

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

**THE IMPLICIT JUSTIFICATION OF ABORTION VIA EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY**

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## **Introduction**

The rhetorical agenda of pro-choice/abortion (PC/A) advocates is one which implicitly assumes an existentialist philosophy to justify the action of abortion. Inevitably, the meaning of ‘implicit’ is the unquestioned reliance on personal choice, and moreover, the position that subjectivity ought to be the source of that choice. Ultimately the motivation to act in such a way is rooted in what is known as ethical egoism, acting in coherence to what is in the best interest of an individual. In order to clarify the position of PC/A existentialists it is best to first define their worldview, expose the worldview to criticism, consider possible rebuttals to these persons while ultimately concluding with a Christological statement.

## **Definitions**

Worldviews are best understood by first asking who or what is at the center. Only after considering the core of who a PC/A advocate is, can it be possible to understand why they hold certain beliefs, values, and behaviors in support of choice and abortion. It should be first explained that *choice* in itself is not necessarily at question. Rather, *choice* in the context of choosing for or against abortion is, because one is based on subjectivity and the latter must be something else, perhaps objective truth. The ideology that abortion is both the right choice but also possibly the wrong choice, or a preference for and maybe against in the same context is not possible: either abortion is right or wrong—this will be further explained later. PC/A persons base the core of their beliefs and values on subjectivity, essentially their own ideals or preferences.

### ***Existentialism***

From here what follows is an implicit existential philosophy. Existentialism is the method that studies human existence from inside the subject’s experience. One of the more

famous existential ethicists, Jean-Paul Sartre stated, “What [existential atheists and existential Christians] have in common is that they think that existence precedes essence, or, if you prefer, that subjectivity must be the starting point.”<sup>1</sup> Here, Sartre is claiming a common footing among both ends of the existentialist spectrum. The importance of this qualification is that in the context of the abortion issue, individuals of the PC/A camp cannot ward off an existential stigmatism by clinging to a religious position, like Christianity. Indeed in religion, or lack thereof, an individual is courted by their convictions and wedded to them in spite of any aspiration to distance themselves from a position which contradicts other positions they also embrace. This is specifically exemplified in the case of a Christian who is in support of abortion and *choice* ideology. This individual is living in a paradox between what it means to be a Christian and to be a PC/A individual; these two qualities of a person are not complimentary, although in some religious circles it is attempted.<sup>2</sup> The question of how God, specifically the Christian Triune Lord, plays out in existentialism will be discussed later.

### ***Ethical Relativism***

For now, it is important to introduce another worldview belief held by some PC/A advocates. Ethical relativism is a position which understands truth, of a moral judgment, as depending on whether a culture recognizes a particular principle such as abortion as wrong or right. Simply put, under ethical relativism the culture defines truth and in the case of abortion, whether the act is recognized as culturally acceptable. This position has

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<sup>1</sup> Louis P Pojman and Lewis Vaughn, *Philosophy: The Quest for Truth*, 7th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 515.

<sup>2</sup> Please see [http://www.religioustolerance.org/abo\\_hist1.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/abo_hist1.htm) to view the list of pro-choice religious groups who either promote a woman’s right to choose an abortion, or remain silent on the matter.

implications for the world but will be considered specifically within American culture today. Again contradiction ensues when the people of the nation clash with “We the people...”<sup>3</sup> of the U.S. Constitution and the Declaration of Independence which declares that, “All men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”<sup>4</sup>

### ***Skepticism***

The last definition which helps paint the picture of individuals or groups in support of women’s right to choose and abortion is skepticism. This belief initially was considered hesitantly. However, in lieu of what it means to be a skeptic it is quite reasonable to assert that PC/A advocates either use this ideology unknowingly or ascribe to it wholeheartedly. Skepticism is the belief that there cannot be any knowledge of anything. In the case of abortion, skepticism can be used as a means to persuade that one cannot fully know when life begins. It can also be believed by an individual because they *legitimately* think it is not possible to know when life begins. This is arguing from ignorance. The complication here is that although skepticism may be used or uninformatively believed it is contradictory in that persons holding this view often believe to *know* what is best to believe (i.e. that abortion is a viable choice).

### **The Assumption of Existentialism**

Using existentialist rhetoric the PC/A advocate assumes certain things about human existence and from there makes claims about what is right and wrong, and furthermore

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<sup>3</sup> *U.S. Constitution*, Preamble.

<sup>4</sup> *Declaration of Independence*.

attempts to deny knowledge of life's value. Existentialism is the foundational philosophy which initially casts the form of the PC/A movement but the motor that propels it forward is ethical relativism and skepticism. The point here is not that existentialism has a deficiency but rather a tendency.

In an existential endeavor the tendency is to perpetuate subjectivity by first exploring personal experience and consequentially applying that subjectivity to the study of human existence; this is after all the essential premise of existentialism. However, what follows from this tendency is the formation of individuals who by their own authority have established what they perceive as correct, despite evidence contrary. The fundamental problem with the PC/A rhetoric is not necessarily that it allows for abortions to happen, but that it does so without questioning its ethicalness. The real danger of existentialism is its lack of in-depth reflection; a willful refusal to think about incongruent truths. Ethical decisions are decided by individuals who adjust their blinders to focus on their own experience and therefore make conclusions about everything else. These individuals also consist of those who insist that the culture be the driving force behind allowing abortions to happen.

However, if the culture loses support for abortion, the existential position must revert back to the subjectivity of one. This disbandment from cultural support would occur if the current culture, which embraces abortion by allowing its practice, were to cease the allowance of abortion on demand. Existentialism cannot exist without subjectivity.

### ***Outside of subjective experience***

The existential belief that existence should be studied from within subjective experience is evident in the PC/A cause. An assumption in their rhetoric, namely, that

existence precedes essence, indicates that in order to be anything one must first exist. On first glance, this is appealing; however the problem is that no one is anything unless he can first define himself. For the unborn this has catastrophic implications: it means that they are not to be considered *something* until they are able to conceive who they are and their essence is only fulfilled in who they *will* themselves to be.

There are also downfalls to this existential philosophy as they apply to the lives of adults, in that some adults do not know what to make of themselves or are confused, and still some are unable to conceive of themselves at all. Does this mean some human essences are in limbo or non-existent? It is quite difficult to imagine that a state of confusion, misunderstanding, or non-recognition alters the state of one's being, or existence especially when it is evident that they do indeed exist and can be observed as being.

Existentialism seems to conflate both epistemology and ontology, resulting in a misinterpretation of how truly flawed this worldview is when practiced to its end. Specifically, ontology is metaphysical, which perhaps is existentialism's first set back since it desires subjectivity and metaphysics often deals with what is outside of individual control or merit. As it were then, an absolute morality ought to be considered over existentialism because it subjugates itself to no one individual but rather to universal qualities that "every person, even if he dislikes it or seems to reject it, will respond and realize, in his innermost being, that [they are] valid."<sup>5</sup> Roubiczek in his book, *Existentialism: For and Against* warns that if objective truth is rejected and absolute morality dismissed, what then becomes vanquished is any basis for the freedom of the will (i.e. choice, decision, and action). If

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Roubiczek, *Existentialism: For and Against*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 76.

persons are not free to decide, there will not be responsibility, this is, responsibility disappears and the significance of a conscience is lost. Therefore the basis of trust between individuals is lost. And if trust is lost the concept of good and evil lose their meaning, because they can no longer determine actions. In turn this creates what he calls, “quasi-aesthetic” morality, where what is right or wrong becomes what is preferred.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Intrinsic absolute properties not preferences***

It has been concluded that without objective truth and absolute morality, distinctions between what is right and wrong become meaningless or non-existent in themselves. What follows from this breakdown is subjectivity and relativism, which at best mirrors the illusion of a morality but in practice, reflects extrinsic motivation and a morality by preference. But even if, as mentioned earlier, cultural relativism falters, individual relativism still remains in the arsenal of existentialists. Individual relativism “asserts that right and wrong begin with each human being,” and “what’s wrong for one person may be fine for another.”<sup>7</sup> According to this standpoint morality is reduced to a personal preference. Is it best to allow preference as the means to carry out choice, decision, and action? For PC/A advocates, preference is perfectly acceptable for gauging what is right. This existentialist worldview demands an autonomy that naturally reduces to a preference based ethics which implicitly assumes the justification of abortion. But as preference based morality and ethics is played out in the life of real people its persuasiveness dwindles.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 78.

<sup>7</sup> Scott Klusendorf, *The Case for Life: Equipping Christians to Engage the Culture*. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2009), 93-94.

Here are a couple challenges to the existential position of PC/A individuals who cling to relativism. The first is that cultures may not differ as much as perhaps they are perceived to; sometimes the differences are factual, not moral. Scott Klusendorf keenly describes this by insisting that “humans have intrinsic value in virtue of the kind they are [i.e. human], not some function they perform. This is not a moral difference; it’s a factual one.”<sup>8</sup> Francis Beckwith defends this extensively in his support for the *substance view*, which states that at conception human beings have an intrinsic value. This position is challenged as an accidental, not essential, property of the human being. Both Klusendorf and Beckwith give a rebuttal using what is called the SLED test—better understood by reading at length their works. Briefly, SLED means that conceived human persons have value regardless of their Size, Level of development, Environment (in or out of the womb), and degree of Dependency.<sup>9</sup>

In the second case, where cultures do differ, is it to be assumed that nobody is correct? At one point individuals disagreed about enslavement based on racial color, but that did not mean moral truth was necessarily out of reach. Likewise, if the existentialist is correct there should be no ethical difference between persons like Adolf Hitler and Mother Teresa because what they *willed* for themselves defined their existence and their essence is a matter of their own subjectivity (i.e. they cannot be judged). To that end their individual choices, as Sartre explains choice in existentialism, “is to affirm at the same time the value of what we

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 94.

<sup>9</sup> See, Francis Beckwith, *Defending Life: A Moral and Legal Case against Abortion Choice*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), chapter 6, 130ff. Here it is also worth noting that in the cases where a mother's life is at risk, it can be said that the act of saving the woman's life is no abortion but an act of life saving mercy. The definition of abortion matters, and changes very little from one culture to the next.



choose, because we can never choose evil. We always choose the good, and nothing can be good for us without being good for all.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore the existential PC/A individual is compelled to believe that the choice, decision, or act of abortion is not wrong because ultimately that *freedom* begins with the individual, or the existent self-aware subject and their essence, furthermore, who they become is always good. This rationality indicates no difference between genocidal dictators like Hitler and care takers like Mother Teresa; in fact the existentialist would have to say they are the same in goodness.

The implication for choice/abortion dilemmas are similar, in that it assumes individuals having abortions are always doing so for good reasons. But can the philosophy which does not differentiate the goodness or wrongness of something, such as genocidal destructiveness and nurturing care, be trusted to do what is responsible—to do good? The appeal of existentialism is that there are no wrong decisions and one is free to create who they ultimately become, but at what cost does extrinsic motivation and morality by preference cost? If it is reasonable to choose abortion and terminate a life, then according to existential rhetoric it is just as reasonable for the person making the choice to be terminated too, in fact these are both *good* decisions.<sup>11</sup>

### **Pro-Choice/Abortion Reactions to the Value of Life**

Until now, the PC/A existentialist has been defined and his worldview examined with the overwhelming evidence that existential philosophy implicitly assumes the justification of abortion through heavy subjective and relativistic rhetoric. However, we must return to the

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<sup>10</sup> Louis P Pojman and Lewis Vaughn, *Philosophy: The Quest for Truth*, 7th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 517.

<sup>11</sup> This is the dangerous and unharmonious nature of existential rhetoric; often contradicting itself with defeating (and destructive) ideologies.

ideology of skepticism. Skepticism uses circular reasoning much like the person who states there cannot be absolute truth. In asserting that there cannot be absolute truth one is making an absolute truth claim. To that end, skeptics believe that it is impossible to know anything, but by making this claim they are actually proposing that they *know* something about the impossibility of knowing anything! The battle with skepticism is that it works itself into existential PC/A ideology by emphasizing what *it* means by choice. From earlier it can be concluded that existentialism allows subjectivity where the individual makes the choice as to what is right or good. Existentialism says there is no evil, and our choices are good for all people. It follows then that a true existentialist would be skeptical of evil and more likely deny it altogether. The core of existential skepticism therefore does not lie with the question of ‘is there evil?’ but with ‘is life valuable?’ The value of life questions are what will be most helpful for the opposition to digest if there is any hope of breaking the rhetoric.

A supporter of PC/A rights believes he or she knows what is right or wrong but is skeptical on life’s value before birth. This is an important point, because it says a couple things about the existentialist supporter. They either do not know what it means to be a skeptic or they are only skeptical in a particular area; the latter is the most probable position. To be a skeptic an individual must claim they cannot know anything, but in the case of the PC/A existentialist their skepticism is primarily fixated on questioning the value of life before birth. It is then that being an existentialist skeptic perhaps breaks down because the individual claims to know other things and yet it is still difficult to fully separate skepticism from existential behavior. The argument for skeptical existentialism now becomes one of semantics, in that it questions the very textbook definition of skepticism. Although

skepticism claims to know nothing about anything, its circular reasoning disproves the validity of such a statement to begin with. Therefore an existentialist can very well claim skepticism, as it refers to being leery of something or another (i.e. the value of life before birth).

Perhaps it is hard to believe that existentialism can lead to skepticism, but author John Macquarrie in this explanation of existential philosophy makes this statement,

In the existential view there are always loose ends. Our experience and our knowledge are always incomplete and fragmentary; only a divine Mind, if there is one, could know the world as a whole—and perhaps even for such a Mind there would be gaps and discontinuities.<sup>12</sup>

And yet another, albeit older text, claims similarly:

Because of the multifariousness of the real and its unsuspected novelties, being remains hidden and ambiguous. It discloses itself under various masks and surrogates. Its inmost secret can only be uncovered through a decisive leap, and even then the mystery is not removed.<sup>13</sup>

This insight leads existentialism into an open crevasse of possibilities, but never settles on any particular thing. Existential knowledge is ambiguous, subjective, and ravished with skepticism.

As it has been established, the existentialists' core skepticism is with the value of life. Fundamentally, a person is intrinsically valuable because of the thing they are, human. But here a PC/A ally would take issue with the humanity of an unborn child, claiming that existence (birth) must precede essence (value). However, in existentialism the individual gives meaning to their existence, so how do confused, unknowing, or unable persons (even

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<sup>12</sup> John Macquarrie, *Existentialism*. (Philadelphia : Westminster Press, 1973), 1.

<sup>13</sup> James Collins, *The Existentialists*. (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1952), 100.

adults) grant meaning or essence to their lives? Notice two key issues: the first is that even after birth and into adulthood individuals are capable of existing but having problems applying their subjectivity. The other issue is that which pertains to knowing. All individuals exist but may find themselves unable to use their existence as a suitable means to define who they are. This failure of existentialism seems like the strength of skepticism, but this is hardly the case. Skepticism sinks with existentialism, since to reiterate, skepticism claims to know something about knowing nothing, just as existence preceding essence fails to prove value depends on the thing (whatever that may be) to exist a priori.

The PC/A advocate assumes existentially three final things, first that the beginning of life is unknown and so there is no reason to attribute value to the unborn, secondly, that they have a legal right to choose, and lastly that God, if He exists is incapable of directing subjectivity.

In the first example, simple embryology challenges the existentialist and provides empirical evidence for the skeptical PC/A individual who asserts that the beginning of life is ambiguous. Authors on embryology, Keith Moore and T.V.N. Persaud write that “human development begins at fertilization... This highly specialized, totipotent cell marked the beginning of each of us as a unique individual.”<sup>14</sup>

The second challenge deals with the legal right to choose. While it is true that because of *Roe vs. Wade* abortion is legal, choosing anything in general is not legal. It is not legal for someone to choose to murder another human being. Here is where a PC/A supporter’s existential subjectivity fails to meet reason because if existence comes before essence, why

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<sup>14</sup> Keith Moore and T.V.N. Persaud, *The Developing Human: Clinically Oriented Embryology*. (Philadelphia: Saunders/Elsevier, 2008), 15.

does the supporter insist that others recognize their choice if it ultimately lies within their own subjectivity? Is it that they truly desire others to recognize their essence first in order to support their subjectivity? The evidence seems to lead to conclude that choice is only important when it first supports the essence of the subject rather than first the subject of the essence (the latter being the thesis of existentialism).

The last argument to address is the role of God in the abortion dilemma.

Existentialists are largely *skeptical* that there is even a god to begin with, still, the role of religion (Christianity) must be discussed even if it proves helpful to a struggling Christian alone. For both atheistic and theistic existentialists, God, if He exists, is excluded from personal subjectivity. This belief is necessary in order for an existentialist to maintain personal choice apart from anything or anyone else. But if God does exist or at the least some sort of objective absolute truth it is impractical for subjectivity to remain as the epicenter of choice, decision, or action. To that end, Christianity, despite the currents of today's culture, is above all life oriented. Death is swallowed up in the victory of Christ's life, death, and resurrection from the tomb.<sup>15</sup> The narrative of Christ's crucifixion is the depiction of unwavering love and devotion by the Son of God on behalf of all fallen human life. Life from its conception is fallen, inherent in the nature of the thing it is through the inheritance of the first sin of Adam and Eve. However, this fallen nature which every generation since has received is not God's craftsmanship, though all life is his creation. Sin entered through man, not God, but thanks be to God that grace and mercy entered through the great God-man, Christ. For through Jesus are all the transgressions of the world put away, and paid for by his

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. 1 Corinthians 15:54.

blood. Justification comes not from the heart of deceived men, sinful existential subjectivity, but from the Lord of Life himself.<sup>16</sup>

This is no child's play, for at risk is beloved children in the womb whose sins Christ died for and whom he desires to wash in the sweet waters of salvation. The bitterness of the world's flood—its ideology of death through abortion—is reconciled by the branch, the cross, making the waters of Baptism sweet for all redeemed in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Chosen here is biblical language often unheard when discussing abortion or life issues, but this is with a purpose. It not enough to say “in sin did my mother conceive me” in Psalm 51:5, or “You knit me in my mother's womb...” from Psalm 139:13. These, while well and profitable words of Scripture, and helpful for discussion, and as points which make the case that the Bible considers life at conception and beginning in the womb, fails to finally point to Christ. In all that Christians say and do, the goal, particularly for pastors, must be said and done while properly distinguishing Law and Gospel—leaning on being compassionate when counseling on life issues. Next, it is the duty of Christians to guard human life by advocating for it not aborting it. And, lastly, through virtue bring the hearts of strangers, mothers and fathers to love unborn child(ren) as the neighbor they are to themselves and all humanity. The Christian worldview is one that hopes that godliness is embraced, patience is practiced, and faith remains in God's Word. Abortion must finally be unthinkable because in faith one recognizes that Christ came as a babe, and, if Herod had his

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Romans 5:12-21.

way no life eternal would have been procured for all people of every time and place.<sup>17</sup> This evil did not come to pass because the Father watched over his Son. May this hope be ours as we rejoice that the Father and the Son has given us the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, to watch over us and keep us in the one true faith. Abortion will not win, for Christ has already won and will remain the victor!

## **Conclusion**

The overarching premise is that through existential philosophy PC/A advocates implicitly assume the justification of abortion using numerous philosophies (ethical relativism, skepticism, etc.) which spring forth from existentialism. Not only does subjectivity prevail over reason, but it becomes the end to a means. That is, through existentialism subjectivity becomes a viable solution to life's questions, regardless of logic or practicability. The significance of the thesis is that it has implications on what it means to be alive, to live, and life's value. Existentialism seeks to create personhood out of autonomy and subjective teleology but neither of which, as the above evidence displays, satisfies the justification of abortion itself.

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Matthew 2.

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