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Pro-Life Hypocrisy: Why Inconsistency Arguments Don't Matter

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Abstract (250 words): *Opponents of abortion are often described as ‘inconsistent’ (hypocrites) in terms of their beliefs, actions, and/or priorities. They are alleged to do too little to combat spontaneous abortion, they should be adopting cryopreserved embryos with greater frequency, etc. These types of arguments—which we call ‘inconsistency arguments’—conform to a common pattern. Each specifies what consistent opponents of abortion would do (or believe), asserts that they fail to act (or believe) accordingly, and concludes that they are inconsistent. Here, we show that inconsistency arguments fail en masse. In short, inconsistency arguments typically face four problems. First, they usually fail to account for diversity among opponents of abortion. Second, they rely on inferences about consistency based on isolated beliefs shared by some opponents of abortion (and these inferences often do not survive once we consider other beliefs opponents of abortion tend to hold). Third, inconsistency arguments usually ignore the diverse ways in which opponents of abortion might act on their beliefs. And fourth, inconsistency arguments criticize groups of people without threatening their beliefs (e.g., that abortion is immoral). Setting these problems aside, even supposing inconsistency arguments are successful, they hardly matter. In fact, in the two best-case scenarios—where inconsistency arguments succeed—they either encourage millions of people to make the world a (much) worse place (from the critic’s perspective) or promote epistemically and morally irresponsible practices. We conclude that a more valuable discussion would be had by focusing on the arguments made by opponents of abortion rather than opponents themselves.*

Keywords: Abortion, miscarriage, pro-life, pro-birth, antiabortion, hypocrisy, embryo

INTRODUCTION

Opponents of abortion (OAs) are frequently described as ‘inconsistent.’[1-18] For example, it is claimed that they ‘care too little’ about preventing spontaneous abortion, they fail to protect surplus cryopreserved embryos (via embryo adoption), and they refuse to adopt unwanted children. We will call such arguments ‘inconsistency arguments.’ This is because they try to show that OAs are inconsistent in some manner—they do not act in accordance with the beliefs they hold that ground their opposition to abortion. In other words, they are hypocrites. Details

between inconsistency arguments vary, but the general strategy is the same: each specifies what consistent OAs would do—or believe—and then argues that OAs typically fail to do—or believe—whatever it is that consistency demands. This gives OAs two options: (i) stop being OAs or (ii) adjust their actions/beliefs in ways that critics suggest they should (to meet the demands of consistency). Here, we examine the logical structure of inconsistency arguments and identify several flaws they share. This allows us to undermine a wide variety of inconsistency arguments at once. We conclude that even when inconsistency arguments are successful, they are either insignificant or promote troubling consequences for critics.

INCONSISTENCY ARGUMENTS

Examples of inconsistency arguments include criticism of OAs for their (i) (alleged) ‘silence’ (or lack of concern) regarding spontaneous abortion,¹ (ii) refusal to adopt unwanted children, and (iii) refusal to adopt and implant surplus cryopreserved embryos.²[1-18] Simkulet, for example, accuses OAs of ‘hypocrisy’ when they do not adopt and raise children, as they ‘are asking others to do things that they are unwilling to do themselves.’[17] Bovens criticizes OAs for opposing contraceptives that (may) have abortifacient tendencies while endorsing the ‘rhythm method’ (which may cause more embryonic death overall).[3] Harris chastises OAs who permit natural reproduction but prohibit creation of embryos for research, since both processes require ‘sacrifice of embryos in pursuit of another supposedly beneficial objective.’[2] Stretton suggests that if OAs believed abortion were murder, they would seem to be ‘justified in killing an abortion doctor who is about to perform an abortion.’[6] Recently, those who self-identify as ‘pro-life’ have (pejoratively) been labelled ‘pro-birth,’ given that they oppose abortion while (allegedly) opposing healthcare and social support systems for

¹ Simkulet has claimed OAs have been ‘silent’ on the topic of spontaneous abortion,[19] despite how much OAs have said about it in years prior.[24-36] OAs have continued these discussions through 2019 as well.[37-41]

² Typically, the main concern of these projects is to undermine the view that embryos and fetuses possess the moral status of persons. But each argues that OAs are hypocritical (or inconsistent) in some way, as a means of trying to show that OAs’ views are implausible. Our goal, therefore, is not to defend OAs’ views, but to critique the inconsistency arguments that are thought to be a means of undermining those views.

children once born.[18] Hence, OAs are (seemingly) inconsistent hypocrites who either do not believe what they profess or fail to live accordingly.

There are several complications for inconsistency arguments, however. First, OAs are not a uniform population. Second, demonstrating inconsistency is far harder than critics presume. Third, even when inconsistency arguments work, they are either insignificant or lead to troubling consequences for critics. We will consider each complication in turn.³

DIVERSITY AMONG OPPONENTS OF ABORTION

Nobody is *merely* an OA. Labels like ‘pro-life’ and ‘anti-abortion’ cut across categories of religion, morality, nationality, race, sex, and sexuality; OAs include Christians, atheists⁴, democrats, republicans⁵, males, females⁶, etc. Not only are OAs themselves diverse people, the things—procedures, ideologies, etc.—they oppose vary widely, as do their reasons for being OAs. This diversity makes broad accusations of inconsistency problematic. Since OAs are not a monolithic group, when OAs are accused of inconsistent beliefs, these beliefs must be carefully specified and examined. OAs who are merely ‘anti-abortion,’ for example, are not (automatically) inconsistent when refusing to fund welfare programs. There is no conflict in thinking abortion is impermissible and that the state has no obligation to provide universal healthcare—especially if it leads to state funded abortion provision. Relatedly, accusations of being ‘pro-birth’ often assume a particular political perspective as being the optimal way to achieve certain societal goods such as an educated population with less poverty. OAs may simply hold certain political beliefs whereby these goods are thought to be better achieved in a different manner.

³ The same problems arise when inconsistency arguments are levied against *proponents* of abortion access (or ‘pro-choicers’). This is to be expected given our view that inconsistency arguments are generally (and seriously) flawed.

⁴ More than 10% of atheists in the United States consider themselves pro-life on abortion.[42]

⁵ In 2019, 75% of Republicans, 44% of Independents, and 29% of Democrats self-identified as ‘pro-life.’[43]

⁶ Data from 2019 in the United States showed that 51% of females and 46% of males identified themselves as ‘pro-life.’[44]

Similarly, if OAs are accused of inconsistency in terms of their priorities and/or actions, this requires more than mere handwaving. If OAs are not doing enough (e.g., to prevent spontaneous abortion or adopting cryopreserved embryos), opponents should present empirical support that substantiates these claims. It is of some import that the discussion and practice of ‘embryo adoption’ is almost exclusively one that takes place within the pro-life community—especially those from the Christian tradition.⁷ There are also several important barriers to this practice beyond merely possessing the economic resources to adopt, such as couples actually choosing to relinquish their embryos for these purposes.⁸

Whatever the case, given substantial variations in the beliefs, actions, priorities, and lifestyles of different OAs, the charge of inconsistency must be levelled cautiously. Some OAs appear to be inconsistent while others are already doing exactly what critics claim they should be doing. Inconsistency arguments have no force against the latter group.

THE STRUCTURE OF INCONSISTENCY ARGUMENTS

Once we account for diversity among OAs, inconsistency arguments typically imply that (at most) *some* OAs are inconsistent with respect to their beliefs, actions, and/or priorities. Such inconsistency, however, is much harder to prove than many authors might suppose. To see why, consider the logical structure of the inconsistency argument (where *Z* represents whatever actions or beliefs the arguer claims are demanded by consistency):

1. Were OAs consistent, they would *Z*.
2. OAs fail to *Z*.
3. Therefore, OAs are inconsistent.

For the sake of argument, suppose premise 2 is true and OAs are failing to do whatever critics claim is demanded by consistency. Premise 1 is highly vulnerable to two objections: The ‘other beliefs’ objection and the ‘other actions’ objection. These objections reveal that it is not an easy

⁷ For example, see: Patterson[45]; Brakman and Weaver [46]; and Cromer.[47]

⁸ Lovering notes that perhaps ‘only 6% of couples donate their excess embryos’ for adoptive purposes.[16]

task to demonstrate that actions are inconsistent with beliefs. Further, even if it is concluded that OAs *are* acting inconsistently with regard to their beliefs, this does not invalidate their beliefs—it merely means they are hypocrites. Of far more interest are arguments that demonstrate inconsistency of OAs’ beliefs—for example, exposing contradictory beliefs.

THE ‘OTHER BELIEFS’ OBJECTION

The ‘other beliefs’ objection (OBO) to Premise 1 points out that our beliefs are not held in isolation—we all hold a wide variety of beliefs that influence our actions. It is overly simplistic to claim that a given belief entails acting in a specific manner. Other beliefs must be considered.

To illustrate, an argument suggested by Stretton: if OAs really believed abortion were murder, they would seem to be ‘justified in killing an abortion doctor who is about to perform an abortion.’[6] OAs that do not kill abortion doctors ‘caught in the act,’ therefore, reveal that they do not really believe abortion is murder. In response, all an OA has to do is explain that they *do* believe abortion is murder, but that this belief is one of many others they hold. Others may include the beliefs that any act of killing another human being is morally wrong, and that utilitarianism is wrong (so killing the abortion doctor would not be justifiable, even if it prevented future killings). When we conjoin the proposition *abortion is murder* with propositions like *any act of killing is morally wrong* and *utilitarianism is wrong*, we will not expect individuals who accept these propositions to kill abortion doctors. Their failure to kill does not imply that they doubt that abortion is murder. Rather, other beliefs block their willingness to kill.⁹ Put differently, conjoining the belief that *abortion is murder* with the belief that *killing is wrong* and *utilitarianism is wrong* changes the demands of consistency. Stretton’s argument is inapplicable to OAs who also believe things like (i) killing is wrong, (ii) killing is

⁹ There are several good reasons to believe that killing an abortion doctor is morally wrong despite maintaining the belief that what they do is itself morally wrong. We do not have space here to elaborate further beyond pointing out the existing arguments already made to this effect.[48,49]

only permissible when carried out by the justice system, etc.¹⁰ In these cases, stating one's other beliefs derails Stretton's argument.

More formally, the OBO states that even if some proposition *A* implies another, *C*, it may be that the conjunction of *A* with another proposition, *B*, implies that *C* is false.¹¹ Imagine Sue believes there is a tiger in her house. We might expect her to believe she is in danger. Her failure to believe she is in danger, therefore, might lead us to question whether she really believes a tiger is present. Yet, suppose Sue explains that she believes there is a tiger present *and* believes that it is perfectly tame. Her failure to believe that she is in danger no longer gives us any reason to doubt that she believes a tiger is present. Her failure to believe she is in danger is explained once we take stock of her other beliefs.

OBO is especially effective when deployed against the most common inconsistency arguments, which state that if OAs were consistent they would do much more to prevent spontaneous abortion than induced abortion.[1,5,7,11-15] Suppose OAs believe that we have a far greater obligation to stop killing than prevent naturally occurring death. Coupling that kind of belief with the OAs' position—e.g., belief that 'embryos are persons'—undermines any reason for thinking they would or should prioritize prevention of spontaneous abortion rather than induced abortion.

In fairness, Simkulet (at least) claims there is no morally relevant distinction between killing and letting die.¹²[13,15] Two observations about this move are needed. First, we are concerned with the consistency of OAs who *believe* in the relevant distinction. If one believes in the distinction, we would expect them to act as though the distinction carries weight. It could be that belief in the distinction is mistaken. But this would be an epistemic error, not an error

¹⁰ What about OAs that do not have these kinds of beliefs? They may be inconsistent. Our point is not that nobody is inconsistent. The point is that allegations of inconsistency are resolved *very* easily (in many cases) when considering the wider network of OAs' beliefs.

¹¹ The OBO is inspired by a structurally similar objection defended by Alvin Plantinga (in an entirely different context).[50]

¹² Similarly, Berg argues that the killing/letting die distinction is of no use to the OA in this context.[11]

in moral priorities and not reason to conclude that the relevant OAs are inconsistent. In other words, *given* OAs background beliefs (including belief in the killing/letting die distinction), they act in a consistent manner (consistent with their beliefs) when prioritizing opposition to induced abortion over spontaneous abortion.

Second, suppose all OAs in the world reject the killing/letting die distinction. This eliminates just *one* of the ‘other beliefs’ that might be conjoined with their position and render their beliefs/actions consistent. Other beliefs that would easily serve the same function include belief that induced abortion (i) violates parental obligations, (ii) involves gross violations of fetuses’ bodily integrity, (iii) is equivalent to *intentional* abandonment with lethal consequences (in cases of ‘disconnect abortions’), (iv) dehumanizes human beings, (v) supports the notion that children are disposable if they are inconvenient or unwanted, and so on.¹³ Eliminating the killing/letting die distinction and assuming that no other belief(s) could be conjoined with the OAs’ position to render it consistent is to make a hasty generalization.

The difficulty for critics, then, is that inconsistency arguments ignore the innumerable variations in OAs’ background beliefs and values. The central conditional of the inconsistency argument—‘if OAs were consistent in their beliefs, actions, and priorities, then they would believe or act in some particular way’—too often relies on a woefully incomplete antecedent, isolating just one specific belief shared by (some) OAs, and claiming that if OAs maintained that one particular belief, they would act (or believe) in some particular way. Consideration of OAs’ other beliefs, however, quickly reveals how flimsy the charge of inconsistency is in many cases.

¹³ The phrase ‘disconnect abortion’ comes from Simkulet.[17] The assembled list of relevant ‘other beliefs’ comes from Colgrove.[41]

THE 'OTHER ACTIONS' OBJECTION

OBO shows that other beliefs held by OAs must be considered before making accusations of inconsistency. Another (independent) complication for the inconsistency argument is this: As we examine premise 1—'if OAs were consistent, they would Z '—further consideration may find that if OAs were consistent, they might also reasonably $Z_1, Z_2, \dots Z_n$. In other words, there are often many different options for acting on one's beliefs.¹⁴ And frequently, finite resources (and legal restrictions) make available only a limited subset of those options.

By comparison, consider the principle underlying the 'effective altruism' movement: 'Do the most good one can.' There are many different views on what this means and how it might be achieved. Peter Singer makes numerous suggestions (e.g., living frugally, donating substantial amounts of income to effective charities, working in organisations that pay well or have a direct impact on the needy, etc.).^[19] It may be unclear, however, which option is superior. Many considerations apply to each, and they may be highly individualistic. Some people may not have the skills or education to work in a high paying field and may be better suited to directly working in charitable organisations. General propositions like 'do the most good one can' or 'all embryos have high moral value' do not translate into action clearly for particular individuals given variations in skills, opportunities, and resources. Objectively evaluating options to determine the most appropriate action for a particular belief held by a specific individual seems a very difficult task. Moreover, critics are unlikely to be in possession of the same set of facts as the individuals being criticised, and so may come to different conclusions.

¹⁴ Acting on our beliefs is difficult to isolate from our beliefs—for example, our motivating reasons for acting may include beliefs regarding the consequences of our act as well as underlying beliefs. So we might believe that a certain course of action is the best way of preserving the lives of embryos, which we believe are valuable. However, it seems helpful to distinguish between beliefs and actions here.

Applying this to inconsistency arguments, consider Lovering's argument¹⁵ regarding cryopreserved embryo adoption:

1. If OAs believed that the death of a frozen embryo is equivalent to the death of an adult human being, then they would adopt at least one frozen embryo.¹⁶
2. Virtually no OAs adopt frozen embryos.
3. So, OAs must not really believe that the death of a frozen embryo is equivalent to the death of an adult human being.¹⁷[16]

Here, the claim is that consistency of beliefs demands adopting at least one frozen embryo. The argument is deceptive, however, as it omits other possible actions available to OAs. For example, rather than adopt frozen embryos, OAs might pay storage costs for cryopreserved embryos until they can be rescued by artificial womb technology. Alternatively, OAs might choose to act in ways that will prevent the reservoir of frozen embryos from increasing, such as lobbying to change IVF practices¹⁸ or fighting to change public perception of the status of embryos.

The 'other actions' objection, therefore, is this: To demonstrate that an OA is inconsistent regarding how they act on a particular belief—such as 'all embryos have high moral value'—it is necessary to examine *all* their actions with regard to this belief and demonstrate that these actions are not amongst the most appropriate actions (in terms of consistency) for the individual involved.

It is worth noting that the 'other actions' objection may be used in conjunction with the OBO, and the frozen embryos argument illustrates this nicely. It is predicated on a very narrow

¹⁵ Cf. McMahan's argument.[9]

¹⁶ Lovering's first premise is also vulnerable to OBO. The Catholic church, for example, implies that frozen embryo adoption seems to constitute adultery (since it involves third parties in the procreative act).[51] Similar claims are found in both Christian Orthodox and Islamic traditions.[52-54] For all such OAs, therefore, frozen embryo adoption is not a legitimate means of saving lives (and so, their failure to adopt is *easily* explained).

¹⁷ Or, at least, they act in 'morally criticizable' ways for failing to act in accordance with these beliefs. There is, therefore, either an epistemic or moral inconsistency, but inconsistency nonetheless.[16]

¹⁸ For example, in 1996—decades before Lovering's essay—Pope John Paul II made an appeal to 'the conscience of the world's scientific authorities and in particular to doctors, that the production of human embryos be halted, taking into account that there seems to be no morally licit solution regarding the human destiny of the thousands and thousands of "frozen" embryos.'[55] That scientific and medical communities refused does not mean OAs were (or are) unconcerned about the well-being of frozen embryos.

belief concerning frozen embryos, but it seems unlikely that OAs hold just this belief, rather than the more general belief that the death of any embryo is a very bad thing. Once we consider this other belief (using the OBO), it becomes clear that adopting a frozen embryo is but one option amongst many for preventing the death of embryos (and as Blackshaw and Colgrove point out, it is not a particularly efficient option).[20]

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF HYPOCRISY

These objections notwithstanding, perhaps some OAs *do* act in ways that can be shown to be inconsistent with their beliefs. If so, then they are hypocrites. Hypocrisy is a serious charge regarding the *character* of OAs, but it has nothing to say regarding the validity and consistency of their *beliefs*—and OAs’ beliefs are surely what critics should primarily be targeting. After all, hypocrisy is a human weakness that is widely shared (a fact well-understood for millennia).¹⁹ The charge can be met with the admission “I do believe what I claim to believe, but I have failed to act accordingly.” For example, most of us fail to assist starving children as much as we believe we should (or could). Yet this failure does not imply that our belief—that ‘we should assist starving children’—is false. Of course, it is reasonable to point out hypocrisy in OAs where it is discerned, but critics should be clear that this does not discredit OAs’ beliefs and arguments.

This matters because the (supposed) hypocrisy of OAs—rather than the soundness of their beliefs and arguments—is the focus of most inconsistency arguments of which we are aware. Simkulet, for example, highlights OAs’ ‘hypocrisy’ suggesting they are ‘merely fair-weather defenders of life.’[17] Lovering concludes OAs are ‘morally criticizable’ and (possibly) living ‘morally forbidden’ lifestyles.[16] Berg argues OAs ‘do not actually believe in the personhood of all fetuses.’[11] Greasley argues OAs’ either do not really believe ‘that full-fledged humanity, or “personhood”, begins at conception’ or they are ‘disingenuous’ when

¹⁹ See, for example, Aristotle’s discussion of *akrasia*. [56]

acting as though late-term abortions are worse than early-term abortions.[8] OAs, therefore, are variously labelled as hypocritical, ‘fair-weather,’ morally blameworthy, deluded, self-deceived, and/or disingenuous, but nothing here threatens the *truth* of OAs’ claims (e.g., that ‘abortion is impermissible’). As Beckwith states, ‘arguments, and not the people who offer them ... are the proper object of analysis’,[21] and so inconsistency arguments such as these target the wrong object.

Moreover, critics are faced with a dilemma when they denounce OAs as hypocrites—either they are suggesting OAs act in a manner more consistent with their beliefs, or they are implying OAs should change their beliefs because the associated costs are excessive. Neither option is desirable.

Encouraging OAs to act more consistently with their beliefs may not be desirable from the point of view of critics. Consider Stretton’s argument.[6] If consistency demands that OAs kill abortion doctors, it would be better if OAs remain *inconsistent* (Stretton agrees).[6] So, why encourage OAs to be consistent? Relatedly, some authors claim OAs should spend substantial amounts of money on preventing spontaneous abortion, which would almost certainly divert massive amounts of funds/attention ‘*away* from heart disease, cancer, and the flu.’[5,11] Do these critics believe such a shift in funding would be a good thing? Clearly not. So, why encourage OAs—hundreds of millions of people—to advocate for such (negative) changes? Yes, it is a call for OAs to act with more moral responsibility, which is presumably good for them, but from the critic’s perspective, the negative costs seem incredibly high.

Perhaps critics reason like this: OAs who hear the inconsistency argument will probably drop their commitment to being OAs rather than acting to preserve consistency. This is a gamble. But it also encourages vicious epistemological (and moral) practices. After all, inconsistency arguments target OAs (not their beliefs or reasons for being OAs). Whatever one’s reasons were for being an OA prior to hearing the inconsistency argument, those reasons

are unlikely to be affected by the argument itself. Being an OA is merely shown to be more difficult than one supposed.[1] Thus, encouraging OAs to give up their beliefs (given the *pragmatic costs* of those beliefs) pushes them to become epistemically irresponsible agents. This response would, after all, violate fundamental epistemological norms like ‘believe in accordance to one’s evidence’ (since the evidence is unchanged but pragmatic costs have apparently increased).[22]

Similarly, it would be morally vicious to abandon belief that embryos are persons simply because acting consistently on that belief would entail significant costs and sacrifices. It is as though critics invite OAs to ‘change their beliefs’ because if embryos *were* persons, we would need to take extreme measures to save their lives. It is morally objectionable, however, to deny a human being personhood *simply* on the basis of convenience to oneself or society.

OTHER POSSIBILITIES FOR SUCCESSFUL INCONSISTENCY ARGUMENTS

So far, we have argued that inconsistency arguments are susceptible to several objections that are difficult to surmount. We have also explained that inconsistency between OAs’ actions and beliefs, while leaving them open to charges of hypocrisy, does not necessarily discredit their arguments.

There are two other possibilities for successful inconsistency arguments—they could either demonstrate that OAs’ claims, when conjoined with certain empirical facts, lead to absurd conclusions, or they could demonstrate OAs hold inconsistent beliefs regarding abortion.

Critics have formulated numerous arguments of the first form. Harris, for example, claims the frequency of spontaneous abortion implies ‘a certain reverence for or preciousness about embryos is misplaced.’[2] Bovens describes his own inconsistency argument ‘as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the cornerstone of the argument of the pro-life movement, namely that deaths of early embryos are a matter of grave concern.’[3] Räsänen and Lovering also consider

their arguments to be a ‘*reductio*’ of OAs’ views.[14,16] However, these examples fail to demonstrate a *reductio*.²⁰ A *reductio* shows that if a particular claim is accepted, then absurdity follows. Henrike Jansen explains that there are two main forms of *reductio* arguments (i) the strong form, which shows that some belief(s) lead to a logical contradiction and (ii) the weak form, which generates a conclusion that contradicts ‘generally held opinions.’[23] Inconsistency arguments are of the weak form, but it is by no means clear that their conclusions contradict generally held opinions. After all, opinions regarding embryos often differ dramatically between OAs and their critics, given their beliefs regarding the value of embryos. OAs may *not* think it absurd to conclude that we should spend more to prevent spontaneous abortion, adopt frozen embryos with greater frequency, etc. And if the conclusion is absurd only in the critic’s mind, it is hardly an effective argument to deploy against OAs.

Indeed, suppose OAs respond that their critics have a point—they conclude they should do more to prevent spontaneous abortion, adopt cryopreserved embryos, etc. Is this absurd? It is demanding, perhaps, but not clearly absurd.²¹ Timothy Murphy—whose own inconsistency argument predates most others cited here—recognizes this point: ‘the theory of anti-abortionism is not overthrown by the mere practical difficulty of the prospective task. Its claims seem to remain intact even as its sphere of duties expands.’[1] Inconsistency arguments simply aren’t equipped to undermine OAs’ views; at most, they reveal what OAs should do (or believe).

Of course, some OAs may regard the diverting of resources towards reducing spontaneous abortions to be absurd.²² Does this undermine their claim to believe that embryos are persons? Not necessarily. When we addressed spontaneous abortion earlier, we explained that the OBO comes into play in cases like this. OAs may have numerous other beliefs that

²⁰ Cf. Blackshaw and Colgrove.[20]

²¹ Likewise, initiatives to prevent induced abortion may strike OAs’ opponents as absurd as well. But their stating this fact will do nothing to sway OAs on the matter.

²² We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for mentioning this possibility.

may entail they prioritise induced abortions over spontaneous abortions. For example, OAs may believe that there is a significant moral difference between killing and letting die. However, the OBO can also apply to judgements of absurdity. OAs may hold beliefs that strongly suggest that it is absurd to divert funds away from the prevention of induced abortion towards the prevention of spontaneous abortion. For example, a strong belief in the killing versus letting die distinction might imply this, as might the belief that little can be done to prevent spontaneous abortions (whereas virtually all induced abortions are preventable).

We conclude that inconsistency arguments that attempt to demonstrate a *reductio* based on OAs' beliefs about the value of embryos are not persuasive. Once again critics fail to take into account the other beliefs that OAs may hold and how these beliefs might affect their judgement of what is absurd. Additionally, OAs' belief in the value of embryos itself is likely to significantly alter their view of whether certain implications of this view are absurd.

The other possibility we have mentioned is this: perhaps inconsistency arguments can be developed to expose OAs as having some genuinely contradictory beliefs regarding the moral status of embryos and fetuses (or other beliefs relevant to abortion ethics). Successful inconsistency arguments of this kind would have serious implications for OAs' beliefs, since OAs would have an epistemic responsibility to revise their beliefs in order to resolve the contradiction. It is important that critics advance such arguments if these kinds of contradictions are discovered. We are, however, unaware of any inconsistency arguments that successfully demonstrate contradictory beliefs on the part of OAs.

THE BENEFITS OF INCONSISTENCY ARGUMENTS

Although we have argued that inconsistency arguments produced so far have not been successful in demonstrating that OAs hold contradictory beliefs—and have therefore failed to force OAs to abandon or modify their views regarding abortion—these arguments are still valuable in some ways. We acknowledge that they have played an important role in forcing

OAs to examine and articulate their beliefs more clearly, and to consider important implications of their views they may not have noticed. Consequently, they have at times exposed hypocrisy amongst OAs, and it is hoped that OAs will take steps to eliminate this when it is demonstrated. More broadly, inconsistency arguments have been the catalyst for generating valuable discourse between OAs and their critics.

CONCLUSION

We have examined various ways in which OAs are described as ‘inconsistent’ and have revealed several problems with such claims. First, charges of inconsistency—when applied to such a diverse group as OAs—are not generalizable. Second, inconsistency arguments are fragile, depending on a vague presentation of OAs’ wider worldviews and actions. They isolate some particular aspect of OAs’ stated beliefs or commitments, while suppressing or ignoring their background beliefs and commitments. Factoring in OAs’ other beliefs makes the charge of inconsistency far more difficult to sustain. Critics must also consider the wide range of actions that might also be consistent expressions of OAs’ beliefs. Finally, most inconsistency arguments, if they do succeed, demonstrate hypocrisy on the part of OAs, not inconsistent beliefs. While this is a serious charge that deserves thoughtful responses, it does not entail that OAs’ beliefs are contradictory and must be revised. We are so far unaware of any inconsistency arguments that do so. We do, however, acknowledge that inconsistency arguments have generated valuable exchanges that have served to clarify the implications of OAs’ beliefs.

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