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Imposing My Religion: Everyone Does Metaphysics

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Stem cells are fast growing, unspecialized cells that can reproduce themselves and grow new organs for the body. Human embryos have an abundant supply of stem cells (so we are told) which scientists are eager to harvest in hopes of treating disease. The practice of securing these early cells is known as embryonic stem cell research (ESCR). There's only one problem: Unlike non-controversial adult stem cell research which in no way harms the adult donor, you must kill the embryo to secure its stem cells.

In a 2005 *New York Times* editorial, former GOP Senator John Danforth writes that government restrictions on embryonic stem cell research wrongly impose a particular religious view (that of the "Religious Right") on a pluralistic society. "It is not evident to many of us that cells in a petri dish are equivalent to identifiable people suffering from terrible diseases...the only explanation for legislators comparing cells in a petri dish to babies in the womb is the extension of religious doctrine into statutory law."¹

This is not at all persuasive. First, Danforth is just plain wrong that pro-life advocates opposed to ESCR provide no rational defense for their position. Sure they do. Problem is, he takes no time to actually engage the sophisticated case pro-life philosophers present in support of the embryo's humanity.² Even at the popular level, he can't bring himself to answer a basic pro-life argument based on science and philosophy. As stated earlier, pro-lifers contend that from the earliest stages of development, the embryos in question are not mere clumps of cells in a petri dish, but distinct, living, and whole human organisms. Philosophically, we argue that there is no morally significant difference between the embryo you once were and the adult you are today. Differences of size, development, and location are not relevant in the way that ESCR advocates need them to be. Pro-lifers don't need Scripture or church doctrine to tell them these things. They are truths even atheists and secular libertarians can, and sometimes do, recognize.³ Yet nowhere in his piece does Danforth present a principled argument explaining why pro-life advocates are mistaken on these points.

Second, Danforth's own position, like the pro-lifer's, is grounded in prior metaphysical commitments. *Metaphysics* is a big word, but don't let it throw you. It generally has to do with being, that is, the nature of reality. Metaphysics asks questions such as: What's ultimately real and is that reality one or many, material or immaterial? Do living things have specific natures that define the kinds of things they are? Do human beings have minds as well as bodies? And what makes those humans valuable in the first place? As Francis J. Beckwith explains, the nature of the ESCR debate is such that all positions presuppose a metaphysical view of human value, and for this reason, the pro-research position Danforth defends is not entitled to win by default.⁴ At issue is not which view of ESCR has metaphysical underpinnings and which does not, but which metaphysical view of human value does a better job of accounting for human rights and human dignity, pro-life or pro-destructive research?

The pro-life view on ESCR is that humans are intrinsically valuable in virtue of the kind of thing they are. True, they differ immensely with respect to talents, accomplishments, and degrees of development, but they are nonetheless equal because they share a common human nature. Their right to life comes to be when they come to be, either at conception or at the completion of a cloning process. Danforth's own view is that humans have value (and hence, rights) not in virtue of the kind of thing they are, members of a natural kind, but only because of an acquired property that comes to be later in the life of the human organism. Because the early embryo does not appear (to him) as a human being with rights, destructive research is permissible.

Notice that Danforth is doing the abstract work of metaphysics. That is, he is using philosophical reflection to defend a disputed view of human value in his quest to defend ESCR. Put simply, Danforth's attempt to disqualify the pro-life view from public policy based on its alleged metaphysical underpinnings works equally well to disqualify his own view.

Now maybe Danforth, echoing political philosopher John Rawls, meant to convey a more sophisticated claim, namely, that society should confer a large degree of liberty by not legislating on controversial moral issues for which there is no consensus, especially if those issues involve comprehensive moral doctrines based on prior metaphysical commitments. Embryonic stem cell research (ESCR), so the argument goes, is a divisive and controversial issue. Therefore, government should not restrict it.⁵ But this view is clearly self-refuting. To say government should remain neutral on metaphysical questions is *itself* a metaphysical claim, a comprehensive moral doctrine about how government should function. It's also controversial: Do we have a consensus that we should not legislate on divisive matters like ESCR? Moreover, slavery and racism were controversial issues that involved prior worldview commitments. Are we to conclude that it was wrong to legislate against them? The fact that people disagree is no reason to suppose that nobody is correct.

Third, while it's true the pro-life position on ESCR is consistent with certain theological doctrines, it does not follow it can only be defended by appealing to those doctrines. Laws against murder are in harmony with Jewish and Christian theism, but no rational person thinks we should dismiss them. Moreover, the "religious" sword cuts both ways. The overwhelming majority of mainline Protestant denominations (including Danforth's own Episcopal Church) hold to the same metaphysical view he does regarding the embryo. That is, they believe developing humans are not valuable in virtue of the kind of thing they are (substances with a particular nature), but only because of some accidental property we acquire later. Many of these left-leaning groups specifically cite Scripture (wrongly, I must add) to make the case that embryos and fetuses are not human beings. Bottom line: If the pro-life view opposing ESCR is suspect because of its alleged connection to the metaphysics of religion, so is the pro-destructive research one.

In short, Danforth's alleged moral neutrality is not neutrality at all. The rightness or wrongness of ESCR comes down to just one question: Is the embryo a member of the human family? If so, killing him or her to benefit others is a serious moral wrong. It treats the distinct human being, with his or her own inherent moral worth, as nothing more than a disposable instrument. Conversely, if the embryos in question are not human, killing them to extract stem cells requires no more justification than having a tooth pulled. By agreeing that human embryos are fitting subjects for destructive research, Danforth is taking a position that embryos do not deserve the same protections owed toddlers or other human beings. This is hardly a neutral position; it's an extremely controversial one with deep metaphysical underpinnings. Why, then, is it okay for Danforth to legislate his own metaphysical view on the status of human embryos but not okay for pro-lifers to legislate theirs?

Ultimately, Danforth's problem comes down to this: Science divorced from metaphysics cannot tell us why anything has a right to life. Science, for example, cannot tell us why a Black man has value or even why Danforth himself does. If nature is all there is, then all humans are cosmic accidents, regardless of their stages of development or where they might be located (whether it be the petri dish or The White House). Conversely, if these same humans have value in virtue of the kind of thing they are—creatures who bear the image of their Maker—then it's rational to conclude their right to life comes to be when they come to be, at conception or the completion of a cloning process.

In short, state neutrality is impossible. The law either recognizes the unborn as valuable human beings and thus protects them or it does not and permits killing them. Mary Ann Glendon sums things up nicely: Pro-lifers are not imposing their views on anyone. They are proposing them in hopes their fellow citizens will adopt them. That's called democracy.⁶ If Senator Danforth has a problem with that, his argument isn't with me. It's with Thomas Jefferson.

Notes:

1. John Danforth, "In the Name of Politics," *New York Times*, 3-30-05.

2. See, for example, Francis J. Beckwith, "The Explanatory Power of the Substance View of Persons," *Christian Bioethics* 10.1 (2004): 33-54.

3. See Libertarians for Life (<http://l4l.org>) and Godless Pro-lifers (<http://GodLessProLifers.org>)

4. Francis J. Beckwith, "Law, Religion, and the Metaphysics of Abortion: A Reply to Simmons." *Journal of Church and State* 43.1 (Winter 2001): pp.19-33. Beckwith is speaking principally to the issue of abortion, but his thoughts apply to the ESCR debate as well. I owe my thoughts in this section to his excellent analysis.

5. See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

6. Mary Ann Glendon, "The Women of Roe v. Wade," *First Things*, June/July 2003.