Rights, Values and Welfare in Parliamentary Debates on Abortion

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Abstract

Ronald Dworkin has argued that debates about abortion are not best understood in terms of conflicts of rights, but instead by reference to a principle of the sanctity of life. His attempt to reconstruct the terms of debate contrasts with the account that political actors involved in the debate give. This paper looks at Dworkin's theoretical claim against the experience of UK parliamentary debate. A methodological preface explains why it might be theoretically important to consider empirical debates. Dworkin's point of view is outlined before examining one UK parliamentary debate on abortion, that of 1966, a debate that set the framework for current legislation. The analysis is conducted using automated content analysis, by means of the program Alceste. It reveals the principal themes of the debate, notably the contrast between a stress on the sanctity of life and a stress on human welfare. The paper concludes with an evaluation of the extent to which the debate is to be thought of in terms of values rather than rights and suggests that considerations of welfare were important, considerations that cannot be reduced either to rights or to values.
Introduction

Speaking in a parliamentary debate in 1988 on a private member's bill to reform the 1967 law on abortion of which he had been the architect, the then David Steel expressed the following view:

'I have never come across anyone who is pro-abortion. Most of us who support the present legislation have always operated on the basis that abortion is the lesser of two evils in some circumstances. I hope that the Church of England will reprint its detailed and objective report, "Abortion – an Athical [sic] Discussion" published in 1965, which traces the ethics of abortion over the centuries. It said:

"This discussion will proceed … on the supposition that there may be cases in which, granted this general right of the foetus to live and develop, this right may be offset by other conflicting rights; and the proper function of the criminal law is, in a restricted area, to regulate the adjustment of those rights when they cannot be, or are unlikely to be, adjusted by other means."

(Hansard, House of Commons, 22 January 1988, col. 1240).

This understanding of the issue – that public policy on abortion is a matter of the regulation of the adjustment of competing rights – is one that other speakers in the various debates that have taken place share, although they do not always express it with the degree of clarity that David Steel achieved. It is also an understanding that many others, participants and commentators on abortion policy have shared.

In a widely cited book, Life's Dominion, first published in 1993, Ronald Dworkin challenged this conventional understanding of the abortion issue (Dworkin, 1993). He argued that differences over abortion policy were not well understood if they were framed in terms of controversies about moral and legal rights, in particular the rights of the foetus. Instead, he argued, the controversy about abortion should be understood as one about the ways in which human life has intrinsic value and can be regarded as sacred just in itself (Dworkin, 1993: 11).
On this account abortion is wrong because it disregards or insults the intrinsic value or sacred character (these two phrases are used interchangeably in his discussion) of any stage or form of human life. So, even when an abortion is morally permissible, it raises serious moral considerations, because of the violence it does to life. However, these moral considerations should not involve the thought that the foetus is a person with rights, and therefore that in the case of any abortion murder or homicide has been committed.

Dworkin's argument is pursued with his characteristic subtlety and verve. It was also a sensitive intervention in a political debate that, at the time it was published (and perhaps just as much now), was harsh and uncivilised in the US and elsewhere. It attempted to build bridges between the liberal and restrictionist views, whilst at the same time evincing one understanding of the liberal position. However, in line with Dworkin's other work, it took as its principal points of reference judgements by the US Supreme Court. As the quotation from David Steel with which I began shows, there have been other sites of debate. These have shown interesting parallels to the discussions that Dworkin cites from US sources, but also interesting differences, differences that may bear on the more general debate about the relative merits of courts versus legislatures in democratic theory.

In this paper, I seek to confront the Dworkinian account with the experience of UK parliamentary debate. I begin in the next section with a methodological preface, before going on in the subsequent section to lay out the basic elements of Dworkin's point of view. I then examine the character of one UK parliamentary debate on abortion, that of 1966, a debate that set the framework for current legislation. This analysis is primarily conducted using automated content analysis, by means of the program Alceste. This analysis reveals the principal themes of the debate. I conclude with an evaluation of the extent to which the debate is to be thought of in terms of values rather than rights. I suggest that, when we attend to the themes of the debate, we learn as much about the understanding of rights as we do about the role of values. I also suggest that the debates make crucial reference to considerations of 'welfare', considerations that cannot be reduced either to rights or to values.

**Methodological Preface**

Why should we be concerned with the conduct of parliamentary debate in a normative context? After all, there is a well-known, and generally valid, distinction between 'is' and 'ought'. We can understand how discussion and debate might in practice affect the way that legislators vote and decide without that entailing any claims that practically influential
arguments merit the influence that they have. Understanding how parliaments debate does not set constraints on how they should debate. Nor does understanding how they ought to debate necessarily enable us to understand how they do debate. Indeed, there would be little point in normative theory if it simply ended up endorsing existing practices. A normative account of parliamentary debate in particular and deliberative democracy in general should lead to proposals for reform and improvement, or at least to some way of evaluating the quality of debate (Steiner et al., 2004). All this can be granted, without denying that there is something of normative value that can be learnt from the study of parliamentary debates. The relevant methodological arguments for looking at parliamentary debates are various.

One argument can be traced back to J.L. Austin. In his discussion of performatives, Austin noted that in discussions of the uses of language, some philosophers were apt to invent new uses to solve any and every sort of difficulty. They were also prone to talk of the 'infinite' uses of language (a claim that Austin satirised by noting that sometimes to prove their point about the infinite uses of language, philosophers would list as many as seventeen). Austin then went on to suggest that, even if there were a very large number of uses of language, this ought not to stop us studying them, just as entomologists have listed the number of species of beetle that there are (Austin, 1970: 234). In other words, we should think of the study of language along the line of natural history, in which we classify as part of the process of understanding. We can think of this Austinian programme as an attempt to understand what people say in terms of the natural history of human speech.

A second methodological argument is derived from Quentin Skinner's reply to Namierite and Marxist doubts about the importance of political principles in explaining political action, at least in the sense of providing an account of sufficient conditions for action (Skinner, 1974). Namier, for example, argued that 'party names and cant' provided us with no guide when we try to explain the realities of political life (the influence of Pareto is obvious here). Some have sought to reply to this position by arguing that there are good empirical reasons why we should take what people say seriously in explaining their actions. Skinner's position, by contrast, rests upon a conceptual argument. This argument is that, in situations in which agents seek to legitimate actions that might otherwise seem untoward, they need to draw upon stocks of vocabulary that will provide such legitimation. The understanding of the terms of debate, therefore, becomes a way in which we understand the conceptual and rhetorical devices open to actors when seeking political legitimation.

A third argument turns on the affiliation that has been noted between legislation and moral argument, particularly by Onora O'Neill (1989). For O'Neill, Kant's work is to be understood
in terms of a series of connected political and juridical metaphors that underlie even his account of theoretical reason. By contrast with Cartesian rationalism, which begins with the solitary individual directed towards introspection and meditation, Kant's critical account of rationality offers an account of reason in terms of a politics of reason involving tribunal, debate and community (O'Neill, 1989: 17). On this account, reasoning about moral questions is to be thought of on the model of citizens reasoning together about matters of legislation. To reason to a principle is to provide the way in which one legislates for oneself individually and, by means of public reason, collectively with others.

A final argument develops this constructivist turn in political theory. If we think of political theory as the attempt to construct an understanding of principles that are implicit in a political culture, then we can think about parliamentary debates as ways of drawing the contours of that political culture. However, one advantage parliamentary debates possess over judicial judgements is that the dialectical character of parliamentary debates means that they contain the conflicts that are implicit in a political culture. We are not looking to construct one coherent political position out of the elements of a political culture, but instead seeking to understand the tensions that are built into that culture. In other words, political cultures are defined not in terms of a single set of principles, but in terms of the characteristic conflicts of principles that they contain. If we think of dialectical debate as being in some sort of equilibrium, such that there is no point that could be made by one side that would shift opponents on the other side, then the construction that we are seeking for is a reflective equilibrium of the equilibrium of debate.

Given these arguments, it makes sense to look at parliamentary debates. In the case of abortion, it will be helpful to see these against the background of Dworkin's own account of the moral logic of the abortion debate.

**Dworkin on Abortion Debates**

Dworkin's position begins by making what he calls a crucial distinction. It is introduced by way in characterising the views of those who are opposed to abortion.

>'One side insists that human life begins at conception, that a fetus is a person from that moment, that abortion is murder or homicide or an assault on the sanctity of life.'

(Dworkin, 1993: 11).
Dworkin then seeks to unpack this claim by making a crucial distinction in the way it is to be interpreted. One interpretation is that foetuses are creatures with interests of their own, including an interest in remaining alive. As such, a foetus has the same rights as other human beings. Dworkin calls this the 'derivative' objection to abortion. The second interpretation of the claim is that human life has intrinsic value and is sacred just in itself. On this account abortion is wrong because it disregards or insults the intrinsic value or sacred character (these two phrases are used interchangeably) of any stage or form of human life. This is called the 'detached' objection. (Dworkin, 1993: 11).

One element of Dworkin's argument is that if we phrase the issue in terms of intrinsic value, we see that the differences between liberals and conservatives are less sharp that the rights view would suggest. He takes Joseph Donceel's view (Dworkin, 1993: 48-9) for example that the foetus does not have rights but deserves respect, as an example of a liberal Catholic view that would permit abortion in some grave circumstances. The differences between liberals and conservatives more generally are 'less important than their shared respect for human life as intrinsically and overwhelmingly valuable.' (Dworkin, 1993: 49). Both sides in the abortion controversy share the view that the individual human life is sacred.

The argument from the sacred character of human life offers an argument against abortion independently of any view about the extent to which the foetus is a person or has the rights that persons have (Dworkin, 1993: 12). At first sight, it might seem strange both to make this claim and to make it in the context of an argument that liberals and conservatives share the same fundamental commitment. After all, someone might say that one of the reasons for ascribing rights to persons and other living beings is to mark and recognise their intrinsic value. To attribute rights just is one way, and an important way, of marking the moral significance of the being to which we are referring. Moreover, an argument from intrinsic value might seem to be even stronger than an argument from rights, but then it becomes unclear how it could be shared by both sides of the debate.

The way out of this puzzle is to note that Dworkin thinks that an argument cast in terms of intrinsic value has weaker practical significance than one case in terms of rights. He says that if you hold to the rights conception, you think of the foetus as a full moral person with rights and interests equal to those of any other member of the moral community from the point of its conception (Dworkin, 1993: 13). Yet, if one is consistent in this position, it becomes difficult to see why abortion should ever be allowed. Where rights are involved, protecting people from assault is one of government's most central duties (Dworkin, 1993: 31). In cases of rape or incest, no one thinks that the foetus is anything other than an innocent party and this
argument may even be applied to the case where the mother's life is at stake (Dworkin, 1993: 32). Even if, in this latter case, we seek to derive the right of the mother from a principle of self-defence, few people believe, Dworkin claims, that third parties are entitled to help others in matters of self-defence. In short, to hold that a foetus has the right to life, according to Dworkin, would be to saddle oneself with strong practical inferences that are seldom met with in the common sense morality that is prevalent on the abortion issue, even the common sense morality of those who are conservative on the issue.

The argument is also tied to a second claim, namely that it is difficult to make sense of the idea that a foetus has interests of its own, including an interest in not being destroyed from the moment of its conception (Dworkin, 1993: 15). Those beings who are on the way to being distinctive forms of life do not have the interests and rights that those forms of life have. If an unfertilised ovum could be turned into a human being, menstruation would not be against the ovum's interests. We could not say that its fundamental rights were being violated each month (Dworkin, 1993: 16). Similarly Frankenstein's monster just before the switched was pulled would not have an interest in becoming that creature. These examples are intended to show that no creature has interests just by virtue of the fact that it is en route to becoming a full human being.

Creatures can have an interest in avoiding pain, but Dworkin relies upon a study that shows that pain is not possible before 22-23 weeks gestation. Similarly, the more complex capacities that can ground interests (to enjoy and form affections and emotions) are likely to develop even later. So the crucial claim is whether abortion is against the interests of the foetus depends upon the extent to which the foetus has interests at the time of the abortion (Dworkin, 1993: 19). We should also leave aside the question of whether the foetus is a person, because it is too ambiguous to be helpful (Dworkin, 1993: 22-3). When the term person is used, it is only in the practical sense that ought to be meant is that the creature should be treated as a person. Whether the foetus is a constitutional person therefore means whether it should be treated according to the Constitution as other persons are required to be treated.

What then is the content of the other claim that objections to abortion are based upon a sense of intrinsic value or the sacred character of human life? The core of the religious claim is understood as one which asserts the idea that any instance of human life has intrinsic and sacred value (Dworkin, 1993: 36). Catholic teaching cited (Dworkin, 1993: 39) involves the view that every human being has a right to life and physical integrity. But there is a question about whether Thomistic hylomorphism (the view that form and substance need to be
compatible, so that a creature with a soul would need a soul-like form) would concur with that judgement or would say that the soul enters the body at the point at which sentience is possible (Dworkin, 1993: 42). The orthodox Catholic view might seem to be an expression of the principle of the sanctity of life, but it can be challenged. This might seem then to be an advantage of what Dworkin calls the detached strategy. If the real concern is the sanctity of life regarded as a value independently of the view that the foetus is a person with rights, then it would avoid the complicated metaphysics associated with the rights view. Indeed, the sources cited by Dworkin (1993: 43) suggest that abortion was regarded as a sin even when it was thought to be unclear whether the foetus had a soul or not.

The most important implication of the intrinsic value view is that the sanctity of life is a contestable value (Dworkin, 1993: 151). For Dworkin, a state protects a contestable value by encouraging people to accept it as contestable and deciding for themselves what it means. If you hold to the view that the sanctity of life is the central value at issue, you can believe that a decision on abortion should nonetheless be left to the conscience of the person most affected by it (Dworkin, 1993: 15). This he links to the idea of freedom of conscience (Dworkin, 1993: 15), a link that becomes important because it is tied to an ideal of government in which the state should not impose its views upon citizens about matters of basic value. The dispute has a quasi-religious nature and it is no part of government to stamp out one of these views.

A second important implication for Dworkin is that the appeal to intrinsic value helps make sense of the view that those who are opposed to abortion are acting in support of an 'ethic of life'. One trend among some religious groups is the emergence of such an ethic. Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago, for example, is cited as someone who argues that those who oppose abortion should also oppose the death penalty and work towards a fairer health policy. Dworkin points out that the inconsistency objection loses its force if one believes that the criminal has forfeited his right to life (Dworkin, 1993: 49). Hence, he is inclined to believe that it is more plausible to reconstruct Bernardin's position on the basis of a respect for life principle rather than a rights principle.

This, then, is the reconstructive argument that Dworkin advances. How far could it serve to reconstruct the logic of parliamentary debates as distinct from the logic of the US Supreme Court, which is Dworkin's own point of reference? In the next section, I set out one approach before seeking to answer this question.
UK Parliamentary Debate: Source and Methods

In the UK the main legislative framework on abortion was determined by the 1967 legislation introduced as a private member's bill by the then David Steel as a Liberal MP in the House of Commons. (It should be noted that legislation in Scotland has followed different principles, a point made by Steel, himself a Scottish MP, in the debate on his own bill.) The second reading debate for this legislation took place on 22 July 1966, and it is this debate that I shall analyse (for a fuller analysis, see Weale, Bicquelet and Bara, 2007).

Before 1967 abortion was governed by the Offences against the Person Act of 1861, which made it a criminal offence to use any unlawful substance or instrument to secure a miscarriage. However, because the act did not define what a lawful substance or instrument might be, the law developed through a series of cases, the most important of which was that of Bourne in 1938, in which a judge directed the jury that a medical practitioner would be acting lawfully if he was convinced that without an abortion the woman would be seriously harmed either physically or mentally. However, as a piece of case law, this left the conditions unclear as to when an abortion could be lawfully undertaken. The Steel bill, therefore, was not an attempt to make something legal that had previously been illegal in all circumstances, but an attempt to specify more precisely in statute the conditions under which an abortion would be lawful. The 1967 gave statutory effect to the case law defence, added a condition that permitted abortion when the social circumstances of the mother were adverse, specified that the need for the operation should be certified by two medical practitioners and imposed a twenty-eight week term on permissible abortions. It is important to the character of the 1966 debate that it was proposed in the context of the deficiencies of the existing case law, rather than being discussed as a pure issue of principle.

My approach in this paper is to analyse these debates using automated content analysis. The particular approach used follows the procedures contained in Alceste (see the Methodological Appendix for a more detailed discussion.). The use of Alceste the political science of legislative debates has been urged by Cheryl Schonhardt-Bailey (2005, 2006). Unlike other approaches to automated content analysis, Alceste does not require the researcher to specify a dictionary, but instead searches for the co-occurrence of those content terms that give meaning to a text, discarding function words that serve a purely grammatical purpose. The basic unit of analysis is, in effect, a quasi-sentence (hereinafter simply called a 'sentence'), that is to say a unit of expression that has some grammatical and lexical coherence, and in which issues are thematised. Alceste groups these quasi-sentences together with one another according to a $\chi^2$ measure of association, taking the $\chi^2$ measure as a metric of distance rather
than a test of statistical significance. Initially, two groups of quasi-sentences are separated comprising the greatest measure of difference, and each of these classes is further separated to the point where no major partitionings would be justified by the $\chi^2$ metric. In effect, the Alceste partitioning of a parliamentary debate identifies the main dimensions of the content of that debate as those dimensions can be identified by the different use of characteristic words.

Although the number of dimensions is generated within Alceste by the purely formal properties of the co-occurrence of words, the content of the characteristic sentences associated with each class of sentence can allow one to give a substantive interpretation to these statistically defined categories. This enables one not only to interpret the categories as dimensions of debate one by one but also to interpret the correspondence analysis which Alceste also conducts. Correspondence analysis is an exploratory data technique providing a simultaneous analysis of rows and columns in a two-way data table and it is one of a wide family of such techniques (Nishisato, 2007: chapter 3). It provides a two-dimensional plot of multidimensional data in such a way as maximally to account for the variance in the data. In the case of textual data, this two-dimensional plot is of the co-occurrence of the presence or absence of terms in a quasi-sentence, together with a plot of the location of individual speakers who are thought of as occupying a linguistic space defined by their use of terms. Speakers are thus defined by sets of words, regarded as points in n-dimensional space. Since the two-dimensional space provides a field onto which words are mapped, speakers can be mapped onto the same space. The analysis that follows relies upon both these features of the Alceste analysis, that is to say, the classification of quasi-sentences defining characteristic themes of debate and the mapping of these themes and associated speakers onto a two-dimensional space.

**Results from the 1966 Debate**

For the 1966 debate the statistical analysis performed by Alceste identifies five dimensions of the debate, which broadly fall into two classes: substantive and procedural. Table 1 gives a listing and interpretation of the dimensions, together with a sample of characteristic sentences that are found in the classes as defined by the ten sentences with the ten highest $\chi^2$ values. The key terms on which the classes are defined are identified in bold. It is by reference to these characteristic sentences that it is possible to place an interpretation on each class as a dimension of debate. The table also identifies the parliamentary speakers who are statistically associated with the sentences that make up the class, and who identified under the ICUs (initial context units) of the tables.
From the point of view of the present analysis, the two most important classes of sentences are Classes 3 and 5, the first concerned with the sanctity of life (7 per cent of sentences) and the second concerned with the uncertain operation of the prevailing law and the difficulties to which it gives rise. The second is by far the largest class of sentences (47 per cent).

The correspondence analysis projects onto two principal axes the variation of vocabulary used across the debate. The measure of variance used in the proportion of inertia explained, where inertia is measured as the sum of distances of each occurrence of a word from the overall frequency. The proportion of variance explained by the analysis is nearly 59 per cent. Figure 1 gives the relevant graph, and may be interpreted as follows. The first principal axis represents the difference between the procedural and the substantive aspects of the debate, with classes 2 and 4 on one side and classes 1, 2 and 5 on the other. The second axis maps the substantive division of opinion between those stressing the sanctity of life and those stressing the adverse consequences of the uncertain operation of the present law. Since a correspondence analysis also maps speakers onto the same space as the vocabulary, it is not surprising to find those who vote against the bill close to class 3 and those who vote in favour near class 5. Nor is it surprising to see Roy Jenkins mapped near the class concerned with the legislative procedure and David Steel mapped near the uncertain operation of the prevailing law.

How then are we to understand this debate in terms of its content given this statistical analysis? In particular, how far can it be understood in terms of values like the sanctity or sacredness of life or respect for individuals to act on their own consciences in respect of such issues? To answer this question, we need to consider the content of the two most important substantive classes, Class 3 and Class 5.

Class 3, relating to the sanctity of life, is the most straightforward class in terms of its ethical content. As can be seen from Table 1, the sentences that it contains are largely used by opponents of the bill to state the principled grounds upon which they base their objections. The two speakers with the highest \( \chi^2 \) values in this class are Jill Knight (\( \chi^2 = 50 \)) and Norman St. John-Stevas (\( \chi^2 = 32 \)). It is also the class with which those who vote against the legislation are associated (\( \chi^2 = 60 \)).
One interesting exception to the identification of opponents of the bill with this class is Leo Abse. He voted in favour of the bill in the end, but made it clear in the debate that it caused him great problems of conscience to do so. In subsequent second reading debates on the issue (all of which involved private member's bills to move the law in a more restricted direction) in which Abse participated, he took up the restrictionist stance. Abse had been a leading opponent of capital punishment, and he voices his worries about the legislation partly in these terms, a point of view in which he is joined by Norman St. John-Stevas when he argued that the bill was 'fundamentally flawed because it rests upon denial of the sacred character and value of human life', the principle having been recently reaffirmed 'by the House when it voted for the abolition of the death penalty.' ($\chi^2 = 29$).

What of those who were supporters of the bill but some of whose arguments also appear in this class? The first point to note is that the number of such people and the number of sentences that they use to contribute to the class is not very large. In this sense their contributions do not define its distinctive content. The two most conspicuous examples of confirmed liberals on the issue are John Dunwoody and Roy Jenkins, who advance the following points:

'I take it further than that and think of the community as a whole. If one looks at it in that light, one can see that far from undermining respect for the sanctity of human life this bill could enhance respect for human life in the fullest sense, of the phrase.' (Dunwoody, $\chi^2 = 48$).

'… member to attempt a rational analysis of the merits of the respective positions, or to seek to persuade those who hold the view that every unborn child is a potential human being entitled to life, and that it is always wrong to destroy the foetus' (Jenkins, $\chi^2 = 37$).

'I can only state my own belief that to take the risk of condemning a potential human being to a life likely to be dominated by suffering and hopeless inadequacy is to assume a responsibility at least as profound as to destroy a foetus which…' (Jenkins, $\chi^2 = 35$).

As can be seen from these examples, the supporters of the bill, who use the vocabulary of the sanctity of life do not make counter-assertions of principle, but raise sceptical doubts about whether the sanctity of life really does forbid or restrict abortion when there are good
grounds. In this sense, we can say that appeals to the principle of the sanctity of life are distinctively associated with the conservative position on the issue.

On the other side, the arguments for reform are principally found in Class 5. Although this is a large class (nearly half of the sentences of the debate), and it contains varying elements, a central theme is the uncertain operation of the law, which is seen to pose risks to women seeking abortions who may be forced into illegal (‘back-street’) procedures that are inherently risky. These were the principal arguments used by Steel himself. Nor is it surprising to find that those in favour of the legislation being disproportionately located within this class. Some of those opposed to the legislation also employ vocabulary within this class, but they focus on the difficulties of conscience faced by medical staff opposed to abortion both in relation to any operations that had been performed and in relation to those that would be performed under the new law. This is also the class in which the references to public opinion are largely to be found. Moreover, Steel's success in framing the issue in these terms is evidenced by the large number of sentences falling within this class, as well as the fact that the $\chi^2$ values of the sentences are rather low, suggesting that the sentences in this class do not stand out against the general background of the debate.

The proponents of the liberal position, from the very beginning, state the issue in terms of reforms to existing practices that should be improved, rather than on grounds of straight moral principle. When it comes to the social grounds for lawful abortion, the argument is stated in terms of stress and demands on the mother, rather than in terms of an abstract right. In other words, the argument is not that there is a general right to choice that is appropriately exercised in some circumstances, but rather that there are circumstances that would justify a termination and in those circumstances the mother ought to be allowed the choice. The general issue is always related to the workings of medical and social practices, rather than more abstract issues of rights. Nor is the division simply set up in terms of the conflict between the rights of the child and the rights of the mother. The language of rights tends to be used by opponents of liberalising the law. Rather than a clash of right against right, the debate between proponents and opponents is better characterised as distinction between an ethic of ultimate ends (the sanctity of life) and an ethic of human welfare and responsible social provision (the consequences of failure to reform).

If we set this account against the interpretation of Ronald Dworkin, we can see some points of similarity and some points of difference. The principle of the sanctity of life is certainly a theme in the debate. That the relevant sentences occur in only a small proportion the total does not mean that the theme is relatively unimportant. This is a case where relative
frequencies may not be a guide to substantive importance. The concentration of the opponents of the liberal reform in this class gives some indication of the extent to which concerns about the sanctity of life are shaping the conservative position. However, the principle of the right to life is also associated by the same opponents with the idea of the foetus having a right to life. To be sure, this association is not very common; there is a sense in which the assertion of the sanctity of life could be asserted as a value independently of any consideration of claims of rights. However, to interpret the debate in this way would be to impose a rather artificial structure upon it.

It has often been noted of English law and policy debate that a straightforward assertion of the right of the mother to choose is not a prominent theme, and this observation is confirmed by the statistical analysis presented here. In 1966 the case was argued in terms of the need to regulate illegal abortions and in terms of the health and psychological needs of the mother. This is well exemplified in the characteristic sentences of the liberalisers, including Steel, Short, Owen, Dunwoody and Vickers all of who utter sentences with relatively high $\chi^2$ values. (It is, of course, this feature of the rationale of the legislation that makes it at once in comparative terms one of the most conservative, with there being no unconstrained right to terminate in the first trimester, and one of the most liberal, with there being freedom to terminate with medical consent late in the pregnancy.) In other words, the case for reform was phrased in welfarist rather than rights terms. This does not mean that these welfare considerations cannot be thought of in terms of rights, understood in some sense, in the way that Steel himself proposed in the quotation that I gave in the opening to this paper. However, it does mean that we may need a broader and less specific conception of rights than Dworkin and other liberals have supposed. To the discussion of some of these issues I now turn.

**Dworkin's Account and Parliamentary Debates**

I noted at the beginning of this paper that Dworkin's account was at odds with the way in which the abortion debate is typically characterised, even by those who are active participants, such as David Steel. If participants in the debate think that it is about the clash of rights, why should we not take this characterisation at face value? By what test might we say that Dworkin's account offers us a better characterisation? Dworkin confronts this issue explicitly, and notes that his account may seem arrogant. But he argues that '… we must be careful to distinguish the public rhetoric in which people frame their opinions from the opinions themselves….' (Dworkin, 1993: 20). Sometimes people disagree without having a clear grasp of what it is they are disagreeing about (Dworkin, 1993: 30).
This constructivist turn in the argument seems to me to be quite plausible. It is a familiar observation, at least since Sidgwick (1901), that common sense morality is likely to be confused and incoherent in crucial respects. A theory of political argument is an attempt to reduce the incoherence to some order and to show where principles apply and what their limits and scope might be. Neither jurisprudence nor democratic theory could operate without some such assumption. However, there is a substantive corollary to this methodological point. The theoretical account of an argument or dispute will involve terms and concepts that, though they may seem to reflect the terms and concepts of everyday political debate, will in fact be used in distinct and particular ways. So it is in this case, I submit. Dworkin's account works, to the extent to which it does, I suggest, only by defining the notion of rights and value in particular ways. Unless we understand this, we cannot take it as a template against which to assess the character and form of parliamentary debates.

Dworkin's view implies that when participants in the abortion debate say they are talking about rights they are making a mistake of language. They should be referring to intrinsic values. However, this way of thinking really goes along with what I shall call a 'domain' conception of rights. To have a right, on this view, is to have a morally and, it is hoped, constitutionally protected domain of choice and interests. There are departments of one's life in which the political authorities should not interfere, and which they should also protect from interference by others. (This protective function makes the rights-assignment across the community 'compossible'.) Of course, any talk of rights mark what is morally serious, but on the domain conception they mark it in a particular way. Another way of putting this point is to distinguish rights in some strict sense from talk about rights in a more general sense. In the more general sense, to talk of a right is to refer to the fact that in matters of legislation we should consider the standing and place that the affected parties have in the resolution of an issue, and the moral considerations to which their standing and place give rise. In the stronger sense, to have a right is not merely to have moral standing but also to have standing of a particular sort, one where the affected party (or that party's representative) can have some role in determining how the matter is resolved (Jones, 1994: 67-71). In the broad sense, the term right delimits the scope of the affected parties (who has important affected interests in this situation?); in the narrower and more specific sense, the term 'right' ascribes to those affected parties particular sorts of claims.

Confirmation that Dworkin is using the notion of rights in a narrower and more strict sense than that found in much ordinary language use is, paradoxically, to be found in the approach to the question of abortion advanced by John Finnis (1973), an approach that in principle and
practical terms is quite the opposite of Dworkin's. Finnis holds to an absolutist and restrictivist position in respect of abortion, but he does so explicitly without the use of a notion of rights, including any putative rights of the foetus. He appeals instead to a notion of basic goods, and suggests that the duties that mothers have not to abort stem from the non-assumed duties that persons have towards one another in respect of those basic goods. There are a number of interesting points about this argument, but the main one to note in the present context is the extent to which rights in a distinctive sense do not need to be invoked in order to defend an absolutist position. The implication of this is that when rights are invoked in the abortion debate, the sense of the term is the general, rather than the specific, one. The term 'right' is being used of the object of moral concern, whether that be the foetus or the mother.

Rights in a domain sense are historically contingent (Tuck, 1979) and emerged with the rise of modern society. Dworkin in general is correct to claim, I think, that the language of rights is constitutive of a certain sort of liberalism, but insofar as it is correct to claim this, it undermines that role that the language of rights in the strict sense can play in explicating the abortion debate by definition. There are many moral systems in which it is claimed that the notion of right is strictly speaking absent. This could not be the case if the term is being used to demarcate a general area of moral concern, since in that case to talk of rights would simply be to talk of the concern.

A similar point can be made in respect of the concept of 'intrinsic value', which is Dworkin's formulation is regularly joined with the notion of the 'sacred'. In a very general sense, the notion of 'value' can be used to speak of anything on which people habitually place some worth. Prosperity in this sense is a value, as is personal security or the possibility of a fulfilling career. These are important components of the human good, but none of them would properly be described as 'sacred'. The notion of intrinsic value, in the sense that Dworkin appears to have in mind, is a distinctive category of experience that inspires some sense of awe and wonder in the minds of those who are open to the possibility of the sacred. There is a good case for saying that this is an important, and possibly central, component of value, but it is not the whole of value, and may be contrasted with the more mundane sense of value that is attached to other aspects of the human good.

To make his argument work, Dworkin needs to define both rights and value in the strict senses that I have distinguished. That is to say, he is concerned with interests that lie at the base of a claim to rights that can be exercised and he is concerned with values only in a particular sense. There can be no objection to defining the relevant notions in this way in a constructivist account of the abortion debate, but it is worth noting that it risks missing the
presence of ethical considerations in a more general sense. To say that rights and values are distinct, and that the abortion debate needs to be understood in terms of rights leaves open the possibility that there are other important ethical considerations in play.

One such possible consideration is that of ‘welfare’. Suppose, for example, that we are concerned to reduce suffering and deprivation. We may not think of this as a right, but rather as an important goal to be pursued alongside other goals. When people talk about the stress of bringing up a severely disabled child, their talk may not be best cast in terms of rights. Rather what they seem to have in mind is the thought that such distress is not something that people can reasonably be expected to bear. There is no general right not to be distressed. Distressing situations can occur in life and no one is responsible. So it is difficult to trace the argument to some general right. Rather it features as a distinct consideration that may sit alongside claims of rights and might even counter-balance them.

What is the relationship between the idea of intrinsic value and the idea of welfare? We can think of the promotion of welfare as a valued end of government, and something that should be promoted for its own sake and not some ulterior end, for example military power. (The ‘welfare state’ is sometimes traced in historical terms to a concern for military manpower.) The term ‘value’, then, can be used to describe whatever it is that makes us think that some ends should be pursued by governments for their own sakes rather than any other purpose (the ultimate value). However, when Dworkin refers to the sacred and intrinsic value, he seems to have a more specific conception in mind: whatever enables people to give meaning and significance to their lives. In this sense, governments may be concerned with the relief of suffering, but have no sense of what value is associated with that, since different people will understand suffering in different ways depending upon their religious and spiritual beliefs. More generally, economic policies can be said to raise economic welfare, but this does not relate to intrinsic meaning in the stronger sense. Here again, we seem to have a distinction between a moral concept in the strict and in the more general sense.

The upshot of this argument is to suggest that we need to pay attention to at least three sets of considerations in abortion debates. The first include considerations of rights, but understood in the sense of powers that can be exercised by agents and their representatives to shape the outcome of choice. To have a right is to be a participant in a choice on the basis of a moral claim about one’s interests or standing. The second sort of consideration refers to notions of intrinsic value and the sacred, with its associated idea of a consistent ethic of life. The third sort of consideration is that of welfare, understood to be at least a concern with avoiding
suffering and deprivation. None can be reduced to the other – as the empirical analysis of parliamentary debates goes to show.

**Conclusion**

How can we summarise the conclusions of this analysis?

The first point to note is that Dworkin is correct from one point of view. If we define the notion of rights in a strict sense, then the parliamentary debate is not about a clash of rights. That is to say, it is not framed in terms of a domain of choice or benefit that it is the duty of the state to protect. However, in a wider and looser sense of rights, the sense used by parliamentarians like David Steel, the debate is one that can be understood as a conflict of rights, since it involves weighing and balancing considerations relevant to the standing of mother and foetus. In this sense of rights, rights do not denote a domain of choice or interests that it is the duty of the state to protect, but a set of interests and considerations that it is the duty of parliament to balance.

A second point is that an 'ethic of life' form of argument is certainly present in the UK debate, but it is used by conservatives rather than liberals. Here there is a distinction between the practical context of the UK and that of the US. In the US liberals will want to persuade conservatives on abortion that they should at least be progressive on capital punishment. In the UK the situation is reversed. Conservatives on abortion will want to persuade liberals that a progressive stance on capital punishment implies a more restrictionist stance on abortion. There are interesting issues here of a philosophical kind about the extent to which we can appeal to settled convictions to determine a reflective equilibrium.

Thirdly, a marked feature of the UK debate is its characterisation of the issue in terms of welfare. Here there is one role for the empirical study of deliberation to play, namely to reveal the principles that political actors judge relevant to the determination of a policy issue. Moreover, the dialectical character of parliamentary shows how relevant principles come into contact with one another. A political culture is not a narrative but a drama.
Table 1: Classes of Argument in 1966 Debate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classes and % of E.C.U.s</th>
<th>Class 1 15%</th>
<th>Class 2 10%</th>
<th>Class 3 7%</th>
<th>Class 4 20%</th>
<th>Class 5 47%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>of Legislation</td>
<td>The Grounds Of Debate</td>
<td>The Sanctity of Life</td>
<td>The Character of Procedure</td>
<td>The Operation of the Current Law</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>name_RoyJenkins</td>
<td>u.c.e. : 719 Kh2 : 64</td>
<td>name_NormanStevas</td>
<td>u.c.e. : 810 Kh2 : 83</td>
<td>name_RoyJenkins</td>
<td>name_DavidSteel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u.c.e. : 842 Kh2 : 89</td>
<td>of course, there is scope for argument about when the right to life begins, but it is of profound significance that modern microbiology has confirmed the assertions of theologians that human life is fully present from the moment of conception and there is no qualitative difference between the embryo and the born child.</td>
<td>name_NormanStevas</td>
<td>u.c.e. : 698 Kh2 : 66</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>name_McNamara</td>
<td>u.c.e. : 587Kh2 : 56</td>
<td>name_McNamara</td>
<td>u.c.e. : 302 Kh2 : 76</td>
<td>name_JillKnight</td>
<td>u.c.e. : 34 Kh2 : 35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u.c.e. : 862 Kh2 : 65</td>
<td>under this clause many a normal child may be sacrificed in order to avoid the risk of bearing a handicapped child, it is too high a risk to run and it is too high a price to pay. subsection 1, c, contains the phrases capacity as a mother and severely overstretched.</td>
<td>name_Durwoody</td>
<td>u.c.e. : 323 Kh2 : 66</td>
<td>name_DavidOwen</td>
<td>the fourth category comprises those which are illegal but have a covering of legality, those where the patient, because of her financial circumstances, is able to find or be directed to medical practitioners or psychiatrists who will sign the necessary certificates to cover existing law on payment of a fee of perhaps 100 or 200 guineas and have the operation carried out in adequate circumstances.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>subsection 1, b, deals with the question of the possible risk that a child may be born subject to a physical or mental abnormality and may be seriously handicapped.</td>
<td>name_JohnHobson</td>
<td>u.c.e. : 36 Kh2 : 52</td>
<td>u.c.e. : 347 Kh2 : 63</td>
<td>name_DavidOwen</td>
<td>u.c.e. : 36 Kh2 : 32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>name_NormanStevas</td>
<td>name_NormanStevas</td>
<td>friend the member for roxburgh, selkirk and Peebles, mr. david steel, said that he had no children of his own and remarks were made by my hon. and learned friend the member for walsall, north about how he might feel if he had a daughter.</td>
<td>name_DavidOwen</td>
<td>name_ReneeShort</td>
<td>u.c.e. : 899 Kh2 : 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>name_McNamara</td>
<td>name_McNamara</td>
<td>friend the member for roxburgh, selkirk and Peebles, mr. david steel, said that he had no children of his own and remarks were made by my hon. and learned friend the member for walsall, north about how he might feel if he had a daughter.</td>
<td>name_DavidOwen</td>
<td>u.c.e. : 430 Kh2 : 43</td>
<td>estimate the number of illegal operations carried out each year vary tremendously. I should not like to assert any particular figure, but a recent survey carried out and published only last week by the national opinion polls on behalf of the abortion law reform association assessed that, at a minimum, about 40, name_ReneeShort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>name_DavidOwen</td>
<td>name_DavidOwen</td>
<td>name_DavidOwen</td>
<td>u.c.e. : 90 Kh2 : 39</td>
<td>name_DavidOwen</td>
<td>u.c.e. : 869 Kh2 : 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u.c.e. : 657 Kh2 : 59</td>
<td>i only made the point because of what the hon. member for roxburgh, selkirk and Peebles, mr. david steel, said in moving the second reading.</td>
<td>name_WilliamWells</td>
<td>u.c.e. : 190 Kh2 : 53</td>
<td>name_RoyJenkins</td>
<td>in conclusion, I want to deal with two opposite views on the bill; the first is the attitude of the roman catholic church. I entirely respect the doctrine and beliefs of that church in this matter, but I would point out that the doctrine of the church is not necessarily permanent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u.c.e. : 811 Kh2 : 54</td>
<td>member, i hope, my hon. speaker, that the hon. lady the member for</td>
<td>name_DavidOwen</td>
<td>u.c.e. : 6 Kh2 : 38</td>
<td>name_RoyJenkins</td>
<td>u.c.e. : 705 Kh2 : 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clause 1, l, c, is particularly welcome. it permits the termination</td>
<td>name_EdwardLyons</td>
<td>name_EdwardLyons</td>
<td>u.c.e. : 2 - Kh2 : 42</td>
<td>name_DavidOwen</td>
<td>how can anyone believe otherwise perhaps when as many as 100, 000 illegal operations a year take place, that the present law has shown itself quite unable to deal with the problem?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u.c.e. : 213 Kh2 : 51</td>
<td>and learned member for walsall, north, mr. william wells, who moved the amendment, and, in particular, my hon. friend the member for birmingham, edgbaston, mrs. knight, who spoke very movingly, after all, a woman has much more right to speak in this debate than has any other hon.</td>
<td>name_JillKnight</td>
<td>u.c.e. : 37</td>
<td>name_DavidOwen</td>
<td>u.c.e. : 464 Kh2 : 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u.c.e. : 409 Kh2 : 47</td>
<td>and may be mental or physical or mental abnormalities and may be to pay. subsection 1, c, contains the phrases capacity as a mother and severely overstretched.</td>
<td>name_JohnDunwoody</td>
<td>u.c.e. : 3</td>
<td>name_DavidOwen</td>
<td>we know that we shall not</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of pregnancy when there is substantial risk of a child emerging with serious physical and mental abnormalities.

name DavidSteel
u.c.e.: 56    Khi2: 45
would involve serious risk to the life or of grave injury to health, whether physical or mental, of the pregnant mother, whether before, at or after the birth of the child;

name EdwardLyns
u.c.e.: 216    Khi2: 45
It is also unlawful to terminate where the mother has suffered rubella german measles in early pregnancy, yet the deformity rate from such pregnancies is said to be 30 per cent.

name RoyJenkins
u.c.e.: 711    Khi2: 45
where the continuance of the pregnancy would involve serious risk to the life or of grave injury to health, whether physical or mental, of the pregnant woman.

name WilliamWells
u.c.e.: 178    Khi2: 41
one of the fundamental objections to the clause is that it makes doctors abductors of medical questions, but of social ones. paragraph, d, states: the pregnant woman is a defective or become pregnant while under the age of sixteen or became pregnant as a result of rape.

name JohnHobson
vote...

u.c.e.: 659    Khi2: 41
if, however, the reason is given that there is a strong possibility that the mother being a defective may suffer serious consequences as a result of having the child, why cannot she be dealt with under paragraph, a?

wolverhampton, north east’, mrs. renee short, will catch your eye when I have concluded, at the outset, I want to make my own position plain. I am not a member of a cabal, as the hon. member for pontypool, mr.

name ChasPannell
u.c.e.: 651    Khi2: 53
I do not think that the right hon. and learned gentleman is stating the position fairly, my hon. friend the member for falmouth and carnmore, dr. john dunwoody, did not want to solve social and economic problems, he wanted to solve, as a doctor, the impact of a social or economic problem upon his patient. name NormanStevas
u.c.e.: 809    Khi2: 53
member for roxburgh, selkirk and peebles, mr. david steel, on the manner in which he introduced the bill, which he did with extraordinary moderation and skill, and I should also like to congratulate the hon. name JoanVickers
u.c.e.: 387    Khi2: 50
she is anxious not to create further problems for herself, I am glad that the hon. and learned member for walsall, north, mr. william wells, has returned to the chamber, because I did not think that he made a very good case for his point of view.

u.c.e.: 379    Khi2: 48
I have pleasure in supporting the bill, and I congratulate the hon. member for roxburgh, selkirk and peebles, mr. david steel, on the way in which he introduced it.

name MrSpeaker
u.c.e.: 1    Khi2: 46
before I call the hon. member for roxburgh, selkirk and peebles, mr. david steel, to move the second reading of the bill, may I make an announcement. so far, 32 right hon. and hon. members not a seek to catch my eye in this debate. members can help each other and help the case for and against the bill by speaking briefly.

name WilliamWells
u.c.e.: 189    Khi2: 37
independent human life as it is possible to have.

name LeoAbse
u.c.e.: 767    Khi2: 52
every failure that we make to plan so that every life can live out its full potentiality within its purely transient span is a defeat, just as every haging of a murderer or traitor is a defeat for the community, name NormanStevas
u.c.e.: 843    Khi2: 52
there is only a difference of development, the embryo has a life of its own and has the full potentiality of becoming a human being. therefore, it cannot be treated as mere animal matter to be excised from the womb and thrown aside and discarded as a dustbin or incinerator.

name JohnDunwoody
u.c.e.: 281    Khi2: 48
I take it further than that and think of the community as a whole, if one looks at it in that light, one can see that far from undermining respect for the sanctity of human life this bill could enhance respect for human life in the fullest sense, of the phrase.

name WilliamWells
u.c.e.: 170    Khi2: 40
if one looks at clause 1, 1, 6, c, and d, of the bill, it is perfectly clear that this argument is justified. the very, wording of paragraph b, makes it clear that if the clause becomes law there will be a number of embryos capable of development and with a chance of developing into healthy human beings which will be destroyed.

name JimKnight
u.c.e.: 317    Khi2: 40
there is something very wrong indeed about this. babies are not like bad teeth to be jerked out just because they cause suffering, an unborn baby is a baby nevertheless. would the sponsors of the bill think it right to kill a baby they can see? of course they would not.

name WilliamWells
u.c.e.: 424    Khi2: 37
I agree with the sponsor that it is wrong that these matters of great importance should be left entirely to private members. so much depends on the vote today, I hope that there will be very strong support for the bill and that it can go to committee for detailed discussion.

name LeoAbse
u.c.e.: 804    Khi2: 37
if they do not allow this second reading because they hold partially religious views, this debate should be voted upon and I hope that the bill will be given a second reading.

name DavidSteel
u.c.e.: 11    Khi2: 33
it remains my view that it is unfortunate that the practice in the house is for controversial social issues of this kind such as the second reading of the bill, to be left entirely to private members to bring forward.

name DavidSteel
u.c.e.: 121    Khi2: 30
it is in that spirit that I have opposed the drafting of the bill, and I hope that the house.

name AngusMaude
u.c.e.: 516    Khi2: 30
have said having said and having shown, I hope, that I want to look at the implications of the bill impartially, I hope that the house will decide to give the pressure a second reading so that the matters that I have raised can be discussed more carefully in committee.

name JohnHobson
vote...

u.c.e.: 567    Khi2: 30
this is not only a private member’s bill, but it is one of those private members’ bills on which we all agree that there should be no party view.
the bill draws in its provisions a sharp distinction between the born and the unborn child. Hon. members, who would recall with horror at the destruction of a live baby, are perfectly willing and anxious to legalise the destruction of embryos.

I.C.Us

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Vote</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Edward Lyons</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Hobson</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legge Bourke</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mcnamara</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vote_</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

997 * 16. 52.
999 * 2. 4.
1001 * 15. 51.
29.41 9.13 *
1005 * 13. 54.
24.07 3.88 *
"vote_"

995 * 8. 42. 19.05
3.66 *
"name_JoanVickers"
1003 * 7. 35.
20.00 3.72 *
"name_NormanStevas"
1012 * 30. 238.
12.61 2.03 *
"party_con"

985 * 16. 142. 11.27
4.35 *
"gender_f"
994 * 15. 44.
34.09 50.54 *
"name_JillKnight"
1000 * 6. 39.
15.38 4.09 *
"name_LeoAbse"
1003 * 11. 35.
31.43 32.17 *
"name_NormanStevas"
1012 * 28. 238.
11.76 11.20 *
"party_con"
1017 * 36. 179.
20.11 60.07 *
"vote_no"

986 * 128. 535.
23.93 18.00 *
"gender_m"
989 * 2. 3. 66.67
3.93 *
"name_ChasPannell"
997 * 15. 52.
28.85 2.39 *
"name_JohnHobson"
1000 * 13. 39.
33.33 4.16 *
"name_LeoAbse"
1003 * 12. 35.
34.29 4.28 *
"name_NormanStevas"
1004 * 2. 3. 66.67
3.93 *
"name_PeterMahon"
1006 * 16. 44.
36.36 7.23 *
"name_RoyJenkins"
1009 * 17. 46.
36.96 8.16 *
"name_WilliamWells"
1016 * 15. 52.
28.85 2.39 *
"vote_"

990 * 22. 32. 68.75
6.40 *
"name_DavidOwen"
991 * 69. 103. 66.99
19.54 *
"name_DavidSteel"
996 * 23. 35. 65.71
5.21 *
"name_JohnDunwoody"
1005 * 32. 54.
59.26 3.56 *
"name_ReneeShort"
1014 * 71. 105. 67.62
21.27 *
"party_lib"
1019 * 225. 420. 53.57
19.35 *
"vote_yes"
Figure 1

Correspondence Analysis of 1966 Debate

Horizontal axis: 1st factor: V.P. = .2818 (33.38% of inertia)
Vertical axis: 2nd factor: V.P. = .2161 (25.59% of inertia)
Methodological Appendix

In order to analyse the text of parliamentary debates, we have used the text analysis set of programs known as Alceste (Analyse des Lexèmes Cooccurrents dans les Enoncés Simple d'un Texte).

In Alceste, the text is thought of in terms of 'unités de contexte initiales' (u.c.i), which in terms of parliamentary debates are best thought of as speeches or interventions by members of the House. These u.c.i can be tagged with 'passive variables, which in our case we have labelled as the political party, vote and gender of the speaker. However, the statistical operations in Alceste are based upon the unité de contexte élémentaire (u.c.e), which can be thought of as a sentence or quasi-sentence, the term we use subsequently.

The basic data matrix on which statistical computations are built depend upon these u.c.e and the words that make up the sentences of a speech or intervention. Unlike many other text packages, Alceste does not require the analyst to compile a dictionary of key terms. Instead, it conducts its content analysis on the whole text, reducing various grammatical forms (for example tensed forms) to a root form. It then divides the vocabulary of the text of these root forms into two classes: 'function' words, which enable sentences to operate as part of natural languages and 'content' words, which contain the distinctive meaning of the text (Brugidou, 2003: 419). This is a purely syntactical operation.

The basic data matrix, then, for statistical analysis can be represented as follows (see Reinert, 2005: 68):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form j</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>u.c.e. i</td>
<td>δij</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pj</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Within the data matrix, each word ('form') is assigned a column, and each sentence a row. At the intersection of the sentence row and the word column, the presence (1) or absence (0) of that word is recorded as occurring in the sentence. Typically, then, in any data matrix there will be many more zeros that ones entered. The Pj values represent the marginal total of the occurrence of any particular word, and the Pi values the marginal totals of the number of
sentences in which that word appears. These are thought of as the 'weight' or proportionate contribution that the word or sentence makes to the total table.

Alceste then provides a descending hierarchical classification of the content words. The hierarchical classification then proceeds as follows (Guérin-Pace, 1998: 79). All sentences are placed together in the same class. That single class is then partitioned into two, according to the criterion of marginal $\chi^2$ values. The initial partitioning aims to maximise the $\chi^2$ values of the margins, dividing the table into two sub-tables. The operation is then repeated until a stable set of partitioned classes is created. This is illustrated in the following table (compare Reinert, 2005: 71; see also Kronberger and Wagner, 2000):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class 1</th>
<th>Class 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$k_{ij}$</td>
<td>$k_{ij}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$k_1$</td>
<td>$k_2$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The aim of the statistical analysis is to search among all the possible partitions of the word classes that partitioning of the table that maximises the chi-square values. In a UK parliamentary debate, Alceste normally classifies vocabulary into between three and five classes depending on the issue at hand.

The process of descending hierarchical classification establishes the discursive dimensions of the debate, but not the position of speakers within those dimensions. To carry the analysis this stage further, Alceste uses a version of correspondence analysis. In a correspondence analysis, we think of the elements of vocabulary used in debate as defining a multidimensional space, and the distinctive profile of each speaker then defines a position for that speaker as a point in that multidimensional space (Greenacre, 1994). Different speakers, using different patterns of words, will be defined by those patterns or profiles, and will therefore occupy different positions in the multidimensional space. It is convenient to have a measure of the distance between speakers and between individual speakers and the average pattern of words for the debate as a whole. Correspondence analysis uses the chi-square statistic, not as a measure of statistical significance but as a measure of geometric distance between speakers.

Many words and the themes they represent are used in a debate, so that it is impossible to interpret what is going on, since there are too many dimensions to consider. Correspondence
analysis reduces this dimensionality using a measure of dispersion in a set of points. The particular measure it uses is taken from mechanics and is known as inertia (Greenacre, 1994: 12). A swarm of points in space can be seen to have a centroid, and the position a particular point has from the centroid, its inertia, can be defined as $rd^2$ with the sum of these quantities being the total inertia for the whole object.

For a swarm of points, a correspondence analysis thus seeks to find a plane that fits these points. A plane may be said to best fit a swarm of points in the following sense. Suppose a plane produces an estimated position for a profile. Then the actual position will differ by an error term. Considering all the points together, and using Pythagoras's theorem, the total inertia can be decomposed as follows:

$$\sum r_i d_i^2 = \sum r_i dest_i^2 + \sum r_i e_i^2$$

The best fitting plane can then be defined as that plane that minimises the sum of errors, that is to say the plane the fit of which minimises $\sum r_i e_i^2$. Typically, correspondence analysis reduces the dimensionality of the represented data to two, and the task is to find a suitable substantive interpretation of these two dimensions.


References


