and, in particular, when we consider the specific elements involved. The one eliminated is a human being at the very beginning of life. (...) (*Excerpt from John Paul II's Evangelium Vitae. Encyclical Letter on the Value and Inviolability of Human Life (1995) <http://www.newadvent.org/>*)

By means of dissociation, from the unitary concept of abortion, the term "procured abortion" is split off and negatively qualified as "particularly serious and deplorable". The other dissociated term, "accidental abortion/miscarriage", remains implicit and should be viewed as "less bad" than the other one. Separation is also signaled by the sentence stating that abortion differs from other crimes committed against life through its particular characteristics ("Among all the crimes which can be committed

against life, procured abortion has characteristics making it particularly serious and deplorable"). The qualifying adjectives "serious" and "deplorable" modified by the adverb "particularly" are lexical indicators of negative value attributed to the notion "procured abortion" distinguished within the general concept of abortion. After introducing the distinction between "procured abortion" and other crimes committed against life, the speaker, as a representative of the Church, makes use of an explicit definition of abortion quoting a religious authority ("The Second Vatican Council defines abortion, together with infanticide, as an 'unspeakable crime'"). By this definition, the speaker indirectly precizes that the real interpretation of the term abortion is "crime" and not "interruption of pregnancy".

According to van Rees (2003), pointing out that a term can have various interpretations or that a concept gives rise to confusions is another clue for precization. In the fragment above, the speaker explicitly states that "crime" and "interruption of pregnancy" are two possible interpretations of the term abortion, of which only the former is the correct one. Moreover, he makes explicit reference to the fact that the ambiguous terminology related to abortion has created a lot of confusion about this concept ("in many people's consciences, the perception of its gravity has become progressively obscured", "the acceptance of abortion in the popular mind, in behaviour and even in law itself, is a telling sign of an extremely dangerous crisis of the moral sense, which is becoming more and more incapable of distinguishing between good and evil" , "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"). As one can notice, the text abounds in lexical clues for ambiguity and confusion: "obscured", "incapable of distinguishing between good and evil", "ambiguous terminology", "to hide", "to attenuate".

The existence of such confusion, as shown in the text, justifies the speaker's need to precize the real meaning of abortion by an appropriate redefinition intended to change the public opinion's perception of this deed. A dissociative distinction between truth and falsity is indirectly performed by means of the expressions "we need to look the truth in the eye" and "to call things by their proper name" which simultaneously indicate a separation of the real interpretation of abortion from other possible interpretations, a negation of the false interpretation of abortion as "interruption of pregnancy" and also the application of a value scale of the real/false type to the meaning of abortion. The speaker dissociates between "abortion's false nature" and "abortion's true nature". The former term which remains implicit is attributed to the pro choice perspective and is

qualified as negative while the latter is positively connoted since it represents the real interpretation of what abortion is.

Furthermore, the pro choice definition of abortion as mere “interruption of pregnancy” is replaced by a new one which includes the criminal aspect of this operation (“But no word has the power to change the reality of things: procured abortion is the deliberate and direct killing, by whatever means it is carried out, of a human being in the initial phase of his or her existence, extending from conception to birth”). “Reality of things” is another indicator of value signaling a dissociation between reality and appearance. Other clues of value that indicate the dissociation between the real meaning of abortion and the false meaning of abortion are: “unspeakable”, “gravity”, “grave”, “seriousness”, “apparent”, “truth”, “murder” vs. “ambiguous terminology”, “convenient compromises” or “temptation of self-deception”. The redefinition of the concept of abortion from the pro life perspective contains the major argument that underlies ethical argumentation against abortion: “The one eliminated is a human being at the very beginning of life”. Pro life advocates argue that the fetus is a human being from the very moment of conception and therefore that human development is continuous from conception to birth. It appears that they make no distinction between the fetus at the moment of conception and the fetus at the moment of birth as their pro choice opponents do.

II. 2. Lexical indicators of dissociation in pro choice argumentation on abortion

From a pro choice perspective, the fetus is not a person from the moment of conception and consequently abortion is not a crime but simply an operation by means of which a woman gets rid of an unwanted pregnancy. Interestingly, when assigning personhood to the fetus, pro choice supporters distinguish between the fetus as “a newly fertilized ovum” or “a newly implanted clump of cells” at conception, and the fetus as a person at the moment of birth. This dissociation is strategically used in order to justify the moral permissibility of abortion when the fetus lacks the attributes of personhood.

In the following example, the dissociative distinction between “a potential human being” and “a real human being” and between abortion as “termination of a pregnancy” and “not the killing of a baby” is signaled by a combination of clues for separation, negation and value.

A 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 is a potential human being, not a real one; it is the draft of the house, not the house itself; it is the acorn, not the oak tree. (my translation) (www.provita.ro)

From the unitary concept of baby, the speaker splits off the terms “product of conception” or “mass of tissues” in order to refer to the earliest stage of a baby’s development in the womb. Moreover, the single unitary concept of human being is separated into “potential human being” and “real human being”. Defining the fetus as “a mass of tissues”, “a product of conception” or “a potential human being” is an indirect manner of precisating that in its initial phase of life the fetus is not a person, contrary to what pro life advocates support. As a result, the interpretation of abortion as a crime is rejected being implicitly considered false. Instead, the interpretation of abortion as “termination of a pregnancy” is qualified as the real one. As one can notice in the text, separation is indicated by the lexical items corresponding to the new aspects distinguished within the notions of abortion and fetus respectively: “termination of a pregnancy”, “mass of tissues”, “product of conception” or “potential human being”. As already known, another function of dissociation is negation. In the present case, the speaker asserts the truth of the statement that the fetus is “a mass of tissues” or “a product of conception” but views the other possible interpretation of the fetus as “a baby” or “a real human being” as false. The same thing happens with the concept of abortion whose interpretation as “the termination of a pregnancy” is considered true while the other potential interpretation as “the killing of a baby” is regarded as not true. Denial is signaled in the text by the adverb of negation “not”. The potential/real pair is a lexical indicator for the application of a value scale to the dissociated terms “potential human being” vs. “real human being” of which the former is negatively connoted as peripheral or not essential whereas the latter is viewed as central. Of the two dissociated terms, term I (“potential human being”) is the marked one which matters in viewing the fetus as not a person and abortion as “not the killing of a baby”.

In the following fragment, the use of dissociation is indicated by a similar combination of clues of separation, negation and value.

(...) 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. (...) while I am arguing for the permissibility of abortion in some cases, I am not arguing for the right to secure the death of the unborn child. It is easy to confuse these two things in that up to a certain point in the life of the fetus it is not able to survive outside the mother's body; hence removing it from her body guarantees its death. But they are importantly different. (*Excerpt from Judith Jarvis Thomson - A Defense of Abortion, Philosophy and Public Affairs, Vol. 1, 1971, No. 1, p. 47-66*)

From the unitary concept of fetus, the terms “newly fertilized ovum” or “newly implanted clump of cells” are split off to refer to the initial stage of

the fetus' development when it cannot be considered a person. Thus, a distinction is made between two stages of development: up to a certain moment of the pregnancy period the fetus is not a person ("up to a certain point in the life of the fetus it is not able to survive outside the mother's body") and after that moment it becomes a person. Moreover, the speaker dissociates between "arguing for the permissibility of abortion in some cases" and "not arguing for the right to secure the death of the unborn child". Therefore, having an abortion during the period of pregnancy when the fetus is not a person is morally permissible while having an abortion after the fetus becomes a person is questionable.

Separation is indicated by the terms introduced through dissociation "newly fertilized ovum" or "newly implanted clump of cells". Pointing out that "the permissibility of abortion in some cases" can be confused with "the right to secure the death of the unborn child" is an indicator of the necessity to make a precization. By an explicit distinction signaled by the indicator "different" ("they are importantly different"), the two statements made by the speaker are meant to be perceived as completely different. In order to resolve a possible contradiction between these two statements, the speaker asserts that abortion is permissible in certain cases but denies that she supports "the right to secure the death of the unborn child". "While" ("while I am arguing") and "not" ("I am not arguing") are two lexical indicators of negation present in the text. The application of a value scale to the pro life premise that "the fetus is a person" is explicitly signaled by the lexical indicator "false" ("I think that the premise is false, that the fetus is not a person from the moment of conception"). Implicitly, the pro choice definition of the fetus is positively qualified as being the real one.

Conclusion

The analysis of some excerpts from ethical argumentative texts pro and against abortion has shown that the use of dissociation in this type of discourse is signaled by a combination of lexical indicators of separation, negation and value. Based on the contradiction between "crime" and "interruption of pregnancy" and between "human being" and "mass of tissues", *abortion* and the *fetus* are the two concepts that undergo a process of dissociation.

By means of this argumentative technique, disputants try to decide the discussion in favor of their position. Thus, from the unitary concept of abortion, pro life supporters separate the notion of "procured abortion" which is negatively qualified as "particularly serious and deplorable". Moreover, of the two possible interpretations of abortion, "crime" vs. "interruption of pregnancy", the former is considered the real one. As concerns the fetus, pro life supporters argue that it is a person from the

moment of conception, so no distinction is made between the fetus at the moment of conception and the fetus at the moment of birth. Pro choice advocates, instead, split off the term “potential human being” from the unitary concept of “human being” to refer to the entity eliminated by abortion. Since the fetus is not a person from the moment of conception, abortion is permissible. Of the two possible meanings of abortion, “crime” vs. “interruption of pregnancy”, the latter is viewed as the real one.

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Rezumat

Disocierea este o tehnică argumentativă prin care un concept considerat inițial unitar este divizat în două concepte diferite, dintre care unul este conotat pozitiv, iar celălalt negativ. În argumentarea etică despre avort dispuțanții folosesc tehnica disocierii ca o manevră strategică pentru a defini obiectul disputei, avortul, pentru a stabili punctele de plecare ale discuției și pentru a argumenta în favoarea sau împotriva avortului. Prin această tehnică atât protagonistul, cât și antagonistul încearcă să creeze o nouă perspectivă asupra realității disputate, atenția publicului fiind îndreptată către acele aspecte care pot avea o dublă semnificație. În plan lexical, există trei tipuri de indicatori ai disocierii corespunzători celor trei acțiuni ce se realizează simultan prin disociere: separare, negare, valorizare (van Rees 2003). Analiza unor texte argumentative etice pro și contra avort arată că Avortul și Fetusul sunt două concepte care presupun existența unor contradicții între „ucidere deliberată” și „întrerupere de sarcină” sau între „ființă umană” și „ovul recent fertilizat”, contradicții ce se pot rezolva printr-o disociere. Lucrarea de față urmărește identificarea indicatorilor lexicali ai disocierii prezenți în argumentarea etică asupra problemei avortului.