

Article

The Afterlife Dilemma: A Problem for the Christian Pro-Life Movement

Marlowe Kerring (pseudonym)

Author email: M.Kerring@protonmail.com

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Abstract: Many “pro-life” or anti-abortion advocates are Christians who believe that (1) there exists an all-powerful, all-knowing, and morally perfect god who created our universe; (2) restricting abortion ought to be a top social and political priority; and (3) embryos and fetuses that die all go to hell or they all go to heaven. This paper seeks to establish that Christian pro-life advocates with these beliefs face the *Afterlife Dilemma*. On the one hand, if all embryos and fetuses that die go to hell, they need to abandon their belief in the morally perfect god of traditional Christianity. On the other hand, if all embryos and fetuses that die go to heaven, a plausible triage principle suggests that they must abandon their view that restricting abortions ought to be a top priority. Either way, this popular Christian pro-life view is untenable. The Afterlife Dilemma implies that many pro-life Christians must abandon some aspect of their current beliefs about God, the afterlife, or the comparative moral importance of abortion.

Keywords: abortion; pro-life; fetus; embryo; Christian; afterlife

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A central aim of the modern “pro-life” movement is to restrict the availability and legality of abortion services in the hope of preventing fetuses and embryos from being killed or destroyed. The movement is fundamentally comprised of individuals who passionately believe that the act of abortion kills an innocent human person and is seriously morally wrong in most cases.¹ The overwhelming majority of pro-life advocates are religious,² and many of those are Christians who hold the following beliefs:

¹ The most widely acknowledged exceptions to the rule—recognized by many Christian groups—are cases in which a woman’s life or health is endangered by the pregnancy, or the pregnancy resulted from rape or incest.

² This paper focuses primarily on the contemporary U. S. context. 94% of Americans who believe that abortion ought to be illegal in all or most cases are “absolutely certain” (79%) or “fairly certain” (15%) that God exists. On the contrary, atheists represent only 2% of those who think that abortion should be mostly or always illegal; <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/views-about-abortion>.

- There exists a morally perfect, all-knowing, and all-powerful god who created our universe.
- Restricting abortions ought to be a top social and political priority.
- Embryos and fetuses that die all go to hell for eternity, or they all go to heaven for eternity.

The first belief is a core tenet of traditional Christianity in the Catholic and Protestant traditions. The second belief is a defining commitment of the pro-life movement; it captures the moral importance and urgency that many pro-lifers ascribe to the issue of abortion.³ The third belief is commonly held by Christians who maintain that heaven and hell are the two ultimate afterlife destinations for human beings.

While the contemporary public debate over abortion has principally centered around secular concepts (moral status, personhood, harm, benefit, rights, autonomy) and shied away from explicit appeal to religious notions,⁴ this paper deals directly with pro-life Christians' bedrock beliefs about God and the afterlife. It aims to establish that those who hold the aforementioned beliefs face a serious challenge, which takes the form of a dilemma. I will call it the *Afterlife Dilemma*.

According to the Afterlife Dilemma, pro-life Christians run into trouble whether embryos and fetuses are hell-bound or heaven-bound. On the one hand, if all embryos and fetuses that are destroyed, miscarried, or aborted go to hell for eternity, one cannot reasonably believe that our universe was created by a morally perfect, all-knowing, and all-powerful god. This means that pro-life Christians must abandon the traditional Christian view of God in favor of some alternative, and doing this may weaken or undermine their reasons for opposing abortion in the first place. On the other hand, if embryos and fetuses go to heaven, a plausible triage principle suggests that preventing abortions should not be a top social and political priority. This means that the modern Christian pro-life movement is deeply misguided. In light of their limited time, money, and other resources, Christians ought to prioritize preventing the deaths of unsaved adults over those of embryos and fetuses. So, either way this popular Christian pro-life view is an untenable position.

Pro-life Christians who are confident about the eternal destination of embryos and fetuses may only need to grapple with one horn of this dilemma. That is to say, those who are firmly convinced that all embryos and fetuses that die are heaven-bound can focus on the second horn, disregarding the first. Those who are convinced they are hell-bound can do the opposite. However, many Christians are *uncertain* about the ultimate fate of embryos and fetuses. Within this group are Christian pro-life advocates who believe all embryos and fetuses that die end up in the same place—either heaven or hell—but are unsure about which place it is. The Afterlife Dilemma applies to these individuals as well. If the reasoning for each horn of the dilemma is compelling, such Christians

³ In 2020, roughly one-third of pro-life Americans considered themselves “single-issue voters” who will only vote for a political candidate who shares their pro-life stance on abortion; <https://news.gallup.com/poll/313316/one-four-americans-consider-abortion-key-voting-issue.aspx>. To quote two defenders of the pro-life position, “[I]t seems evident that pro-life advocates . . . consider induced abortion as one of humanity’s most serious problems” and “demonstrate it by their allocation of resources.” Blackshaw, Bruce P. and Daniel Rodger. 2019. “The problem of spontaneous abortion: Is the pro-life position morally monstrous?” *The New Bioethics* 25(2): 103–20, 108.

⁴ Jelen, Ted G. and Clyde Wilcox. 2003. “Causes and consequences of public attitudes toward abortion: A review and research agenda,” *Political Research Quarterly* 56(4): 489–500, 492; Digby, Foster. 1996. “Abortion is the issue from hell,” *Free Inquiry* 16(3): 24–25.

need to accept the following disjunctive claim: *Either the god of traditional Christianity doesn't exist, or restricting abortions shouldn't be a top social and political priority.* Their uncertainty about which disjunct is true should be proportional to their uncertainty about the eternal destination of embryos and fetuses.

The Afterlife Dilemma is a novel argument, but it is built upon insights that have been widely recognized by others. It has long been appreciated by Christians and non-Christians alike that it is hard to reconcile the eternal damnation of infants and fetuses with belief in a morally perfect god.⁵ The first horn of the dilemma centers around this insight and draws from the scholarly literatures on the problems of evil and hell. Likewise, Christians often acknowledge that death can be viewed as a blessing for those who are bound for heaven. In line with this insight, some contemporary philosophers have argued that a heavenly fate for fetuses yields surprising conclusions about the ethics of abortion and reproduction.⁶ The second horn of the dilemma is a variation on these arguments. The key innovation of the present paper is that it draws these insights together into a distinctive argument that challenges a popular Christian pro-life position and implies that its proponents need to modify, weaken, or abandon their theological commitments or their pro-life commitments. The argument is also novel in its development of a “spiritual triage” principle to evaluate the allocation of scarce resources in pro-life Christians’ attempts to restrict abortion.⁷

This paper is organized into six sections. Section 1 makes some initial clarifications. Section 2 sets the stage for the argument by proposing and motivating a triage principle. Sections 3 and 4 present the two horns of the Afterlife Dilemma. Section 5 anticipates and responds to objections. Section 6 reframes the argument as a *reductio ad absurdum* and surveys a range of potential replies to this challenge.

1. Clarifications and Assumptions

This paper focuses on pro-life Christians with a particular set of beliefs, and it also makes certain simplifying assumptions. This places limits on the scope of the argument, though it is easy to see how the argument might be modified or extended to speak to certain alternative views. For example, some may believe that embryos and fetuses go to neither heaven nor hell but instead have some relatively neutral fate (e.g., limbo, annihilation).⁸

⁵ The history of Catholic thought on unbaptized infants and limbo is a testament to this fact; International Theological Commission. 2007. “The hope of salvation for infants who die without being baptised,” http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070419_un-baptisedinfants_en.html.

⁶ Himma, Kenneth Einar. 2002. “No harm, no foul: Abortion and the implications of fetal innocence,” *Faith and Philosophy* 19(2): 172–94; Himma, Kenneth Einar. 2010. “Birth as a grave misfortune: The traditional doctrine of hell and Christian salvific exclusivism,” in Joel Buenting (ed.), *The Problem of Hell: A Philosophical Anthology* (pp. 179–98). New York: Routledge; and Kershner, Stephen. 2018. *Does the Pro-Life Worldview Make Sense?* (ch. 2). New York: Routledge.

⁷ In a 2010 book, Thomas Pogge also challenges pro-life advocates’ allocation of resources, arguing that the struggle against global poverty needs to be prioritized over the struggle to outlaw abortion. Afterlife considerations play no role in his arguments, however. Pogge, Thomas. 2010. *Politics as Usual* (ch. 6). Cambridge: Polity.

⁸ The idea of limbo arose in Catholic thought in the 12th century and continued to play a role in Catholic theological teaching for centuries to follow. It was thought to be an eternal destination for infants who die without baptism; limbo’s occupants receive no punishment but are deprived of union with God in heaven. Yet, a 2007 report from the Catholic Church approved by Pope Benedict dismissed limbo as a “problematic” solution to the problem of unbaptized infants and argued that there are strong

To accommodate this view, one could formulate the “Afterlife Trilemma” that recognizes three possible outcomes for embryos and fetuses. It is very likely that the neutral fate option, like the heaven option, will threaten the view that abortion ought to be a top social and political issue. But in the interest of space this paper only deals with the less complex Afterlife Dilemma, which applies to many Christian pro-life advocates. Or, to give another example: some Christians think that ensoulment (when a human acquires a soul) occurs in the days or weeks following conception and therefore will deny that *all* embryos go to heaven or hell. Again, the Afterlife Dilemma can be easily modified to accommodate this view.⁹

This paper adopts the following minimal assumptions about the nature of heaven and hell. Hell is an extraordinarily harmful place that involves intense suffering of some type. Its occupants are very, very badly off for eternity and have no chance of escape. Heaven, which is hell’s opposite, is an immensely beneficial eternal destination that involves happiness, joy, or pleasure of some type and from which there is also no escaping (though perhaps nobody wants to leave). Both heaven and hell have some occupants.¹⁰

Although Christian views about salvation can be complicated and vary across different denominations, I only assume the following. If a person is *saved*, then after death they will go to heaven. If a person is presently *unsaved*, they will go to hell if they die now. Since unsaved people sometimes become saved, a person who is currently unsaved, if they continue to live, might (for all we know) become saved before their death.¹¹

The focus of this paper is on embryos and fetuses, on the one hand, and “adults” on the other. The latter term I use irregularly and stipulatively to refer to individuals who have reached “the age of accountability” and acquired a sufficient level of rational and moral agency so that their salvation status will depend on their actions, beliefs, or character. The category of “adults” (in the specified sense) includes most older children, adolescents, and individuals who are regarded as adults. It excludes infants, young children, and people with mental conditions that preclude the development of moral agency.

The Afterlife Dilemma presupposes that embryos and fetuses who die share the same fate: they all go to heaven or they all go to hell. This appears to be the most commonly voiced view among Christians, but there are other possibilities. Maybe embryos and early-stage fetuses go to heaven while later-stage fetuses go to hell. Or, maybe there is variation at the level of individuals so that some embryos and fetuses go to heaven while the others go to hell.¹² This paper sets aside such possibilities for

“theological and liturgical reasons to hope” that unbaptized infants (including embryos and fetuses) go to heaven; International Theological Commission (2007). A minority of Christian denominations (including Seventh-Day Adventists and Christadelphians) hold that the unsaved are annihilated. This is sometimes called “the doctrine of conditional immortality” since certain salvation conditions must be met for a person to receive the gift of immortality.

⁹ One might, for example, replace every instance of “embryos” with “post-ensoulment embryos.”

¹⁰ This conception of hell fits best with the Augustinian tradition; Talbott, Thomas. Summer, 2021. “Heaven and hell in Christian thought,” in Edward Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/heaven-hell>.

¹¹ For simplicity I will assume that salvation is a permanent affair; once you’re saved, your eternal fate in heaven is permanently settled. Some Christians recognize the possibility of “backsliding,” transitioning from the state of being saved to the state of being unsaved. If backsliding is possible, some of my claims about unsaved adults will apply to a limited degree to saved adults since they, too, will carry some risk of damnation.

¹² A possible rationale for this view is the Molinist notion that God has counterfactual knowledge about how humans would have acted under non-actual circumstances. From that perspective, one can believe that the eternal fate of individual embryos and fetuses is determined by how their lives *would* have gone had

simplicity's sake, but those who subscribe to such views will need to grapple with some variant of the Afterlife Dilemma.

2. Two Kinds of Triage

To set the stage for the dilemma facing the Christian pro-life movement, let's contemplate this scenario.

Battlefield: You are a military medic on a battlefield who comes across two seriously wounded soldiers, S1 and S2. You only have time and resources to treat one of them. The soldiers are experiencing similar levels of suffering, which can be alleviated by treatment. There is one notable difference between them, however. S1 has non-fatal injuries and will probably survive without any immediate medical treatment. S2 has much more serious injuries that will probably prove fatal if not treated now. If treated, S2 will have some chance of long-term survival with further interventions. Faced with this choice, whom should you treat?

Although this is a tragic situation, it admits of a clear moral verdict: S2 ought to be treated. Indeed, it seems *obvious* that you should prioritize S2 over S1. Battlefield is a very simple and straightforward case for medical triage. The term "triage," originally used in military medicine, refers to the sorting of patients for treatment priority in contexts involving scarce medical resources (e.g., emergency departments, disasters, battlefield settings).¹³ Medical triage systems can be quite complex and based on numerous criteria, but any remotely plausible system of triage will respect the following principle of harm minimization:

Harm Minimization in Medical Triage: Other things being equal, given limited resources you ought to prioritize treating person A over person B if an untreated A is likely to be harmed to a much greater extent than an untreated B.¹⁴

The "other things being equal" or *ceteris paribus* clause is crucial. Harm minimization is one morally relevant consideration, but there are others. For example, one person might be more likely to generate some significant good for society. In a case where other moral considerations are in play, it may be the case that one ought to prioritize treating someone who will benefit less from the treatment than another person would have. Nevertheless, Harm Minimization in Medical Triage implies that whenever no other morally relevant differences are present, one ought to act to significantly minimize harm.

Now imagine a different scenario.

Lifeboat: You are a Christian in a lifeboat who comes across two drowning people, P1 and P2. One is to the east, the other to the west, and you only have time to

they not died prematurely. For a pertinent contemporary example, see Craig, William Lane. 1989. "No other name': A middle knowledge perspective of the exclusivity of salvation through Christ," *Faith and Philosophy* 6(2): 172–88.

¹³ Iserson, Kenneth V. and John C. Moskop. 2007. "Triage in medicine, Part I: Concept, history, and types," *Annals of Emergency Medicine* 49(3): 275–81, 275.

¹⁴ This invokes a standard counterfactual understanding of harm. On this view, the statement "An event E harms (or benefits) person P" means that P has lower (or higher) welfare than P would have had if E had not occurred. In the triage principle above, the degree to which A is harmed by not getting the treatment depends on how much better off A would have been if A had received the treatment.

paddle over and rescue one of them. Both people are at risk of dying. There is one notable difference between them, however. You have good reason to believe that P1 is saved and, hence, will go to heaven if not rescued. You have equally good reason to believe that P2 is unsaved and will go to hell if not rescued now. If rescued, P2 will have some chance of becoming saved at some future time. Faced with this choice, whom should you rescue?

Lifeboat is a situation that calls for a kind of *spiritual triage*. Although it would be desirable to rescue both P1 and P2, the tragic circumstances do not allow for it. A hard choice must be made.

There are (at least) three strong reasons for thinking that one ought to rescue P2 in Lifeboat. Firstly, it just seems obvious that you ought to prioritize P2 over P1 in light of the consequences they face. They are both in danger of dying, and the only salient difference between them is their likely spiritual fate. P1 is probably going to enjoy eternal blessings in heaven no matter what choice is made. P2, in stark contrast, is likely to face *eternal suffering* if not rescued but has at least some chance of going to heaven if rescued. Rescuing an unsaved individual is no guarantee that they will ever become saved, but it allows space for that possibility. There won't be any such possibility if they die while unsaved. Because P2 has so much more at stake, P2 ought to be rescued.

In addition to being independently plausible that you ought to rescue P2 given the stakes, there is an impressive structural similarity between Battlefield and Lifeboat. Both cases involve a good result (g), an even better result (G), a bad result (b), and an even worse result (B). They share a common structure, as illustrated in Figure 1.

<i>Battlefield</i>	<u><i>Outcome for S1</i></u>	<u><i>Outcome for S2</i></u>
If you treat S1:	alleviated suffering & survival	suffering & death
If you treat S2:	suffering & survival	alleviated suffering & some chance of survival
<i>Lifeboat</i>	<u><i>Outcome for P1</i></u>	<u><i>Outcome for P2</i></u>
If you rescue P1:	survival & heaven	death & hell
If you rescue P2:	death & heaven	survival & some chance of heaven
<i>Structure</i>	<u><i>Outcome for S1/P1</i></u>	<u><i>Outcome for S2/P2</i></u>
If you help S1/P1:	g & G	b & B
If you help S2/P2:	b & G	g & some chance of G

Figure 1: Outcomes and structure of Battlefield and Lifeboat.

The strong symmetry in the structure of these cases supports the following claim: *If you ought to treat S2 in Battlefield, then you ought to rescue P2 in Lifeboat*. The plausibility of this claim is even more apparent when one attends to the dramatically different stakes involved. The choice in Battlefield is merely a life-or-death matter for S2, but the choice in Lifeboat is an eternal-bliss-or-eternal-suffering matter for P2. In Lifeboat, the stakes are exorbitantly—if not infinitely—higher. Since it is obvious that you ought to treat S2 in Battlefield, it is even more obvious that you ought to rescue P2 in Lifeboat. So, one can argue by analogy: you ought to treat S2; if you ought to treat S2, then you ought to rescue P2; therefore, you ought to rescue P2.

For Christians, there is a third reason why rescuing P2 ought to take priority. Most Christians see themselves as having some obligation to “save souls”—to encourage and aid in the salvation of their fellow humans.¹⁵ If a Christian is able to help another person become saved, then (everything else equal) they ought to do so. Presumably, this obligation gives rise to derivative obligations to do things that are necessary for fulfilling the primary soul-saving obligation, like keeping a person alive long enough to become saved. Consequently, there is a morally significant difference between P1 and P2. Christians have an obligation to prevent the deaths of P1 and P2, but they also have a salvation-promoting obligation that probably applies only to P2.¹⁶

As with Battlefield, there is a plausible triage principle that applies to Lifeboat:

Harm Minimization in Spiritual Triage (HMST): Other things being equal, given limited resources you ought to prioritize rescuing (i.e., preventing the death of) person A over person B if—over the course of their life and afterlife—an unrescued A is likely to be harmed to a much greater extent than an unrescued B.

This principle is compelling and fits nicely with Christians’ obligation to support others’ salvation. It suggests that whenever limited time or resources force a choice between rescuing individuals who are heaven-bound or rescuing those who are currently hell-bound, Christians need to give priority to the latter group, other things being equal. With that stage-setting in place, let’s turn to the Afterlife Dilemma.

3. If Embryos and Fetuses Go to Hell

The first horn of the Afterlife Dilemma entertains the possibility that all embryos and fetuses that die go to hell. This would seem to vindicate treating abortion, embryo destruction, and miscarriage (i.e., natural embryo loss, spontaneous abortion) as matters of extreme moral and spiritual urgency, as they may account for more than 200 million embryonic and fetal deaths each year.¹⁷ HMST will call for prioritizing the rescue of unsaved embryos

¹⁵ Matthew 28:16–20.

¹⁶ A striking real-world variation on Lifeboat harmonizes with this conclusion. During the sinking of the Titanic, Christian pastor John Harper turned down a place on a lifeboat in order to share the Christian message with as many unsaved passengers as possible. Reportedly, he gave up his own life-vest to a non-believer and at one point was heard shouting “women, children, and the unsaved into the lifeboats!” <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/as-titanic-sank-he-pleaded-believe-in-the-lord-jesus>. (Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this story to my attention.)

¹⁷ This estimate is based on data regarding the annual number of abortions and miscarriages. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), between 2015 and 2019, approximately 73 million induced abortions occurred worldwide each year: WHO. 2020. “Preventing unsafe abortion.” WHO Fact Sheet, <https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/preventing-unsafe-abortion>. It has been estimated that 40–60% of embryos and fetuses are lost due to natural embryo loss and miscarriage; Jarvis, Gavin E. 2016. “Estimating limits for natural human embryo mortality [Version 1]” *F1000Research* 5: 2083; Jarvis, Gavin E. 2017. “Early embryo mortality in natural human reproduction: What the data say [Version 2]” *F1000Research* 5: 2765. In view of the number of induced abortions and approximately 140 million live births each year, this suggests that approximately 142–320 million embryos and fetuses are miscarried annually. Mind you, neither estimate is beyond question. There is some debate as to whether a noteworthy portion of spontaneous abortions results from irregularities so serious that a human embryo is never formed; see Blackshaw and Rodger (2019). There is also some dispute about the methodology used to estimate the number of induced abortions worldwide; see, e.g., Koch, Elard et al. 2012. “Overestimation of induced abortion in Columbia and other Latin American countries” *Ginecologia y obstetrician de Mexico* 80(6): 442–43; Koch, Elard et al. 2012. “Methodological flaws on abortion estimates for Latin America: Authors’ reply to Singh and Bankole” *Ginecologia y obstetrician de Mexico* 80(11): 740–47.

and fetuses over the rescue of saved adults—and perhaps unsaved adults too. This is because one might have justified confidence that all embryos and fetuses that die are hell-bound while having less justification for making case-by-case assessments about the salvation status of particular adults.

This first possibility, however, raises a serious problem for pro-life Christians. Embryos and fetuses getting sent to hell seems incompatible with the existence of a morally perfect, all-knowing, all-powerful god like the one posited in traditional Christianity. This problem resembles the classic *problem of evil*: the problem of explaining how the existence of a good god is compatible with the substantial evils in our world.¹⁸ How could there be so many horrendous evils in our world if it is overseen by a god who knows how to prevent them, has the power to do so, and (being morally perfect) is opposed to evil? A more targeted and difficult problem, which also applies to traditional Christianity, is the so-called *problem of hell*, which calls for an explanation of how a morally good god is compatible with a hell where people experience intense, inescapable suffering for eternity.¹⁹

The first horn of the Afterlife Dilemma raises the *problem of damned embryos and fetuses*, which is an even more targeted and perhaps most difficult problem.²⁰ The difficulty of this problem surely helps to explain why so few Christians today openly espouse the thought that embryos, fetuses, and infants that die go to hell. As expressed in a document from the Catholic Church, “People find it increasingly difficult to accept that God is just and merciful if he excludes infants, who have no personal sins, from eternal happiness, whether they are Christian or non-Christian.”²¹ How could an all-knowing, all-powerful god who is perfectly good, loving, merciful, and just allow some persons to be eternally damned when they had absolutely no opportunity to be saved, since they died before acquiring basic mental and agential capacities? One of the most popular defenses of the traditional doctrine of hell—that people are damned to hell because of their own free choices²²—cannot help solve this problem. Embryos and fetuses lack the cognitive equipment needed to make choices of any sort.

The problem of damned embryos and fetuses is worrisome enough when contemplating a single embryo or fetus being condemned to suffer for eternity, but the problem seems much worse when one attends to the *scale* of the phenomenon. Since it has been estimated that 40–60% of pregnancies end in miscarriage, let’s suppose that roughly half of all embryos and fetuses are spontaneously aborted or miscarried. The Population Reference Bureau has estimated that approximately 117 billion human beings

¹⁸ Van Inwagen, Peter. 2005. “The problem of evil,” in W. Wainwright (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* (pp. 188–219). Oxford: Oxford University Press; Tooley, Michael. Spring 2019. “The problem of evil,” in E. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/evil>.

¹⁹ Adams, Marilyn McCord. 1990. “Horrendous evils and the goodness of God,” in Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert M. Adams (eds.), *The Problem of Evil* (pp. 209–11). Oxford: Oxford University Press; Kvanvig, Jonathan L. 1993. *The Problem of Hell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press; Patsalidou, Ioanna-Maria 2012. “Universalism and the problem of hell,” *Philosophy Compass* 7(11): 808–20; Manis, R. Zachary. 2019. *Sinners in the Presence of a Loving God: An Essay on the Problem of Hell*. New York: Oxford University Press.

²⁰ One might include infants and young children in this grouping. Since some Christian traditions hold that infants and young children can be saved if they are involved in some ritual (e.g., baptism), I’ll focus on embryos and fetuses for simplicity.

²¹ International Theological Commission (2007).

²² Patsalidou (2012), 813.

have been *born* over the course of human history.²³ If all embryos and fetuses that die go to hell, these two estimates suggest that hell is currently populated with over 117 billion souls who died as embryos or fetuses.²⁴ Whether or not this estimate is perfectly accurate, one may safely assume that hell contains *many billions of people* who died at the embryonic or fetal stage. These are persons who, in their earthly lives, never witnessed anything outside the womb and never developed basic cognitive abilities that would have enabled them to engage in moral reasoning or religious faith or to comprehend anything about themselves, the universe they occupy, or the eternity of suffering that awaited them. Surely an all-powerful, all-knowing, and morally perfect god would not allow such a fate to befall billions of souls.²⁵

At this juncture, some Christians will be tempted to argue that certain great goods in our universe justify the bad outcome of billions of embryos and fetuses getting damned to hell for eternity. This is to offer a *theodicy* or *defense* against the problem of damned embryos and fetuses.²⁶ It needs to be the case that these goods outweigh, or at least match, the badness of the bad outcome—an extremely tall order when we’re talking about billions of beings suffering for eternity. It further needs to be the case that these goods could not have existed without the eternal suffering of these beings, or some comparable evils. It is hard to conceive of there being a compelling theodicy or defense for the problem of damned embryos and fetuses. This is largely because any proposed greater good would presumptively only benefit *other* beings in the universe. The idea that it’s permissible to sacrifice some individuals at the altar of the greater good is unpalatable and a key reason why many people, including most Christians, reject utilitarianism. And note that, in the present case, the suggestion would be that it’s permissible to allow roughly *half of humanity* to suffer eternal torment for the sake of some great good that only benefits others.²⁷

An alternative line of response makes an appeal to what we humans allegedly deserve. Traditionally the most common Christian defense of the idea that embryos and fetuses go to hell draws on the idea of “original sin.”²⁸ In rough outline, the idea is that Adam and Eve—the first human beings that God created—willingly chose to defy God and, as a result, their descendants have inherited a sinful nature that renders them

²³ <https://www.prb.org/articles/how-many-people-have-ever-lived-on-earth>.

²⁴ It is over 117 billion on account of the embryos and fetuses that died from induced abortions.

²⁵ A natural question here is what embryos and fetuses in the afterlife are supposed to be like. Timothy Murphy offers some worthwhile analysis, as well as an earlier estimate of the number of embryos and fetuses who might occupy the afterlife. Murphy, Timothy F. 2012. “The afterlife of embryonic persons: What a strange place heaven must be,” *Reproductive BioMedicine Online* 25: 684–88.

²⁶ On van Inwagen’s favored interpretation, a theodicy aims to elucidate God’s actual reasons for allowing evil, whereas a defense aims to tell a story about what God’s reasons might be, for all we know; (2005), 195–97.

²⁷ Incidentally, several influential theologians in the Western tradition held the rather disturbing view that part of the joy experienced by those in heaven derives from witnessing the suffering of those in hell. A striking example is found in Edwards, Jonathan, “The end of the wicked contemplated by the righteous: Or, the torments of the wicked in hell, no occasion of grief to the saints in heaven,” in E. Hickman (ed.), 1834. *The Works of Jonathan Edwards in Two Volumes (Volume II; sec. II.)* London: William Ball. This view has the right structure to serve as a defense against the problem of damned embryos and fetuses: the suffering of damned embryos and fetuses is necessary for, and outweighed by, the happiness and pleasure that heaven’s occupants take in observing their suffering. But for many of us moderns, arguing that God allows the eternal suffering of some souls in order to enhance the eternal pleasure of others is a perverse and utterly unpersuasive strategy for defending God’s alleged moral perfection.

²⁸ This defense commonly focuses on infants or, in the Catholic tradition, unbaptized infants.

deserving of hell. God has graciously opened up a pathway by which some people may gain passage into heaven and avoid hell, but this is supererogatory on God's part. It is not owed to humans.

Even if one is willing to believe that people can deserve eternal suffering for things entirely beyond their control (a very tough pill to swallow), this attempt to pass the buck of responsibility for damned embryos and fetuses onto Adam and Eve and absolve God of any moral culpability is unconvincing in light of the fact that, according to traditional Christianity, God is the one who *created* the entire universe. Consider another thought experiment.

Terrible Creative Power: You discover that you have the power to create a certain type of universe. It would be populated with billions of conscious beings who are capable of experiencing happiness but also intense suffering and unhappiness. You next discover that, if you create this universe, you will thereby initiate a chain of events that will culminate in the following result: a substantial portion of the creatures will, at some point in their existence, begin to experience intense, relentless, and inescapable suffering that will haunt them for eternity. A large subset of those creatures will experience this within days or weeks of coming into existence and will have had absolutely no opportunity to avoid this fate, though even this last group—in virtue of things entirely beyond their control (choices made by other sentient beings and their own nature or essence)—will deserve to suffer for eternity. Finding yourself with this power, should you create this universe?

Clearly, you should not. And so it is hard to believe that a god who would actively and knowingly choose to create such a universe—one that will eventually be populated with billions of tormented creatures—could possibly qualify as morally perfect. Frankly, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that such a being would be downright evil or sociopathic. Nor is the situation changed all that much if one thinks that, because of human beings' free will, it was impossible for God to foresee in advance whether or not this terrible outcome would come to pass. Surely an omniscient god would know, at the very least, that creating the universe *might* result in that outcome. The bare possibility that billions of embryos and fetuses might become trapped in a condition of everlasting torment that they could not have avoided and from which they could never escape is more than enough justification to avoid creating the universe.²⁹

Consequently, if aborted and miscarried embryos and fetuses are relegated to a hell where they experience intense, eternal, and inescapable suffering, there is a strong case to be made that our universe was not created by a morally perfect, omniscient, and omnipotent god. On this first horn of the Afterlife Dilemma, pro-life Christians must abandon their belief in the god of traditional Christianity.³⁰

²⁹ A more developed version of this sort of reasoning is offered in Knight, Gordon. 2010. "Molinism and Hell," in Joel Buenting (ed.), *The Problem of Hell: A Philosophical Anthology* (103–14, specifically, 111–14) New York: Routledge.

³⁰ There are other replies (like skeptical theism) that have not been investigated here. My aim is only to present a strong initial case for each horn of the dilemma, with the understanding that further investigation is needed.

4. If Embryos and Fetuses Go to Heaven

The second horn of the Afterlife Dilemma concerns the more palatable possibility that all embryos and fetuses that die go to heaven. Although this view is attractive to many Christians and is more easily reconciled with the idea of a benevolent, loving god, it raises a different problem.

To understand the problem, one must first recognize that pro-life Christians are in a situation that calls for spiritual triage. They are obviously motivated to prevent the deaths of embryos and fetuses, and they should also want to prevent the deaths of currently unsaved adults in the hope that they might become saved. But Christians cannot prevent *all* of these deaths. They lack the time, money, energy, political influence, and other resources to come even remotely close to rescuing all of the embryos, fetuses, and unsaved adults (among others) that require rescuing. These life-saving resources are scarce, and hard choices must be made.

Now, recall HMST, the principle defended in Section 2, which says that one should prioritize preventing the deaths of those who are likely to face much greater harm from dying. Unsaved adults are at risk of facing the worst harms imaginable. If they die while unsaved, they are bound for hell and will undergo intense, ceaseless suffering for all of eternity. By contrast, if embryos and fetuses are bound for heaven, then (as Himma has argued) they are not significantly harmed by death; indeed, it appears that they benefit from dying.³¹ It is evident, then, that unrescued embryos and fetuses are harmed to a *much* lesser extent than unsaved adults who end up dying and spending eternity in hell. If harm minimization is a key imperative in medical triage, it ought to be even more so in spiritual triage where the stakes are exorbitantly higher. In light of HMST, it seems clear that, other things being equal, preventing the deaths of embryos and fetuses ought to be a lower priority than preventing deaths of unsaved adults.

What does this mean in practice for the Christian pro-life movement? Most obviously, it means that the movement as it exists today—essentially as an *anti-abortion* movement—has deeply misplaced priorities and needs to dissolve, or else completely reinvent itself by developing different goals and priorities. Likewise, individual Christians who participate in pro-life activism (e.g., contributing their time, talents, or money to anti-abortion groups or organizations, lobbying politicians, picketing abortion clinics, volunteering at pregnancy crisis centers) need to redirect their efforts, financial contributions, and other resources toward more pressing causes.

None of this necessarily implies that Christians cannot continue to be opposed to abortion and view it as something sinful, regrettable, or even tragic. It's just that they cannot justifiably continue to misallocate valuable, scarce resources to prevent this practice when they could be effectively used in the service of other causes involving much, much higher spiritual stakes. Imagine a doctor in the aftermath of a natural disaster running around treating as many people with minor injuries as possible, all the while neglecting the many who have fatal but perfectly treatable injuries whose deaths could be prevented. If embryos and fetuses go to heaven, the Christian pro-life movement has been much like that doctor.

It is difficult to say precisely which issues ought to be the new priority for these Christians since this is going to depend on a wide range of complex empirical considerations. If promoting the salvation of the unsaved is a top priority, it is possible that

³¹ Himma (2002). I elaborate on the benefit claim in Section 5, D.

the time, energy, money, and resources that have gone toward combating abortion need to be redirected partially or entirely toward missionary campaigns and other means of proselytizing. Nevertheless, the key point here is about comparative priority: *Preventing the deaths of unsaved adults ought to be a higher priority than preventing the deaths of embryos and fetuses*. If embryos and fetuses go to heaven, restricting abortion needs to take a back seat to causes that help reduce mortality among adults. These include a range of public health initiatives: promoting universal access to reliable and affordable healthcare, global poverty reduction, suicide prevention, gun control, domestic violence prevention, disease prevention, disaster relief, peace-keeping, climate change initiatives, and so forth. Christians ought to care more about promoting *these* causes, and they also need to put their collective and individual support behind politicians and political parties that prioritize these sorts of issues over attempts to restrict abortion access.³² If embryos and fetuses go to heaven, it is indefensible for Christians to be “single-issue” pro-life voters. Consequently, on this second horn of the dilemma, it appears that restricting the availability and legality of abortion services should not be a top social and political priority for Christians. Their time, energy, and resources are better utilized preventing deaths of unsaved adults.

To summarize, the Afterlife Dilemma starts from the claim that embryos and fetuses that die all go to hell or they all go to heaven. It is then argued that if they go to hell, there is not a morally perfect, omnipotent, omniscient god who created our universe. If they go to heaven, restricting abortion should not be a top social and political priority. The Afterlife Dilemma implies that many Christians who are pro-life face a difficult choice. They must abandon some aspect of their current worldview, whether it is their beliefs about God, the nature of heaven and hell, the eternal fate of embryos and fetuses, or the moral importance of preventing abortions.

5. Objections and Replies

I have now presented the initial case for the Afterlife Dilemma. My objective in this section is to reinforce it by anticipating and replying to some objections. Since Section 3 revolves around a worry that has been familiar to Christian theologians for centuries and is partially addressed by the extensive literature on the problems of evil and hell, I will focus here on objections that might be raised in the less familiar terrain of Sections 2 and 4. Accordingly, this portion of the paper proceeds on the assumption that all embryos and fetuses that die go to heaven.

A. Some Christians will want to reject HMST on the grounds that it seems objectionably consequentialist in spirit and that adopting it would be a perversion of how a Christian ought to approach life and morally weighty decisions. It might be claimed that Christians need to exhibit equal respect and compassion for all people and, therefore, should not rely on some sort of afterlife calculus to decide their moral priorities. Further,

³² In the present-day United States with its two dominant political parties, Christians seem to face a spiritual triage problem in the political realm. On the one hand, many Republicans have championed measures to restrict abortions while staunchly opposing universal healthcare, interventions to curb climate change, and other important life-saving measures. On the other hand, Democrats are the primary defenders of abortion access and rights (and thus tend to thwart a central pro-life strategy for stopping abortions) but have also pushed for affordable healthcare, gun control, and climate change initiatives. If Christian voters and groups are forced to choose between supporting one of these two parties with their current agendas, and if all embryos and fetuses that die are heaven-bound, HMST appears to favor the Democrats.

they ought to oppose abortion for the reason that it is prohibited by God.³³ There is no need to take afterlife consequences into consideration at all.

This line of objection is dubious for a few reasons. Firstly, the principle of HMST is perfectly compatible with a non-consequentialist approach. Generally speaking, non-consequentialists do not, and need not, deny that consequences have moral significance. It's just that they aren't *all* that matters. HMST's inclusion of an "other things being equal" clause leaves space for other morally relevant considerations. Nevertheless, when the consequential stakes are extremely high, many non-consequentialists grant that consequences can justify actions that would not normally be justified. It might, for instance, be morally justified to kill an authoritarian political leader if doing so would stop an unjust war or genocide. Plus, HMST doesn't imply that one needs to *maximize* good consequences or welfare. It only implies that, in situations of scarcity where hard choices must be made, great differences in harm ought to settle the matter, other things being equal. The difference between everlasting harm and everlasting benefit certainly qualifies.³⁴ Moreover, Christians are often attuned to people's salvation status and allow it to guide their behavior. If this were not so, one could not make sense of missionary efforts. Finally, the initial aversion to HMST could be due to its framing in the language of harm and benefit, which may seem unrecognizably Christian. But the afterlife benefits and harms in question are ultimately a matter of whether or not a person is eventually united with God in heaven, revels in the divine presence, and attains "the beatific vision." Framing matters in this way might make a difference for some Christians, lessening their initial discomfort.³⁵

B. A related line of reasoning claims that HMST ought to be rejected because it's perfectly acceptable to strive for less significant goods. Generally speaking, we don't fault people for pursuing modest improvements to our world just because there are more pressing or important causes out there. It might be said that someone who devotes their extra time and money to reducing illiteracy in their community can't be justifiably criticized for failing to use those resources to address global poverty or urgent humanitarian crises. So, an objector might think that pro-life Christians can reasonably devote their resources to preventing abortions even if (by their own lights) there are more pressing causes.

Yet, it is debatable whether one can justify this allocation of resources if they could be effectively put toward a much more urgent cause. Maybe we fail to appreciate this because we don't normally face a stark comparison between these options. To adapt a famous example from Peter Singer,³⁶ imagine you are sitting on a park bench about to hold a literacy tutoring session with someone from your community. You suddenly see a toddler fall into a nearby pond and start splashing about. You believe the child will drown if you don't run over and help, but doing this will ruin the tutoring session. Most individuals will agree that, in this scenario, you are undoubtedly obligated to save the drowning child. And if, by some very bizarre stroke of bad luck, a nearby toddler starts drowning each

³³ It should be noted that many have disputed the claim that the Christian Bible prohibits abortion: e.g., <https://thewalrus.ca/what-does-the-bible-actually-say-about-abortion>, <https://ffrf.org/about/getting-acquainted/item/18514-what-does-the-bible-say-about-abortion>.

³⁴ In their defense of the pro-life position, Blackshaw and Rodger (1999) appeal to a triage principle much like HMST: "[S]ome deaths are worse than others in their consequences, and so we should also prioritise prevention of these deaths if possible" (109). These authors make no mention of afterlife consequences, however.

³⁵ Cf. Himma (2002), 180–81.

³⁶ Singer, Peter. 1972. "Famine, affluence, and morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1(3): 229–43.

time you sit down for a tutoring session, you're obligated to prioritize preventing deaths over preventing illiteracy each and every time.³⁷

One may find grounds for rejecting this conclusion, which assuredly runs counter to everyday thinking about morality. But even if it is permissible to devote one's scarce resources to illiteracy rather than malnutrition, disease, or death, things may change as the gap in moral importance widens. The gap between the everlasting benefits of heaven and the everlasting harms of hell could hardly be wider.

C. It could be said that even if HMST is true, we will rarely be justified in applying it. A medic can have fairly good evidence about soldiers' physical injuries, but reliable evidence about people's salvation status is extremely hard to come by. Thus, even if you ought to prioritize treating S2 over S1 in Battlefield, you can reasonably choose to rescue P1 or P2 in Lifeboat—since you're not in a good enough epistemic position to do spiritual triage.

On the contrary, many Christians seem to think that one *can* have reasonably good evidence that a person is saved. They often believe they themselves will go to heaven and that specific deceased loved ones are already there.³⁸ And even if one could not have good evidence that a person is saved, there might be good evidence that certain people are *not* saved—like those who are grossly immoral, openly ridicule religion, or proudly identify as atheists.

Even if the objector's point about our epistemic limitations held true regarding the salvation status of adults, it needn't apply when it comes to embryos and fetuses. There might be compelling grounds for believing that all embryos and fetuses that die go to heaven (as we are currently assuming). This would take the form of philosophical and theological argumentation rather than empirical observations about the behavior of individual fetuses. In that event, even if case-by-case assessments about the salvation status of adults were not trustworthy, one could still responsibly apply HMST and prioritize rescuing adults (who may or may not be saved) over embryos and fetuses.

D. Some will resist the application of HMST to the abortion issue by claiming that other things *aren't* equal when it comes to preventing deaths of embryos and fetuses versus preventing deaths of unsaved adults. For instance, the over 70 million abortions and over 140 million miscarriages that occur each year dramatically outnumber the deaths of unsaved adults. (In 2019, there were roughly 55 million deaths worldwide.³⁹) In addition, it might be argued that Christians can use their resources to prevent far more embryo and fetus deaths than unsaved adult deaths. And so, one might claim that focusing on abortion is justified because it's a more efficient use of Christians' resources.

It is true that embryo and fetus deaths greatly outnumber deaths of unsaved adults and, for the sake of argument, let's suppose that the second claim about efficiency can be convincingly defended. In view of Christians' beliefs, there is nevertheless good reason to think that unsaved adults ought to be prioritized over embryos and fetuses. For once we take all of the possible earthly and afterlife consequences into consideration, it appears

³⁷ Here one might object that single tutoring sessions have a negligible impact on a person's literacy level, and so obviously the drowning child has moral priority. But the conclusion remains quite plausible even if we exercise some imaginative freedom and contemplate a hypothetical scenario where the choice is between saving a toddler's life or bestowing full literacy on someone who will otherwise never achieve it.

³⁸ A 2014 CBS News poll found that 82% of Americans who believe in heaven are "fairly certain" that they will end up there. Only 2% were fairly certain they're headed to hell. <https://ropercenter.comell.edu/paradise-pollled-americans-and-afterlife>.

³⁹ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/the-top-10-causes-of-death>.

that death *benefits* embryos and fetuses—in the sense that death makes them overall better off than they otherwise would have been.⁴⁰ Death brings them into a state of heavenly bliss rather than having years or decades of earthly life. Even a remarkably rich and fulfilling earthly life will pale in comparison to the richness of life in heaven. Plus, dying prior to reaching the age of accountability ensures that a person avoids being exposed to the risk of eternal damnation. Even if being aborted is harmful to the fetus in some respects, death is a colossal benefit to any embryo or fetus that would have ultimately gone to hell had it not died. And so, strange as it may seem, Christians ought to believe that preventing abortions often or always *harms* those embryos and fetuses much more than it helps or benefits them. Meanwhile, the unsaved who die have an eternity of inescapable suffering ahead of them. Viewed in this light, it seems false that preventing a larger share of embryonic and fetal deaths ought to take priority over preventing a smaller share of unsaved adult deaths. From a Christian perspective, that prioritization seems to bring greater overall harm to everyone involved.

At this juncture, let it be stressed that this does not justify ignoring or minimizing any pain or suffering that an abortion procedure might cause in a fetus. Causing extreme pain and suffering in any sentient being, human or non-human, is doubtless a morally serious matter. However, in the United States the overwhelming majority of abortions occur in the first trimester.⁴¹ While there is evolving research and discussion regarding precisely when fetuses develop the capacity to experience pain, the prevailing view among contemporary researchers is that fetal pain isn't likely to be an issue in first-trimester abortions.⁴² Yet, even in those cases where a fetus *is* painfully killed, the Christian viewpoint under consideration seems to imply that the death—horrendous and tragic though it may be—is nonetheless an extraordinary benefit to the fetus since it guarantees a heavenly fate and spares it from the risk of eternal suffering.⁴³

E. Pro-life Christians might say that their anti-abortion campaign ought to be a top priority because it allows them to feed multiple birds with one scone. Firstly, it prevents the tragic outcome of innocent human beings dying prematurely. Secondly, it prevents the *killing* of innocent human beings, which is a grave moral evil prohibited by God. It might be asserted that preventing killings has moral priority over preventing deaths by natural causes. Thirdly, it promotes the salvation of unsaved adults. This is partly achieved by stopping people from committing grave sins that will increase their odds of facing eternal damnation, and partly by using anti-abortion activities as an occasion to spread the word about Christian teachings—to the general public, as well as abortion providers and women

⁴⁰ This point is defended in Himma (2002) and Kershner (2018), ch. 2.

⁴¹ From 2009 to 2018, over 90% of U.S. abortions occurred in the first trimester (≤ 13 weeks gestation), with roughly three-fourths of all abortions occurring at or before 9 weeks. Approximately 7% of abortions occurred during weeks 14–20, and 1.3% of abortions occurred at 21 weeks or beyond; <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/ss/ss6907a1.htm>.

⁴² Belluck, Pam. September 16, 2013. "Complex science at issue in politics of fetal pain," *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/17/health/complex-science-at-issue-in-politics-of-fetal-pain.html>; Anand, K. J. S. and Barbara Clancy. 2006. "Fetal pain?" *Pain: Clinical Updates* 14(2): 1–4; Derbyshire, Stuart W. G. and John C. Bockmann. 2020. "Reconsidering fetal pain," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 46: 3–6. For a dissenting voice, see Thill, Bridget. 2022. "Fetal pain in the first trimester," *The Linacre Quarterly* 89(1): 73–100.

⁴³ Regardless, it makes good sense to advocate for humane and painless abortion methods for situations where a fetus has the capacity to suffer. This is a reason to want abortions to be regulated rather than illegal and unregulated. On this theme, read Kluge, Eike-Henner W. 2015. "Ethical considerations on methods used in abortions," *Health Care Analysis* 23: 1–18.

who are seeking or considering an abortion. Public health initiatives might help to prevent deaths of unsaved adults, but opposing abortion can directly promote the salvation of unsaved adults and also reduce tragic deaths and sinful acts. Isn't this a worthier use of Christians' resources?

There are several critical points to be made. Firstly, it is debatable whether an appeal to the killing/letting-die distinction works in this context. The standard appeal to that distinction (which is itself a matter of controversy) suggests that it is morally worse for an agent to actively kill someone than to allow them to die by other causes. It is not clear that the distinction retains its moral importance once we shift to talking about the preventative actions of third parties.⁴⁴ Imagine that you find yourself on a battlefield and have the chance to rescue one of two soldiers. If one is about to be shot by a sniper and the other is about to be crushed by a falling tree, it's not obvious that the moral priority is to save the first one. From your standpoint, failing to prevent either death would be a case of letting someone die by other causes.

Even if the prevention of killings does have greater moral urgency than the prevention of naturally caused deaths, there's a glaring flaw with the above reasoning. It overlooks the fact that *many unsaved adults are killed as well*. Christian pro-life advocates who take the killing/letting-die distinction to have moral importance from the third-party standpoint could invest their time and resources in efforts to prevent violent crime, domestic abuse, gun violence, war, and so forth. HMST suggests that these latter causes are the higher moral priority.⁴⁵

It should also be questioned whether anti-abortion efforts are all that successful at promoting salvation. Firstly, it is debatable whether performing or authorizing an abortion is more (or much more) sinful than having the desire, willingness, and intention to have an abortion but finding that one cannot due to external restrictions. Jesus purportedly claimed that "committing adultery in one's heart" is a sin just as committing actual adultery is.⁴⁶ If "committing an abortion in one's heart" is a significant sin, then even successful anti-abortion initiatives may not do much to reduce the amount of sin. Secondly, Christians standardly believe that committing morally heinous acts need not preclude one's eventual salvation. There are countless examples of prominent Christians who had deeply sinful pasts, including the Apostle Paul. If committing serious sins is compatible with later being saved, it's not obvious that preventing people from carrying out such sins is an effective salvation-promotion strategy. Thirdly, it is far from obvious that many popular pro-life strategies—e.g., displaying gory pictures of aborted fetuses, picketing outside of abortion clinics, lobbying for abortion-restricting legislation and policies—do much to lead unsaved adults to embrace God. Fourthly, in the United States more than half of the women

⁴⁴ This point is made in Pogge (2010), 126, and Berg, Amy. 2017. "Abortion and miscarriage," *Philosophical Studies* 174(5):1217–26, 1222–23.

⁴⁵ At this stage, some Christians will appeal to the *innocence* of embryos and fetuses as a justification for prioritizing abortion prevention over efforts to prevent the killing of unsaved adults. Although this issue warrants further investigation, let it be stressed that this view treats innocence as being *extremely* morally weighty. It implies that the killing of an innocent fetus is so much worse than the killing of a "non-innocent" unsaved adult that one ought to prioritize preventing the former *even though both persons will be worse off*. If not rescued, the unsaved adult will be guaranteed an eternity of suffering, as opposed to having some possibility of escaping this fate and enjoying eternal rewards in heaven. Meanwhile, the innocent person who is rescued will be exposed to the risk of eternal damnation rather than having guaranteed entry to heaven. It is hard to believe that the killing of innocents is so heinous that it justifies a decision to dramatically *worsen*, rather than improve, the afterlife prospects of those very innocents.

⁴⁶ Matthew 5:27–28.

who have abortions already self-identify as Christians.⁴⁷ Exposure to a pro-Christianity message will not be all that enlightening for many of those women. Finally, even if anti-abortion initiatives were effective at promoting the salvation of some unsaved adults, they do not promote the salvation of embryos and fetuses. From the Christian perspective, they are actually *jeopardizing* their eternal future in heaven by exposing them to the risk of eternal damnation.

F. Perhaps the most challenging line of objection to the second horn of the Afterlife Dilemma is that it appears to have multiple counterintuitive implications:

- Preventing deaths of infants, young children, and people born with severe mental impairments ought to be a lower priority than preventing deaths of unsaved adults.
- If an individual is forced to choose between rescuing a single unsaved person or a large number of heaven-bound people (which might include saved adults, toddlers, or infants), the unsaved person must be rescued, other things being equal.
- One ought to prioritize preventing deaths in non-Christian countries over countries with a higher proportion of Christians.
- Christians with good evidence that they themselves are saved cannot justifiably make use of expensive healthcare resources that could be put toward preventing deaths of unsaved adults.
- The ideal Christian will regulate their behavior based on calculations about people's likelihood of becoming saved.

There are doubtless many other surprising implications to be discovered. For any putative counterintuitive implication, one may: (1) deny that it is truly an implication of the reasoning offered in Sections 2 and 4; (2) accept it as an implication but try to show it's not as implausible as it initially seems; or (3) accept that it is a counterintuitive implication, and either accept or reject the view along with its implications.

I cannot here examine whether the putative implications above are actually implied by the Afterlife Dilemma. But if they are, and if they are indeed profoundly counterintuitive, this does not necessarily mean that they are too counterintuitive or absurd to be accepted. This is because standard pro-life beliefs apparently have deeply counterintuitive implications of their own. Various writers have claimed that believing the pro-life position should lead one to accept one or more of the following conclusions:

- Considering the vast number of miscarriages that occur every year (especially in the first days and weeks of life), we ought to divert resources away from efforts to prevent cancer, heart disease, and infectious diseases—and perhaps also efforts to prevent induced abortions—and put them toward preventing the spontaneous abortion of embryos.⁴⁸
- If an individual is forced to rescue either a human child or a large number of frozen embryos, one ought to choose the embryos, other things being equal.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/induced-abortion-united-states>.

⁴⁸ Murphy, Timothy F. 1985. "The moral significance of spontaneous abortion," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 11: 79–83; Digby (1996); McMahan, Jeff. 2002. *The Ethics of Killing: Problems at the Margins of Life* (pp. 165–166). Oxford: Oxford University Press; Ord, Toby. 2008. "The scourge: Moral implications of natural embryo loss," *American Journal of Bioethics* 8(7): 12–19; Lovering, Rob. 2013. "The substance view: A critique," *Bioethics* 27(5): 263–70; and Berg (2017).

⁴⁹ Annas, George J. 1989. "At law: A French homunculus in a Tennessee court," *Hastings Center Report* 19(6): 20–22.

- Christians are obligated to adopt and implant unclaimed cryopreserved embryos.⁵⁰
- In a typical case of abortion, the woman and the medical professionals who carry out the abortion ought to be convicted of murder or conspiracy to commit murder.⁵¹
- It is defensible to assassinate abortion doctors.⁵²

In as much as these are truly implications of the Christian pro-life position, this could be a detrimental problem for the pro-life view.⁵³ Abandoning standard pro-life beliefs—including the view that preventing embryo and fetus deaths ought to be a top priority—would help to avoid some or all of these implications. The larger point, though, is that evaluating the plausibility of the second horn conclusion of the Afterlife Dilemma requires a holistic valuation of how it fares against competing views—including non-religious perspectives. It might, or it might not, turn out to be the lesser of counterintuitive evils.

6. The Afterlife Dilemma as *Reductio*

Up till now, I've framed the reasoning in this paper as a simple dilemma, but this framing holds fixed various claims and assumptions about heaven and hell and gives the deceptive impression that Christian pro-life advocates are left with only two options: deny the existence of a morally perfect god, or deny the moral primacy of abortion. In fact, there are other options. This is made more apparent by reframing the Afterlife Dilemma as a certain type of *reductio ad absurdum* argument. In this style of reasoning, one tentatively assumes that some claim is true "for the sake of argument" and then shows how that claim, in combination with some plausible premises, yields a logical contradiction of the form *A and ¬A*.⁵⁴ Since the claim leads to an absurdity, it is rejected as false. What follows is a *reductio* of the four-part view, *Christian Pro-Life**.

1. Christian Pro-Life*:
 - a. Restricting abortions ought to be a top social and political priority.
 - b. There exists a morally perfect, all-knowing, and all-powerful god who created our universe.
 - c. Either all embryos and fetuses that die go to heaven for eternity or they all go to hell for eternity.

⁵⁰ Schoenig, Richard. 1998. "Abortion, Christianity, and consistency," *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* 5(1): 32–37; Lovering, Rob. 2020. "A moral argument for frozen human embryo adoption," *Bioethics* 34(3): 242–51.

⁵¹ Lovering (2013).

⁵² Schoenig (1998); Stretton, D. 2008. "Critical notice—*Defending Life: A Moral and Legal Case against Abortion Choice* by Francis J. Beckwith," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 34(11): 793–97, 795; Kershner (2018), Section II.

⁵³ Much has already been written about these alleged implications of the pro-life position: Friberg-Fernros, Henrik. 2015. "A critique of Rob Lovering's Criticism of the substance view," *Bioethics* 29(3): 211–16; Lovering, Rob. 2017. "The substance view: A critique (Part 3)," *Bioethics* 31(4): 305–12; Blackshaw and Rodger (2019); Colgrove, Nicholas, Bruce Philip Blackshaw, and Daniel Rodger. 2021. "Prolife hypocrisy: Why inconsistency arguments do not matter," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 47(12): 1–6; Hershenov, David B. 2020, "What must pro-lifers believe about the moral status of embryos?" *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 101: 186–202; and Simkulet, William. 2022. "The inconsistency argument: Why apparent pro-life inconsistency undermines opposition to induced abortion," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 48(7): 461–65.

⁵⁴ For readers less familiar with logic, "A and ¬A" means that some claim (A) is true *and* not true. That is absurd.

- d. Hell is an immensely harmful afterlife destination from which there is no escape; heaven is an immensely beneficial afterlife destination from which there is no escape. [Assumed for *reductio ad absurdum* (RAA)]
2. If (1d) and all embryos and fetuses that die go to hell for eternity, then \neg (1b).
3. If (1d) and all embryos and fetuses that die go to heaven for eternity, then \neg (1a).
4. Therefore, either \neg (1b) or \neg (1a). [from 1c, 1d, 2, 3]
5. Therefore, \neg (1b and 1a). [from 4]
6. Therefore, (1b and 1a) and \neg (1b and 1a). [from 1b, 1a, 5]
7. Therefore, \neg Christian Pro-Life* [from 1–6, RAA]

This argument assumes that the popular Christian pro-life view in question is true, asserts two plausible premises (which I have defended in Sections 2–5), and then derives a logical contradiction at line 6. This leads to the conclusion that this Christian pro-life view is false. The above argument is logically valid. If its premises are true, then Christian Pro-Life* is an untenable view that must be rejected.

Pro-life Christians have two broad ways to respond. The first way is to defend Christian Pro-Life* by challenging the argument—specifically, by finding reasonable grounds for rejecting premise 2 or 3. In as much as both premises raise complicated questions about theology and ethics, I cannot pretend to have conclusively defended the Afterlife Dilemma or dismantled every objection that was discussed (particularly the counterintuitive-implication objection raised in 5F), and there are bound to be plenty of unanticipated objections that warrant consideration. Still, I hope to have provided a strong *prima facie* case for the Afterlife Dilemma.

The other line of reply is to accept that the argument is compelling and give up on Christian Pro-Life* by rejecting one or more of its four components. Specifically, Christians could revise their views about (1a) the comparative moral importance of preventing abortions, (1b) the existence or nature of God, (1c) the eternal fate of embryos and fetuses, and/or (1d) the nature of the afterlife. Different people will favor different replies.

Some Christians may decide that, in light of the considerations raised here, restricting abortions really shouldn't be at the top of Christians' social and political agenda. One attractive feature of this option is that it does not appear to require any major alteration in their fundamental theological and metaphysical worldview. One can believe that embryos and fetuses go to heaven and continue to believe in the traditional Christian conceptions of God, heaven, and hell. This option, though, does force one to grapple with the alleged counterintuitive implications of that view.

Another route for pro-life Christians is to modify their metaphysical views about the eternal fate of embryos and fetuses, or the nature of heaven and hell. For example, one might embrace the view that embryos and fetuses face some relatively neutral afterlife or annihilation, or one might adopt a mixed view in which some fetuses are heaven-bound while others are hell-bound. Alternatively, one might revise one's understanding of what hell involves and come to believe that the harms of hell are rather mild or that people in hell have the freedom to escape. Or one might accept the universalist view that hell is a temporary destination and that all souls eventually find their way to heaven. At least some of these belief revisions could render the reasoning in this paper inapplicable, and abandoning the traditional conception of hell could help Christians avoid the (also very threatening) problem of hell. However, this shift may weaken Christians' sense of moral urgency surrounding abortion and the saving of souls. These matters seem far more pressing if embryos, fetuses, and unsaved adults are at risk of eternal torment.

Last but not least, Christian pro-life advocates could decide to abandon their belief in the god of traditional Christianity. They might make modest revisions to their views and start believing in a god with limited power, imperfect knowledge, or a corrupt moral character. Such a god may or may not be deserving of humanity's respect and allegiance. However, many people will be uncomfortable adopting an idiosyncratic religious worldview that is not embraced by a mainstream religious denomination. Their "live options" may be atheism, agnosticism, or some non-theistic major religion, and some of these options may prompt further alterations in their views about abortion. Most obviously, those who become atheists or agnostics will probably stop believing in heaven and hell, and they may also abandon the view that humans acquire full moral status at or near conception, as that view is often bound up with religious beliefs about an immortal soul. This, in turn, may undermine their opposition to abortion.