

The SLED Test – Four Leaky Buckets

Responding to a Cumulative Case Argument Against the Unborn

STEPHEN WAGNER

Note: I first heard the “leaky bucket” response to cumulative case arguments from Scott Klusendorf or J.P. Moreland. – SW

The SLED Test Isolates Criteria and Responds with a Clear-Case Counter-Example

When someone disqualifies the unborn, she usually references one of the four criteria found in the SLED acronym (Size, Level of Development, Environment, Degree of Dependency). To respond, simply show that a consistent application of the criterion will leave many born people out “in the cold” as well. For example, if someone says the unborn are not developed enough to be persons, bring out a clear-case example of a person who also lacks development but is still valuable (e.g. a toddler or newborn). Counter the abortion advocate’s claim by showing that level of development is irrelevant to the value of the toddler, so it is also irrelevant to the value of the unborn (since both are human beings).

The Rejoinder: “But I’m Making a Cumulative Case!”

I listened to a debate once where the abortion advocate countered the SLED Test strategy by claiming that he was making a cumulative case. Every time a counter-example was used against his criterion for value, he claimed that although any one aspect of his case might be refuted with counter examples, taken together they made one strong reason for disqualifying the unborn. Sounds reasonable, right? Actually, his mistake is easy to see if we just think of four leaky buckets.

Four Leaky Buckets

To carry water from my well to my home, I use a bucket. Now let’s say I have a leaky bucket that has a large hole in the bottom so that it holds no water. I find another bucket that happens to have a very large hole as well. I put one inside the other and take off toward the well. But I soon find out that two leaky buckets won’t hold any more water than one. Being a bit dense in the bucket department, I stack two more leaky buckets inside the original two. Now I have four leaky buckets, but have not succeeded in supplying any water to the parched lips of my wife and kids. I’ve learned my lesson the hard way: four leaky buckets can’t hold any more water together than one by itself.

What’s true of buckets is also true of arguments. Four bad reasons don’t support a position any better than one bad reason. Adding bad reasons doesn’t help a person’s case. With the SLED criteria, adding all of the elements together doesn’t disqualify the unborn any more than one of the elements in isolation. If size or level of development or environment or degree of dependency aren’t relevant to the moral status of the unborn by themselves, putting them together just means we have four criteria that are irrelevant to value, not one. How do a whole set of poor reasons make any better case than one poor reason?

Cumulative Case Arguments and the Hidden Fifth Criterion

Some cumulative case arguments are legitimate. But in order to be legitimate, each case must be valid on its own terms, lending support to a larger argument. We pile valid case upon valid case until it becomes more probable to believe one position than another.

This is not what happens with the cumulative SLED argument though. The abortion advocate isn’t multiplying examples of cases. Really, he is simply asserting a fifth criterion, the size-and-level-of-development-and-environment-and-degree-of-dependency criterion. He says the unborn must be a certain size and level of development and environment and degree of dependency in order to count.

My response? This criterion seems specially constructed just to disqualify the unborn. In fact, it only disqualifies the unborn. Doesn’t that seem like an ad hoc argument (one in which premises are added solely to explain away each challenge)? Why should I take seriously this elaborate criterion for value?