

Time has come to support embryonic stem cell research

Throughout history, brave men and women have pushed the frontiers of knowledge where others have said they should not go. Like Prometheus, they offer precious gifts to mankind, and are often chained to a rock for their trouble. Time will tell if Bill Frist is such a man.

Frist is not a medical researcher, merely a doctor who left medicine for politics. Nonetheless, when he publicly broke with the president on the Senate floor by calling for support of stem cell research, he displayed true moral courage.

Stem cells have the astonishing ability to become different kinds of human cells, based on a process we don't yet understand. Adult stem cells (ASCs) have a limited form of this property; they can grow into some kinds of tissue but not others. Embryonic stem cells (ESCs), harvested from a cell ball known as a blastocyst, seem to be more flexible. They can turn into almost any type of cell the organism needs: muscle tissue, brain cells, blood, it doesn't matter.

Somehow, in one of nature's most intriguing mysteries, this mass of identical cells can transform itself into a highly differentiated organism. This organism in turn could become a human being.

And that, of course, is the problem.

No social consensus exists on when personhood begins. The personhood of a blastocyst is not self-evident in the same way that the personhood of a newborn baby is. Equating the two requires a leap of faith. America will always permit such leaps for her citizens to develop and live their personal morality. But that is a lousy way to make public policy. We need something better.

Fortunately, we have it. It lies in the open, honest and thoughtful deliberations that characterize modern democracy. It lies in understanding that some things are wrong in and of themselves, but for others we have to consider the consequences. It lies in listening to the voice of religion, but also to the voice of science, and the voices of those who have little interest in either but just want their lives to be better. They count, too.

There are many advantages to a pluralistic approach to tough policy questions.



OPINION
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First, it doesn't tie you down to dogma. We might conclude that something shouldn't be allowed because the time is not right, and then later change our minds in light of new evidence. As human knowledge grows, our understanding of ethics should grow along with it.

Pluralistic approaches also allow for honoring personal observances of right and wrong. It allows people to lead by example on difficult moral issues, when the alternative of legislation would lead to chaos.

Do you believe homosexuality is wrong? Don't sleep with members of your sex! Do you believe eating meat is wrong? Be a vegetarian! Do you believe stem cell research is wrong? Refuse its benefits! No one is going to strap you down and forcibly cure your diabetes.

I'm not being fanciful here. Stem cell therapy offers the possibility of curing some of mankind's most awful afflictions. You shouldn't oppose ESC research unless you can look into the eyes of a mother of a leukemia patient and say, "I'm sorry, but your daughter has to die." Perhaps, armed with the courage of their convictions, some people are prepared to say this very thing. I cannot do so in good conscience.

Like most Americans, I believe using blastocysts for ESC research is the right thing to do. I don't believe it's murder, and I haven't heard any convincing arguments to the contrary. Giving the green light doesn't mean killing the elderly, cloning people for their organs, or throwing babies in the trash. That's just scare talk. One thing doesn't have to lead to another if we don't want it to.

Throughout the history of human inquiry, there has always been a desire to draw a line and say "this far, and no further." But in open, free societies, that line moves as we learn more about the world. We may leap across that line with reckless abandon. We may gingerly tiptoe over it. We may walk up to it, look around, and decide we're not yet ready.

But cross it we will. It is what we do.

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