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Religion and Science in the Debate About Abortion  
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[1] Abortion has been a controversial issue since ancient times, although it has gained a new meaning as a part of the debate about human rights that has emerged after the atrocities of the Second World War. The development of biology and medical science has also changed the focus and language of the debate on abortion. In the discourse, the advocates of broad access to abortion use terms such as “reproductive rights,” “reproductive choice,” “medication abortion,” “sexual health,” or “surgical procedure” in order to underscore the scientific aspect of their agenda.[[1]](#footnote-1) The opponents of abortion legality also refer to the impact of abortion on women, although a more significant part of their argument revolves around the biology of human development.[[2]](#footnote-2) However, while science is a significant part in the abortion debate, the real source of controversy are philosophical and religious considerations. To some, abortion is a “right” itself; to others, it is a violation of the right to life. Both approaches derive from fundamentally different views on morality and the definition of a human being. Although one’s religiosity is not definitive in determining his or her stance on abortion, some may perceive the abortion controversy as a conflict between religion and science, because both categories are vigorously used and confronted in the debate.[[3]](#footnote-3) John Haught is a theologian and a professor at Georgetown University, who establishes a framework of “conflict,” “contrast,” “contact,” and “conformation” approaches to describe various perspectives on the relationship between religion and science.[[4]](#footnote-4) His framework is useful to better understand the roles religion and science each play in the debate. The most common approach in the debate is the “contact” one, meaning that both sides of the argument use scientific facts to advance their philosophical standpoints.

[2] A few important distinctions have to be made in order to clarify this paper’s main argument. While Haught’s definitions presented below literally pertain to religion, the discussion he offers explains that the non-religious perspectives are not always purely scientific; indeed, they are sometimes based on some metaphysical assumptions.[[5]](#footnote-5) For instance, Haught cites “scientism,” which he defines as “the belief that science is the only reliable guide to truth" and notices that this belief cannot be proved scientifically.[[6]](#footnote-6) Therefore, the present paper defines the term “religion” broadly and includes into the definition philosophical beliefs such as scientism. This paper also assumes that the definitions of a human being and human person are philosophical questions, and supporting a political agenda that matches either pro-life or pro-choice stance is an expression of a system of beliefs. Finally, while it is worth acknowledging that not all supporters of a liberal abortion legislation promote abortion itself, this distinction is not relevant for the present paper. Therefore, it uses terms such as “pro-abortion” and “pro-choice” interchangeably.

[3] Haught uses the four categories of relationship between religion and science in his book “Science and Religion: from Conflict to Conversation” to analyze the perspectives on historical cases of controversy such as Darwin’s theory of evolution.[[7]](#footnote-7) He defines the categories as following:

1) *Conflict*—the conviction that science and religion are fundamentally irreconcilable;  
2) *Contrast*—the claim that there can be no genuine conflict since religion and science are each responding to radically different questions;  
3) *Contract*—an approach that looks for dialogue, interaction, and possible “consonance” between science and religion, and especially for ways in which science shapes religious and theological understanding.  
4) *Confirmation*—a somewhat quieter, but extremely important perspective that highlights the ways in which, at a very deep level, religion supports and nourishes the entire scientific enterprise.[[8]](#footnote-8)

As for evolution, for instance, Haught indicates that among the supporters of the *conflict* approach are atheists who claim that Darwin’s theory conclusively challenged “*any and all* religious interpretations of the cosmos.”[[9]](#footnote-9) The *contrast* approach, in turn, rejects the possibility of any scientific theory, including the theory of evolution, to question or confirm God’s existence.[[10]](#footnote-10) From the *contact* point of view, evolution has changed theology, refining the understanding of the Creator.[[11]](#footnote-11) Finally, *confirmation* suggests that it is theology that by itself predicted the concept of evolving cosmos.[[12]](#footnote-12)

[4] All of these approaches can possibly be used in the debate about abortion as well; however, their application must be slightly modified. Unlike evolution, namely, the abortion issue itself does not add any new dimension to the discussion about the relationship between religion and science, but rather requires the use of religion and/or science to draw conclusions about morality and policymaking. Some arguments of both sides and their attitudes towards the definition of human being have not changed since the ancient times.[[13]](#footnote-13) However, the progress of medical science has provided new facts about early stages of human development, which could potentially help define the beginning of human life more precisely than before. In addition, the theory of evolution has confirmed some people in their opinion that humans are just more intelligent animals, which implies that human bodies have no more dignity than animal bodies.[[14]](#footnote-14) These new scientific perspectives have impacted traditional belief systems, and both sides of the argument have started to use scientific arguments to support their philosophical beliefs; therefore, in the debate abortion, the *contact* approach plays the primary role.

[5] The supporters of a broad access to abortion use the *contact* approach when they refer to medical evidence on the positive impact of abortion on women to influence government policy. To that end, the supporters of the pro-choice movement bring up e.g. the “relief” women feel after abortion and “safe abortion” techniques.[[15]](#footnote-15) Some scholarly articles report about “growing chasm between science and policy” and call for the “evidence-based policy.”[[16]](#footnote-16) They are concerned about “provid[ing] medication abortion care and…women’s access to [safe abortion] services,” while setting aside moral considerations of the act itself.[[17]](#footnote-17) While this fact would be understandable in the context of pure science, these articles advocate for pro-abortion legislation, and thus may be treated as a manifestation of the pro-abortion agenda. Their attitude could be classified as an expression of the *contact* approach.

[6] In a similar way, the pro-abortion activists present scientific data to convince politicians on occasions such as the hearing before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation in the United States Senate in March 2004. Nada L. Stotland, a professor at Rush Medical College was one of the speakers. She promoted “wanted children and safe and legal abortions,”[[18]](#footnote-18) and argued that women were in the best situation to decide about abortion.[[19]](#footnote-19) She also denied the view that women may have a post-abortion psychiatric syndrome, adding that the “negative feelings” women had were a result of inter alia “terminat[ing] their pregnancies illegally and dangerously.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Therefore, she challenged the scientific value of these women’s testimonies, and summed up that “[p]ublic policy must not be based on bad science.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Stotland also described the opinion that “women who become pregnant before the age of legal majority are incapable of making decisions about their pregnancies” is not reconcilable with “several recent scientific studies."[[22]](#footnote-22) Thus, in pro-abortion agenda, science serves as a means to obscure the morality of the act of abortion, presenting the negative consequences of a restrictive law. In addition, pro-choice supporters use euphemisms such as “terminating a pregnancy,” to underline the innocence of abortion (which their opponents might call e.g. “infanticide”).[[23]](#footnote-23) This fact unveils that pro-abortion activists make choices about the language of science to make their argument more appealing.[[24]](#footnote-24)

[6] At the same conference, pro-life speakers emphasized their personal stories and appealed to emotions more than referred to scientific findings; nonetheless, they also found science an important part of the debate. For instance, Georgette Forney, the President of the National Organization of Episcopalians For Life referred to “articles…published in leading medical journals that indicate[d] a significant correlation between abortion and later emotional distress,” pointing that their small number implies “the need for more discussion and further research about the emotional aftermath of abortion” in her prepared statement.[[25]](#footnote-25) In this regard, the pro-life approach seems similar to the pro-choice one, as both use science to back their arguments. In turn, Forney pointed out in her actual speech that she “spend[s] hours and hours counseling these women [the research says] don’t exist;” however, this is not an instance of the *conflict* approach, but rather a notion that the scientific data cited by her opponents was not credible.[[26]](#footnote-26) “There’s mounting evidence”, said Michaelene Jenkins form the Life Resource Network, “that women suffer emotionally and physically after an abortion.”[[27]](#footnote-27) She also challenged the reliability of the articles supporting the pro-choice stance, pointing to “politics and special interest groups.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Therefore, along with their pro-choice counterparts, the supporters of the pro-life movement believed that science played a very important role in the women’s health aspect of the abortion debate (even if they had not found a large number of scientific publications to prove their claims). Thus, they also presented the *contact* approach.

[7] Both the pro-choice and pro-life thinkers represent the *contact* category also when they refer to the biological aspect of being a human. Stephen D. Schwarz, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of Rhode Island, discussed various aspects of the abortion debate in his book *The Moral Question of Abortion.[[29]](#footnote-29)* While he acknowledges that the question about the beginning of human person’s existence is “not essentially scientific but…philosophical,” he quotes several scientists who claim that human life (and being a human) begins at conception.[[30]](#footnote-30) According to Schwarz, fertilization is a “radical break” that draws “a real line” between “that which is merely the preparation for a human being, and that human being himself.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Furthermore, Schwarz also comes up a suggestion about the language used in the debate about abortion. He calls “a serious mistake” to speak about “a fertilized egg.”[[32]](#footnote-32) According to him, this “scientifically wrong” term should be replaced by “a small human being” to underscore the “respect and protect[ion]” due to an unborn person.[[33]](#footnote-33) Thus far, Schwarz’s argument has been an example of the *contact* approach. Then, however, he presented that the moment of conception as a reasonable point to consider the beginning of human life—because it is a scientific fact, as opposed to the metaphysical consideration of the moment when soul enters the body, which would be non-scientific and impossible to examine.[[34]](#footnote-34) Furthermore, the author makes it clear that science cannot provide the definition of a human person, contrary to the considerations of human *life*, which is “the proper subject matter for scientific inquiry.”[[35]](#footnote-35) This may resemble Gould’s “non-overlapping magisteria” (NOMA) position, or Haught’s *contrast* category.[[36]](#footnote-36) Finally, though, Schwarz asserts that “science provides…a kind of raw material for philosophic understanding,” which squarely fits into the *contact* perspective.[[37]](#footnote-37)

[8] Schwarz discusses also the scientific opinions of defenders of abortion. The author counters some adverse arguments based on the scientific knowledge about the zygote, such as its small size, alleged lack of structure, lack of consciousness, non-human appearance, or indivisibility.[[38]](#footnote-38) He also addresses the pro-abortion method of “drawing lines” between the forms of human life that function as human persons and those who do not, referring to such biological premises as “the presence of a functioning brain.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Schwarz notes that language is an important part of the pro-abortion agenda.[[40]](#footnote-40) The pro-choice side uses scientific language, such as “fetus,” or “a cluster of cells” as an antithesis to pro-life’s vocabulary, e.g. “child.”[[41]](#footnote-41) Abortion defenders use biology along with their opponents. Thus, again, the conflict clearly involves the *contact* approach.

[9] Because Darwin’s theory of evolution has altered the perception of human nature, it has had an indirect impact on the debate about abortion, which is another instance of the *contact* approach. Richard Dawkins, a British evolutionary biologist, counters God’s existence in his book *The God Delusion*, and uses Darwin’s theory is part of his argument.[[42]](#footnote-42) He sparked controversy in 2013, when he posted the following tweet: “With respect to those meanings of ‘human’ that are relevant to the morality of abortion, any fetus is less human than an adult pig,” and engaged in some online discussions on abortion.[[43]](#footnote-43) Dawkins’s views reflect his academic background as an evolutionary biologist. He called the view that emphasized the unborn protection as more important than animal protection an instance of “speciesism.”[[44]](#footnote-44) This recalls some cited by Schwarz authors who deny human dignity of the unborn by referring to humans as a species: “mere membership in a biological species is morally irrelevant and thus does not confer on the being in question a right to life.”[[45]](#footnote-45) Therefore, the theory of evolution serves as a scientific context in which some pro-abortionists advance their standpoints.

[10] Because the present paper has classified both pro-choice and pro-life views as “religious” in the sense that their views are based on some fundamental philosophical assumptions, it is difficult to indicate an instance of the *conflict* approach. Potentially, the *conflict* would stem from the *conflation* that happens when both sides of the argument use science to support their case. They could namely accuse each other of sticking to religious superstition rather than scientific inquiry. However, this does not seem to be the case, since there are individuals who either support or oppose abortion regardless of whether they are Christians, atheists, agnostics etc.[[46]](#footnote-46)

[11] The *conformation* approach, in turn, is more likely to be used in the debate, especially by Christians. The early Church run against the grain when it opposed abortion in ancient times.[[47]](#footnote-47) Whereas pagans treated fetus as a part of a woman’s body, Christians considered it “an independent living being.”[[48]](#footnote-48) The Catholic Church points out to this centuries-long tradition when it condemns abortion in its contemporary moral teaching.[[49]](#footnote-49) The advent of modern biology sheds therefore a new light on this teaching, implying that science supports religion as well as that religion could encourage science to make further discoveries (because they often confirm the religious point of view).

[12] Finally, the debate also includes the *contrast* point of view. Brian Zack from the Rutgers Medical School presents Gould’s NOMA approach when he writes that “science is only one of a number of valid fields of inquiry, and it must not take on itself the responsibility for providing answers to questions outside its proper realm” in his article for the *Science*, in which he comments on the Congress of the United States’ question about the scientific definition of human life.[[50]](#footnote-50) To him, life is a “matter of definition,” and the law defines life for a different purpose than science.[[51]](#footnote-51) He concludes that mixing law and science is a “travesty of both honorable traditions.”[[52]](#footnote-52)

[13] In conclusion, Haught’s categories provide a new perspective on the debate about abortion. While it is difficult to track the clash between religion (in a traditional meaning) and science in case of abortion, it is undoubted that both the supporters and the opponents of a broad access to abortion often use scientific arguments to substantiate their moral and philosophical points of view. Therefore, the *contact* framework helps understand the main part of the discourse. While the presence of the *conflict* approach might seem expected in this emotional debate, it is, in fact, of a minor importance, overshadowed by the fact that both sides use science as their main point of reference rather than a means to reject religion. Even though *confirmation* and *contrast* are not dominant in the discussion, their usage is also valid.

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