

THE 2003 KUYPER LECTURE

Response

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The Acton Institute
for the Study of Religion and Liberty

In Response to
Congressman Vernon J. Ehler's lecture

Protecting & Enhancing Life

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“Protecting and Enhancing Life”: A Response to Congressman Vernon J. Ehlers

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I am thankful to The Center for Public Justice and Calvin College for the opportunity to participate in this year’s Kuyper Lecture, and especially to be here with Congressman Ehlers, who is one of the more serious thinkers in the US Congress (though I confess that this may not be much of a compliment).

While I am honored to be asked to address the topic of the protection and enhancement of life, I also do this with a certain sadness when contemplating the reality that this year’s Kuyper Lecture is also the 30th anniversary of a decision of our nation’s Supreme Court that arguably did more to undermine life in a single blow than any other court ruling in our nation’s history. This lecture also comes within the same week that here in Michigan Governor Granholm, someone who wears her alleged Catholicism much more lightly than I would advise any of my penitents interested in the destiny of their immoral souls, vetoed the “Legal Birth Definition Act.”

The very necessity of such an act is itself a sad admission of the barbarism to which our legal institutions have slid.

In his paper, Congressman Ehlers says, “Politicians, scientists and the public must develop a coherent way of thinking about life-related issues that is consistent with their views of humanity so that they can debate and decide these issues clearly.”

Permit me to take this as my point of departure in offering a type of grammar that I see as useful in attempting to foster such an understanding and informed debate. While it may be rhetorically satisfying for the believer to exhort politicians, scientists and the public in biblical categories and with biblical vocabulary, I fear that our culture has lost its common grammar, rendering moral dialogue difficult and the believer’s argument incomprehensible.

In this regard I propose a natural law mode of argumentation that seeks a common ground based in reason, with the hope that the sheer force of such reasoned argument will open a wider field for the protection and enhancement of human life.

You may suspect that this priest is attempting to sneak St. Thomas under your Kuyperian tent. Yet natural-law doctrine has played an important historical role in the tradition of Protestant ethics since the sixteenth century, even if among twentieth-century Protestant theologians the natural-law tradition has been viewed with suspicion and, at times, with hostility. A colleague on staff at the Acton Institute, in fact the Executive Editor of our academic journal, *Markets and Morality*, Stephen Grabill, who is completing his doctorate at Calvin Theological Seminary, is studying this whole area and concludes that a primary reason for the negative assessment of this tradition in Protestant theology has been the influence of Karl Barth’s epistemological criticism of natural theology and his advocacy of a divine command ethic in the 1934 debate with Emil Brunner. Though the Protestant tradition of natural law atrophied during the years 1934 to 1990, in the last decade of the twentieth century some Protestant theologians began to express renewed but cautious interest in natural-law ethics.

The decline of natural law in the Protestant community is tied to the theological argument, stemming from Barth's criticism of natural theology, that the Fall has disordered natural human faculties to such an extent that humans are unable to know good and evil naturally apart from special revelation. But in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many Protestant theologians (such as Philip Melancthon, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and others) taught that the diminished natural human faculties still functioned sufficiently to reveal the general precepts of the natural moral law.

In our time, the privatization of religious belief and the impoverishment of public moral discourse provide the backdrop against which the renewed Protestant interest in natural law must be seen. The natural-law tradition supplies an antidote to these cultural trends because, according to it, there is a universal law to which people of all races, cultures, and religions can have access through their natural reason. Natural law thus provides moral knowledge that all people can grasp without the aid of special or divine revelation. Natural law is particularly advantageous in terms of political discourse and Christian engagement in the public square because it seems to provide a moral vocabulary that can function for both religious and secular interlocutors.

Permit me to rehearse for you what I think such an argument might look like, and then conclude with what might be some more provocative ramifications of the premise I have laid out.

We have been reminded that 80 Nobel Laureates have argued that stem cells derived from human embryos hold the possibility of cures for Parkinson's, arthritis, diabetes, Huntington's, heart disease, etc. Former Director of the NIH, Harold Varmus has said: "It is not unrealistic to say that [stem cell research] has the potential to revolutionize medicine."
[<http://reason.com/rb/rb071101.shtml>]

Familiar faces of people whom many American consider friends, like Michael J. Fox, Christopher Reeve and Mary Tyler Moore, have all shared their personal pleas with the nation to make such research available.

And the media has generally been unable to resist casting this ongoing debate as a classic clash between the forces of reason and science against the same antiquated, repressive and misogynous ideas propagated by institutions such as those run by celibate males who also imprisoned Galileo.

Light does battle with darkness once again.

I would like to break the character-type so beloved by the media and instead offer *reasons* based on scientific consensus against the liberal destruction of nascent human life, whether in the form of embryonic stem cells, zygotes, or fetuses. Please note that in the forthcoming argument I will not employ theology, ecclesial authority or even philosophy to identify the origin and nature of human life.

At the outset, I wish to concede that it is absurd in the extreme for people to turn a blind eye to science's ability to ease human suffering by defending what Christopher Reeve has called "a mass of cells slated for disposal".

It is absurd, if one accepts Mr. Reeve's characterization of the products of conception (to employ another euphemism that obfuscates rather than clarifies) what these cells at the center of our debate are — scientifically speaking.

Here are the facts:

“All standard embryology texts clearly state that in normal cases the beginning of a distinct human organism or human individual or human being, occurs with the fusion of the pronuclei of the sperm and ovum, producing the zygote.” (Patrick Lee and Robert P. George, “Embryology, Philosophy, and Human Dignity”, *National Review Online*, August 9, 2001.

<http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/comment-leeprint080901.html>).

Human embryos are distinct organisms.

“At every stage of development, human beings (whether zygote, morula, blastocyst, embryo, fetus, infant, or adult) retain their identity as an enduring being that develops through the stages of life. From conception, we possess the genetic blueprint necessary for development; we are beings organized for maturation as members of the human race.

In short, the self-directing human organism that each of us is today is the same human being that was created when we were conceived. None of us “became” a human being at some point after conception. Each of us was a human being from the point at which we became a distinct organism — that is, conception.” (“No Compromise on Stem Cells”, *The Wall Street Journal*, July 11, 2001).

To reiterate, all that I have said here regarding the human status of the embryo is predicated, not on faith or revelation, but scientific consensus.

If you are aware of any recognized scientific textbook or research that contradicts this, I would be interested to see it.

Let us proceed now to an exploration of the ramifications of the biological premise.

When one looks at the cluster of issues that surround the identity of embryonic life, whether it is stem-cell research, abortion, cloning, invitro fertilization, and others, from this scientific basis, a new perspective emerges.

We are, after all, accustomed to the historical attempts to somehow blur human identity — what University of Chicago’s Dr. Leon Kass calls today’s “soft-dehumanization” has a similar ring to previous such efforts — under slavery (Blacks are not human beings and have no souls), under the Nazis (Jews are inhuman), under the Soviets (Capitalists have no rights).

I contend that nascent human life is not merely the raw material that can be employed as a resource, because such a premise undermines the value of civilization, and would leave all human beings in jeopardy.

Likewise, in this light, we might examine the contention of the 80 Nobel Laureates who remind us of the scientific potential of embryonic stem-cell research. What shall we say to this argument?

You may recall that Dr. Kervorkian once suggested that prisoners on death row ought to be employed for scientific research. He reasoned — and this may sound familiar — that “they are as good as dead already”. Imagine the scientific advances that could be made. Yet people were rightly horrified at his suggestion.

Why? I suggest they are horrified for the same reason that even the advocates of abortion say that “nobody likes abortion” or that it should be “rare”.

Why? Because we all know that the same entity you and I are now, we were when we were embryos.

We know that these are not a “mere mass of cells”.

We know that to instrumentalize human life is to regress, not progress. Americans, of all people, understand that each human being has an intrinsic, not merely an instrumental, value.

We know that we have worth because of what we are, not because of properties or states we happen to instantiate.

Human beings possess this worth, these rights, not because a state or family grants them, but simply because they are.

It is, as the Declaration of Independence so movingly puts it:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident...That all men are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

It is compelling to hear the victims of various diseases who stand to benefit from scientific research plead their case, and call upon the moral sensitivity of society. We are moved to hear their plea because we recognize in them an intrinsic dignity — even if we disagree with the policies they may advocate.

It is precisely in defense of science and technology at human service and the defense of the human person himself that the world’s strongest opponent of embryonic stem-cell research has adopted the position he holds. This despite the fact that he is reported to be suffering from Parkinson’s Disease — one of the ailments that some believe may eventually be cured as a result of stem-cell research.

John Paul II, however, understands that the end never justifies the means.

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