



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

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ADVOCATES OF EMBRYONIC STEM CELL RESEARCH FUMBLE ETHICS, MORALS

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Recently a pro-stem cell research group, Wisconsin Stem Cell Now, published a “primer” on the subject of stem cell research in Wisconsin. Among other things, the document seeks to dismiss moral arguments against embryonic stem cell research. In the process, the authors misrepresent the relationship between ethics and morals, equate morality with religion, and define moral argument in a way that would have disqualified some of our nation’s most significant voices for reform from public debates.

In arguing that destroying human embryos for research purposes is ethical, the primer argues:

“By definition, ‘ethical’ medical research complies with a system of right or good conduct, especially as defined by professionals.”

But ethics is broader than that. Terms like right or good are not solely the province of professionals or experts. We agree that war is too important to be left only to generals, or law too important to be left only to lawyers, because all of us are affected by decisions made by “experts.”

The primer goes on to argue: “Knowledge is not ‘ethical’ or ‘unethical’ in itself. It is by our actions that humans are judged.” Thus if research is put to lofty purposes, it is ethical.

Not so.

This line of argument conveniently ignores the relationship between means and ends. How we gain knowledge can be the result of right or wrong actions. Much of what we learned about a human’s ability to survive in cold water came from experiments conducted by German doctors who literally froze people to death during World War II. No one calls such methods ethical.

The primer asserts that opponents talk about the ethics of research to obscure the fact that the debate is really about morals. The primer goes on to say that society does not dictate morals. And because religious groups don’t all agree on what is moral, we can’t write morals into law without imposing someone’s religious belief on society.

This argument is unpersuasive. In one way or another, many of our laws reflect a societal judgment that certain conduct “ought to be encouraged or discouraged.” The criminal code is full of moral judgments. And while individuals in society are free to choose how to act, society makes and imposes moral judgments upon individuals through the enforcement of that code.

No one today seriously doubts that outlawing slavery was anything but a moral issue. The 19th Amendment that codified a woman's right to vote was another moral judgment. As were the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The legitimacy of these laws is not undermined by the fact that some who advocated for these changes were motivated by religious convictions.

These moral judgments did not become laws because one religion said so. Nor did they represent the imposition of people of one faith on the "faithless." Rather, our society enacted these laws because it was persuaded by the compelling moral arguments that stressed their necessity.

The primer asserts that opponents of research that destroys embryos know they are in the minority and that is why they argue that such research is immoral and unethical.

Wrong again.

Opponents of research that destroys embryos argue that such research is immoral because they believe it is. Like others who have advocated for the weak and powerless, they know that success does not come easily. Persuasion takes time. Appeals to the collective conscience of the community must be made again and again until they take root.

However, the contribution of morally based arguments to our nation's history is too rich to permit banning such arguments from the public square.