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Why inconsistency arguments fail: a response to Shaw

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Opponents of abortion are commonly said to be inconsistent in their beliefs or actions, and to fail in their obligations to prevent the deaths of embryos and fetuses from causes other than induced abortion. We have argued that these 'inconsistency arguments' conform to a pattern which is susceptible to a number of objections, and that consequently they fail *en masse*. In response, Joshua Shaw argues that we misrepresent inconsistency arguments, and that we underestimate the extent to which our opponents have anticipated and addressed counterarguments. In this essay we draw on aspects of Shaw's alternative formulation of inconsistency arguments to present an improved inconsistency argument structure. While we agree with Shaw that inconsistency arguments must each be examined on their merits, we reject Shaw's assertion that our objections are dependent on misrepresentations. Our initial objections remain largely successful, therefore, in dealing with the inconsistency arguments of which we are aware.

KEYWORDS Embryos, inconsistency arguments, abortion, prolife

Introduction

It has become increasingly common to argue that opponents of abortion hold inconsistent beliefs, or act in ways inconsistent with their beliefs.[1] Most frequently,

[1] For a detailed overview of such arguments (and responses), see Blackshaw *et al.* (2022).

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it is claimed that abortion opponents dedicate considerable resources to opposing induced abortion, but fail to act to reduce the much greater numbers of spontaneous abortions.[2] This supposed failure to act is claimed to be inconsistent with the view that embryos and fetuses have equivalent moral value to other more developed human beings.

We have argued that these so-called *inconsistency arguments* can be represented with the same logical structure, outlined below (Blackshaw *et al.* 2021, Colgrove *et al.* 2021):

(1) Were opponents of abortion consistent, they would *Z*.
(2) Opponents of abortion fail to *Z*.
(3) Therefore, opponents of abortion are inconsistent.

Armed with this analysis, we have argued that inconsistency arguments can be easily undermined by three types of objections.

First, the *Diversity Objection* is aimed at inconsistency arguments that make broad accusations about opponents of abortion without considering the wide variety of views that they hold. After all, opponents of abortion belong to a wide range of political and religious communities. Insofar as arguments make sweeping claims about their habits, priorities, beliefs, values, and/or actions, such arguments commonly rely on unjustified overgeneralizations (or stereotypes).

Second, the *Other Beliefs Objection* claims that we must examine the other beliefs abortion opponents hold before concluding that 'they would Z.' For example, if opponents of abortion believe that killing is morally far worse than letting die, they might prioritize preventing killings via induced abortion rather than preventing spontaneous abortions.

Finally, the *Other Actions Objection* argues that there are many different options for acting on one's beliefs. Instead of being obliged to only Z, an opponent of abortion might reasonably Z_1 or Z_2, … or Z_n – or, depending on their resources, a combination of these actions. For example, a belief that all embryos are valuable may mean someone chooses to oppose abortion or work to protect frozen embryos. If, like many opponents of abortion, they believe embryos are of equal value to more developed human beings, they may even choose to work to protect these more developed human beings.

Joshua Shaw (2021) has made several criticisms of our argument. He argues that we misrepresent inconsistency arguments, and we underestimate the extent to which proponents have anticipated and addressed counterarguments. In critiquing our objections to inconsistency arguments, Shaw rejects our claim that inconsistency arguments fail *en masse*. Here, we respond to Shaw.

Shaw's alternative structure

First, regarding our description of inconsistency arguments, Shaw argues that our first premise, that 'were opponents of abortion consistent, they would *Z*' is

[2] Other terms used to refer to these deaths include 'miscarriage' and 'pregnancy loss'. See Bohn (forthcoming), however, for an argument that 'naturally-occurring intrauterine death' is a better way to refer to relevant deaths than any of the other terms listed here. That said, since our critics use 'spontaneous abortion' and 'miscarriage', we will do so here.

largely inaccurate. He notes that the majority of inconsistency arguments identify a reason for opposition to abortion, and only target those who hold to this reason.

Accordingly, Shaw proposes the following structure for inconsistency arguments:

S1. If OAs oppose abortion because of A, then they would Z.
S2. It is not the case that OAs do also Z.
S3. Therefore, it is not the case that OAs oppose abortion because of A.

We agree with Shaw that many inconsistency arguments, particularly those from academic sources, are concerned with targeting one belief: that embryos and fetuses have the moral status of persons. In fact, we noted this point ourselves.[3] And Shaw's first premise highlights this aspect of inconsistency arguments, whereas our formulation does not (although our version does not *exclude* it either). We have two concerns with this formulation, however.

First, it is curious that Shaw's formulation of 'inconsistency arguments' does not use the term 'inconsistency'. This is not an oversight. Rather, he argues that 'claims about consistency do not figure in the premises of their arguments but as summaries of their implications.' Implications do not arise out of thin air, however, and cannot be taken for granted. Without further argument, therefore, how one gets from Shaw's conclusion – that 'it is not the case that OAs oppose abortion because of A' – to claims about inconsistency, will remain mysterious. Of course, Shaw could add premises to the formulation here, in order to derive some claim about inconsistency. But all that reveals is that – as an articulation of the structure of *inconsistency* arguments – Shaw's formulation is incomplete.[4]

Second, not all inconsistency arguments identify a reason for opposition to abortion in the way Shaw suggests. Shaw himself cites several examples of these arguments – from Cloud (2016) and Levinovitz (2017), respectively – which simply criticize abortion opponents in a very general way. Our interest in inconsistency arguments was partly motivated by addressing these kinds of sweeping claims regarding abortions opponents (which sometimes assert that if abortion opponents really cared about human lives, they would feed the hungry and so on). Now, there may be a specific reason for opposing abortion implicit in such arguments, but they must be reformulated to make this reason explicit in order to be represented by Shaw's proposed structure.

Refining the structure of inconsistency arguments

Previous concerns aside, we do see value in Shaw's specification of a reason for opposition to abortion. It seems that Shaw's formulation of inconsistency

[3] (footnote ii in Colgrove *et al.* 2021)

[4] Our initial structure, in contrast, leads to a more general conclusion that opponents of abortion are inconsistent in some way (and so, it needs no further premise). This is especially fitting given that typical arguments that we target explicitly frame matters in terms of (in)consistency. For example, Ord (2008) concludes that opponents of abortion 'cannot consistently remain opposed' to abortion (18). Berg (2017) concludes that 'to be consistent,' opponents of abortion must combat spontaneous abortion in specific ways (1224-5). Simkulet (2017) observes that 'recently, many pro-choice theorists' have argued that the 'antiabortion stance is inconsistent' when nothing is done to combat spontaneous abortion (784). And so forth. For a detailed overview of these arguments, see Blackshaw *et al.* (2022).

arguments better reflects a particular *kind* of inconsistency argument (perhaps the most interesting kind). Since we wish to address both kinds of inconsistency argument – those that rely on sweeping claims and those that focus on particular reasons for opposition to abortion – we will propose a revision to our original formulation, splitting it into a broad and a narrow form, respectively.

The broad form of inconsistency arguments is this:

B1. If someone should Z and does not Z, then they are inconsistent.
B2. Opponents of abortion should Z.
B3. Opponents of abortion do not Z.
B4. Therefore, opponents of abortion are inconsistent.

This broad form represents inconsistency arguments that make sweeping claims about abortion opponents, while ignoring the various reasons they have for their opposition to abortion.

In contrast, the narrow form of inconsistency arguments will borrow from Shaw's use of a particular reason, A, for opposition to abortion[5]:

N1. If opponents of abortion who oppose abortion for reason A should Z and they do not Z, then they are inconsistent.
N2. Opponents of abortion who oppose abortion for reason A should Z.
N3. Opponents of abortion who oppose abortion for reason A do not Z.
N4. Hence, opponents of abortion who oppose abortion for reason A are inconsistent.

Our narrow form takes into account Shaw's suggestion that many inconsistency arguments centre around a particular reason that abortion opponents give for opposition to abortion. The narrow form is, therefore, more in line with Shaw's version. Furthermore, it does not require additional premises. The conclusion – that a subset of abortion opponents is inconsistent – clearly follows if the argument's premises are true. As such, we believe that the narrow structure improves upon both our original formulation and Shaw's proposal.

As for the premises, B1 and N1 are not typically subject to challenge, since each merely states what inconsistency involves. And, in either case, Z may stand in for a belief or an action. For instance, in the narrow version, one may argue that those who oppose abortion for reason A should *believe* something or that those who oppose abortion for reason A should *act* in some particular way.[6] Either way – whether one should believe some particular claim(s) or one should act in some particular way(s) – premises B1 and N1 imply that failure to do so results in inconsistency. Additionally, how 'inconsistency' is understood—whether it involves hypocrisy, holding contradictory beliefs, etc. – depends on context. This is an *advantage* of the formulation, however, not a problem. Different inconsistency arguments use 'inconsistency' differently. Our formulation is general enough to

[5] We also remove Shaw's use of 'because of' to avoid any confusion between one's reason for doing something and the causal story behind why one acts in a particular way.
[6] As noted in our original (2020) discussion, 'Z represents whatever actions or beliefs the arguer claims are demanded by consistency.'

capture the whole gamut of 'inconsistency' charges. Lastly, since the first premise of each argument simply states what inconsistency involves, debates in the literature have centred exclusively on the second and third premises only.

Importantly, dividing our inconsistency argument structure into the broad and narrow forms will help to clarify how our three objections should be used. This is critical because our reading of Shaw suggests that he believes that all of our objections were designed to apply to all inconsistency arguments. For example, he states that 'it is difficult to see how the OBO [Other Beliefs Objection] shows that inconsistency arguments fail *en masse*'. He makes a similar complaint against the Diversity Objection, and one of his concerns regarding the Other Actions Objection is that 'it only applies to *some* inconsistency arguments'. We have never claimed, however, that all of our objections apply to all inconsistency arguments. In what follows, therefore, we will unpack how each of our objections targets different aspects of inconsistency arguments, while explaining why Shaw's criticisms are generally misguided.

Understanding the diversity objection

The Diversity Objection is aimed at the broad form of inconsistency arguments: those that make sweeping claims about abortion opponents (as though they were a homogenous group). To use Shaw's (2021) language, such inconsistency arguments 'traffic in breezy, reductive accusations'. Shaw seems to agree with us, in other words, that some inconsistency arguments rely on unwarranted generalizations about abortion opponents (and so, fall prey to the Diversity Objection).

Consider, for example, Simkulet's (2021) blanket assertion that 'pro-life theorists are relatively silent on the issues of spontaneous abortion, surplus in vitro fertilization human embryos, and the suffering and death of born persons due to lack of access to food, shelter and medical care'.[7] The idea that abortion opponents are always (or even generally) 'relatively silent' on various humanitarian issues is simply unfounded. *Some* opponents of abortion may be inconsistent in this way. But the claim that all (or most) are inconsistent in this way is untenable. That just is the main point of the Diversity Objection. Thus, if, like Shaw,[8] our opponents concede that inconsistency arguments should only target particular subsets of abortion opponents, rather than trying to attack them *en masse*, then the Diversity Objection is a success.

In response, Shaw (2021) complains that 'academic' arguments *are* usually careful to target subsets of abortion opponents in this way. If correct, then the Diversity Objection is not an effective response to such (academic) arguments. This is not an objection to our view, however. It is just *a restatement of* our view.

[7] We call this a 'blanket assertion' because, *as written*, Simkulet's claim targets the entire class of pro-life theorists. Perhaps Simkulet intends to target only those pro-life theorists that *are* 'relatively silent' on issues like spontaneous abortion, etc., setting other pro-life theorists to the side. Later in the essay, for instance, Simkulet (2021) insists that very 'few' pro-life theorists take sufficient action (2-3). If so, then Simkulet's opening claim – which targets the entire class of pro-life theorists – is misleading. And whatever the case, such a statement is precisely the kind of 'breezy' allegation that Shaw claims only appears in 'non-academic sources,' which we will discuss in a moment.

[8] See Shaw (2021:6).

We never argued that the Diversity Objection undermines *all* inconsistency arguments. It just highlights one way in which such arguments may fail. If there is any disagreement between ourselves and Shaw, therefore, it concerns how often arguments in academic circles are subject to the Diversity Objection. Shaw (2021) thinks not often at all. We are not convinced.

Simkulet's (2021) claims (above), for instance, are evidence against Shaw's suggestion that 'breezy' allegations against opponents of abortion are primarily found within 'non-academic sources.'[9] As more evidence, consider Nussbaum's claim that 'nobody consistently regards the fertilized ovum as a full-fledged person. … . No religion holds funerals when there is a miscarriage' (2008, p. 342). McMahan casually remarks, 'whatever people may profess on their bumper stickers, very few really believe that embryos have the same moral status as older children and adults' (2016, p. 512). It may be that these claims are more commonly made in non-academic circles. And we are inclined to agree with Shaw that these sorts of statements are not characteristically 'academic' in nature. They are certainly not based on any kind of meaningful or evidence-based research. For that reason, as we argue elsewhere, such claims are literal 'bullshit', in Frankfurt's (1986) sense of the term.[10] With that said, however, when Shaw claims that our criticisms 'misrepresent' arguments that appear within *academic* literature, we do not think such a criticism is entirely fair. Overgeneralizations and bullshit are not unique to non-academic circles.[11]

In sum, the Diversity Objection notes that opponents of abortion possess a diverse set of beliefs, and so 'the charge of inconsistency must be levelled cautiously' (Colgrove *et al.* 2021). Shaw objects that this is not 'entirely fair or accurate', as ethicists do generally base their arguments on a full moral status view of embryos and foetuses. The division into broad and narrow inconsistency arguments should clarify our position. The Diversity Objection is aimed primarily at sweeping claims of inconsistency that fail to differentiate between the various views held by opponents of abortion. It will, therefore, be more commonly employed against broad versions of the argument. Importantly, the Diversity Objection does not target all inconsistency arguments whatsoever. Instead, it is intended to cull the most egregious (broad) claims first. This leads us to the other two objections, which are likely to target more sophisticated ('academic') inconsistency arguments.

Understanding the other beliefs objection

The Other Beliefs Objection argues that we must consider other mitigating beliefs that opponents of abortion might hold before accusing them of inconsistency. The objection targets the second premise of inconsistency arguments (e.g. N2).

[9] See Bohn (2021) for an explanation of why Simkulet's claims are mistaken.

[10] See Blackshaw *et al.* (2022).

[11] One final note: Our initial essay (2020) on inconsistency arguments was designed to respond to the whole class of inconsistency arguments, rather than just those appearing in academic literature. As such, Shaw's suggestion that we are misrepresenting academic arguments is misguided: with the Diversity Objection, we were targeting academic and non-academic arguments alike (we never claimed to be interested exclusively in the former type of argument).

Here is one example of how the dialectic unfolds. Take opponents of abortion who maintain that embryos are persons (i.e. they have full moral value). Critics say: If you believed that, then you should oppose spontaneous abortion. N2, then, becomes something like this: Opponents of abortion who oppose abortion for the reason that embyros are persons should funnel research money into the prevention of spontaneous abortions. The Other Beliefs Objection offers a response. Suppose, for instance, that opponents of abortion maintain that embryos are persons *and* that spontaneous abortions cannot be prevented.[12] If correct, should these abortion opponents funnel research money into the prevention of spontaneous abortions? Of course not; doing so would fail to save any lives. This instance of N2 would, therefore, be rendered false. In a word, consideration of abortion opponents' other beliefs has the power to render N2 false (and quite easily).

In response, Shaw mentions two ways of understanding the Other Beliefs Objection. One he calls the 'soft interpretation': that inconsistency arguments have failed to deal with the mitigating reasons opponents of abortion give for failing to Z, despite holding to A. The other is that inconsistency arguments *must* fail, as they cannot take account of all the potential mitigating reasons. Despite Shaw's assumption to the contrary, the soft interpretation is the correct one. As we stated (explicitly), our objections imply that it is *difficult* for inconsistency arguments to succeed, not impossible.[13]

Shaw pushes back, however, and construes us as claiming that 'proponents of inconsistency arguments have failed to address certain mitigating reasons that OAs could give for not supporting Z' (2021). Shaw goes on to list the many ways in which our critics *have* seemingly anticipated and undermined the 'other beliefs' that might rescue opponents of abortion (e.g. the 'killing/letting die distinction').

We never claimed, however, that our opponents failed to anticipate some of the responses abortion opponents might make when challenging N2. In fact, in several places elsewhere, we have extensively discussed most of the mitigating reasons that Shaw lists as having been anticipated.[14] In fact, there are two responses that we have made: a weak response and a strong response.

The weak response goes like this. Suppose our critics have successfully undermined the claim that there is a moral distinction between killing and letting die, such that it is *unquestionable* that abortion opponents should take action to prevent spontaneous abortions. Elsewhere, we argued,

> If one believes in the distinction [between killing and letting die], we would expect them to act as though the distinction carries weight. It could be that belief in the distinction is mistaken. However, this would be an epistemic error, not an error in moral priorities

[12] This is not to say that the latter claim is true, only that the subjects *believe* it to be true. Whether or not this belief is mistaken will be discussed below.

[13] For example, we state that 'even supposing inconsistency arguments are successful, they hardly matter' (2020). We write that 'these objections notwithstanding, perhaps some OAs do act in ways that can be shown to be inconsistent with their beliefs' (2020). We never state that it is impossible to overcome our objections, but that it is difficult to do so, and that 'inconsistency arguments produced so far have not been successful' (2020).

[14] See, for instance, Blackshaw and Rodger 2019, Blackshaw and Colgrove 2020, Colgrove 2021.

> 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 prioritising opposition to induced abortion over spontaneous abortion. (Colgrove *et al.* 2021)

Put differently, undermining the killing/letting die distinction will not prove that opponents of abortion act in inconsistent ways (nor does it prove that their beliefs are contradictory or inconsistent). Rather, it just shows that they have some false belief(s), whether they recognize this or not. The inconsistency argument, then, is only troubling for those opponents of abortion who become convinced that they must abandon whatever belief(s) are doing the work in undermining N2. Elsewhere, we listed just a few possible candidates:

> … belief that induced abortion: (1) violates parental obligations, (2) involves gross violations of fetuses' bodily integrity, (3) is equivalent to *intentional* abandonment with lethal consequences (in cases of 'disconnect abortions'), (4) dehumanises human beings and (5) supports the notion that children are disposable if they are inconvenient or unwanted and so on. (Colgrove *et al.* 2021)

This takes us to the strong response: our critics have, thus far, failed to provide a compelling case for rejecting belief in the killing/letting die distinction (among the other beliefs that might undermine N2, listed immediately above). There are other possibilities. Take, for instance, the belief that nothing can be done to prevent the vast majority of spontaneous abortions. On this point, Shaw quotes Berg, who states, 'imagine throwing up our hands about a horrible disease that kills 22–89% of born persons … that's not what we do' (Berg 2017). And Shaw elaborates that an abortion opponent 'who accepts a full moral status view' but does not fight for major social change to prevent spontaneous abortions 'can be accused of being inconsistent insofar as their responses do not accord spontaneous abortion the gravity it seems to deserve' (2021).

This criticism seems unwarranted. As we have noted, a very significant research programme into spontaneous abortion already exists (Blackshaw and Rodger 2019).[15] Further, consider an analogy. Suppose our critics agree that adult human beings are morally valuable (and that we should save their lives, if possible, in most cases). If we could prevent adults from ageing, this would prevent them suffering from the health complications that typically accompany old age, and that eventually result in death. This would save countless lives. And yet, we so far do not see our critics lobbying for increased funding towards anti-ageing research. Perhaps they should just admit that they do not *really* believe that the adult human beings they could save are morally valuable.

Suffice it to say, if Shaw's claim is that a *compelling* case has been made (in the literature) against beliefs that are relevant to the Other Beliefs Objection, we remain unconvinced.[16] As such, the Other Beliefs Objection remains in full force

[15] Also, see Bohn (2021) for an explanation of the ways in which – contra critics – opponents of abortion *do* routinely work to prevent spontaneous abortion.

[16] Again, the reader need not take our being unconvinced as evidence against the views in question. Rather, see our arguments elsewhere: Blackshaw and Rodger 2019, Blackshaw and Colgrove 2020, Colgrove 2021.

for us and for other abortion opponents who accept similar views. At the very least, if our critics are to succeed, they must show that it is *epistemically irresponsible* for opponents of abortion to believe in things like the killing and letting die distinction, a difficult task when there is no consensus on this amongst ethicists. And, as Colgrove (2021) has argued, if our opponents want to argue that abortion opponents should advocate for a massive redistribution of resources towards prevention of spontaneous abortions[17], we might first ask that they at least *try* to answer three questions: (i) what *is* being done (at present) to combat spontaneous abortions, (ii) what should be done, and (iii) why. Thus far, our critics (including Shaw) have declined to answer these questions. Yet, the questions are pertinent. After all, current spending and research funding might imply that diverting funds into anti-abortion campaigns will actually be the most cost-effective means of saving prenatal lives at present.[18]

One aspect of these debates that has, as far as we know, gone unaddressed thus far: In seeking to undermine the beliefs relevant to the Other Beliefs Objection, our critics have usually argued from the more controversial to the less controversial. They have tried to undermine an important moral principle that is not only encoded into our law today, but widely accepted across history and across cultures – the killing and letting die distinction – in order to obtain a trivial result: that *some* anti-abortion opponents live in an inconsistent manner. Generally speaking, this is not a compelling way to construct a philosophical argument.

Our defence of the Other Beliefs Objection, therefore, is not that our opponents have failed to anticipate beliefs that might be relevant to the objection. So, when Shaw writes, 'it seems wrong for Colgrove et al. to accuse proponents of inconsistency arguments of ignoring how OAs could give various mitigating reasons for not supporting Z,' the charge is off-base (2022). We did not accuse anyone of *ignoring* anything. Rather, the task we set for our critics was to provide a case that opponents of abortion find *sufficiently compelling to warrant changing their beliefs*. On this count, we remain unmoved: they have not succeeded. And either way, to provide a compelling case against all such beliefs – not simply anticipate and mention them – will be no easy task.

Understanding the other actions objection

Finally, Shaw addresses the Other Actions Objection, which states that for a given belief, there are commonly many possible actions consistent with that belief. He correctly notes that it is not applicable to inconsistency arguments in which Z is a belief, not an action. As we have explained, this is not problematic: each of our three objections may be drawn upon when responding to inconsistency arguments, though the appropriate response depends on the particular inconsistency argument being examined. Different objections, in other words, are applicable to different

[17] Colgrove (2021) here refers to spontaneous abortions as miscarriages.

[18] Blackshaw and Rodger (2019) explain that induced abortion is the most common preventable cause of prenatal death.

variations of the inconsistency argument (there is no requirement that any one objection apply to all three).

That said, in response to us, Shaw provides the example of Berg, Ord, and Murphy's claim that opponents of abortion are inconsistent in not *believing* spontaneous abortion to be a great moral wrong.[19] Clearly, the Other Actions Objection cannot be used here, as abortion opponents are being accused of having inconsistent beliefs, not of acting inconsistently. The Other Beliefs Objection is applicable in such cases, however, and we have argued that belief in the killing and letting die distinction counters this inconsistency claim. Again, this just reiterates that different types of responses will be applicable to different versions of the inconsistency argument; we have developed a series of tools that may be applied differently in different contexts, not tools that will each address all variations of the problem at once.[20]

Another example Shaw raises is someone who holds the belief that all embryos have full moral status, and the belief that the destruction of surplus IVF embryos is not immoral. Again, as Z is a belief, the Other Beliefs Objection must be used rather than the Other Actions Objection. Although these two beliefs seem *prima facie* contradictory, an anonymous reviewer points out that a person who holds them might also believe that surplus IVF embryos that will not be used do not have a life worth living. In this case, they might also hold that withdrawing life support is permissible.[21] Another possibility is that opponents of abortion who approve of the destruction of surplus IVF embryos ground the immorality of abortion on something other than the full moral status of embryos. For example, an opponent of abortion could hold that abortion is immoral on the basis of Don Marquis' 'future of value' argument rather than on moral status (Marquis 1989). In this case, abortion is considered immoral because an embryo or fetus possesses a future of value similar to our own future, and depriving us (and any other entity) of such a future is immoral. They could reason that a frozen embryo does not have a future of value *unless* it is implanted in a functioning human or artificial uterus.[22]

Shaw also argues that the Other Actions Objection does not apply where opponents of abortion fail to perform what he calls 'a range of minimally required

[19] How they know that such beliefs are widespread among abortion opponents remains a mystery.

[20] One could, of course, argue that there *are* actions (related to epistemic responsibility) that should be taken once one discovers her beliefs to be inconsistent, but we will not pursue such a line of response here.

[21] An anonymous reviewer also wonders whether *any* belief will do when applying the Other Beliefs Objection or whether the belief must be a 'good' (sufficiently compelling or justified) belief. The former is correct. Suppose, for instance, that someone believed embryos have full moral value and that frozen embryos experience constant suffering (so bad that killing them is morally justified). Holding these beliefs would resolve relevant inconsistencies (that is, holding these beliefs would explain why those people fail to prevent the destruction of surplus embryos despite believing that embryos have full moral value). Critics are free to object to the belief that is invoked here (that frozen embryos experience constant suffering). Indeed, such a belief seems misguided. But that is a different criticism than the claim that the belief holder is *inconsistent*. As we note elsewhere (2021), 'whether the belief [that resolves an apparent inconsistency] is true or false is a different issue than whether or not the inconsistency argument has been undermined. It has been undermined'. Thus, if our critics 'want to change the subject – to examining whether the things [opponents of abortion] believe are true or false, rather than fixating on [their] alleged inconsistency – then [the Other Beliefs Objection] has succeeded' (2021).

[22] These abortion opponents would be outside the scope of any inconsistency argument that targets abortion opponents who believe that personhood begins at conception, of course. This recalls the Diversity Objection, and the need to ascertain the beliefs of abortion opponents if a persuasive argument is to be made. In this case, arguments would have to target abortion opponents who accept embryo destruction in IVF.

actions' (2022). If these actions can be show to be obligatory, we agree, although we doubt that the problem of spontaneous abortion which he raises once more has such obligatory actions. This is because spontaneous abortion has a wide variety of causes.[23] Despite how critics sometimes talk – with Ord (2008) referring to spontaneous abortion as a 'scourge' for instance, and Berg (2017) calling it 'deadlier than any familiar disease' – there is no single, unified cause of death that accounts for all spontaneous abortions. Importantly, as Blackshaw and Rodger (2019) point out, the leading *preventable* cause of death amongst the unborn is induced abortion. And it is more plausible that it is obligatory for those who hold that embryos and fetuses have full moral status to concentrate their efforts on preventable causes of deaths. Even so, it is a high bar to demonstrate that a particular action (or set of actions) is obligatory. If we assume most clinicians believe that all born human beings are equally morally valuable, we would not consider them to be morally compromised if they dedicated their careers to treating disease or conditions that do not kill, or are a significant cause of death (for example, treating chronic pain instead of cancer or coronary heart disease).

Lastly, Shaw argues that the Other Actions Objection 'may also exaggerate the range of actions that can be substituted for Z' (2022). He notes that not all alternative actions will be as consistent with belief A as Z, or sufficient for A's normative force. Shaw is correct that not all alternative actions qualify as Z substitutes; however, this is not a flaw in the objection.[24] It merely implies each proposed alternative action must be carefully examined to determine if it fulfils the obligation generated by A. We make a similar point about alternatives needing to be consistent with Z, and argue that the probability of success is a relevant factor to consider (Blackshaw *et al.* 2021).

Conclusion

Shaw's critique has helped to improve our formulation of inconsistency arguments, for which we are grateful. However, his criticisms of our three objections seem to imply that he believes each objection is applicable to every inconsistency argument. This was not our intention: these objections are tools for attacking these arguments, and each argument must be analysed to select the appropriate objections. In this regard, we agree with Shaw's claim that inconsistency arguments must be assessed on a case-by-case basis to determine if their premises are sound. Our objections provide a range of ways to do so. We reject Shaw's claim that our objections rely on misrepresentations of inconsistency arguments, and maintain our claim that such arguments fail *en masse* – in that as a group, arguments across the literature appear to fall prey to one or more of the objections we have developed. Importantly, our claims refer to the inconsistency arguments of which we are aware. We never claimed that there are no sound

[23] For discussions of the causes of spontaneous abortion, see Colgrove (2021, pp. 396–400), Bohn (2021), and Blackshaw and Rodger (2019).

[24] Additionally, the Other Actions Objection cannot exaggerate the range of actions substituted for Z – only someone wielding it poorly can do that.

inconsistency arguments, only that we have not yet found one we believe is persuasive.

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