

Stem cell rhetoric: A utilitarian view of human life

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How do you marginalize religion and trivialize moral argument? Ron Reagan, son of the former president, offered a textbook example in his speech in July to the Democratic National Convention in which he called for more expansive research using embryonic stem cells.

He granted that some people have moral objections to cloning human embryos for the sake of extracting stem cells (which leads to the destruction of the embryos). He allowed that such people are “well-meaning and sincere,” and are “entitled” to their belief that human embryos have moral value and should not be created and destroyed for others’ use. “But it does not follow that the theology of a few should be allowed to forestall the health and well-being of the many,” he contended. To proceed with research is to be on the side of “reason” as opposed to “ignorance,” he went on, and such pursuit of knowledge is part of an inevitable movement toward human enlightenment: “The tide of history is with us.”

Reagan deftly makes several familiar moves. First, he relegates strong moral beliefs to the private sphere—one is “entitled” to have such beliefs, but to argue for them in public is to force them on “the many” who don’t share them. At the same time, he labels the moral claim that he disagrees with a “theology,” thereby both eliminating the need to argue with it (since presumably it is beyond rational discussion) and insinuating that those who press such a claim are guilty of religious coercion. He then aligns his position with “reason” and “progress”—opponents, naturally, of theology.

To see what is wrong with this argument, try substituting “infanticide” or “slavery” for “stem cell research.” As in: “Those who believe infanticide is wrong are entitled to their belief, but their theology should not forestall the well-being of the larger society or the movement of history toward enlightenment.” Or: “Those calling for the abolition of slavery are no doubt sincere, but they shouldn’t impose that belief on

the rest of us.” The logic of the argument is the same.

It might be said, in reply to this point, that infanticide and slavery are clearly and completely immoral, whereas stem cell research with embryos carries the possibility of doing a great deal of good in treating devastating diseases. But infanticide in third-century Rome and slavery in 19th-century America were by no means obviously immoral. Such practices were plausibly construed as socially beneficial—until Christians (and others) started making counterarguments.

Moral claims about the value of life cannot be relegated to the private sphere or dismissed as theology. Scientists’ ability to create and destroy embryos for research and therapeutic purposes presents a specific moral challenge to the valuing of human life. To deliberately create, use and discard embryos for the sake of curing disease is to adopt, in an unprecedented way, a utilitarian view of human life.

The question is not whether the “tide of history” is behind such research. It is whether such research is in keeping with what we are meant to do and who we are meant to be as creatures, ones who receive life as a gift from God.