President Bush’s veto on Wednesday of any change in his stem cell research policy was derided by many as a sop to his conservative base. But the price that the president and his party are sure to pay for this decision leads me to the conclusion that, whatever the politics of the move, the president actually has been persuaded by the moral argument against embryonic stem cell harvesting.

Rather than simply dismiss this moral argument as “Luddite,” as Rep. Edward Markey (D-MA) did yesterday, it would certainly demonstrate more respect for the deeply held beliefs of millions of Americans if the argument were taken seriously. It runs as follows:

However small or undeveloped an embryo might be, it is still human. It is what every one of us was at the earliest stage of life?because life develops along an unbroken continuum, from fertilization until natural death.

Embryonic stem cell research requires the destruction of the embryos in question. They are exploited, or experimented on, or harvested--choose whatever term you like--by some members of the human community for the benefit of others. They die that others might (someday, maybe) find healing for their maladies.
Few of us would consent to such an arrangement if it involved us. Personally, I would not consent to having my body’s resources exploited and my life ended in order to provide benefits to other people’s bodies and lives. At least, I would want to have the opportunity to make such a decision for myself. Embryos, of course, are not able to speak up for themselves and make such a choice.

The only way we can manage to describe this as something other than exploitation-unti-death is if we decide that embryos are not members of the human community and therefore lack any standing that must be considered in our moral decision making about what we do with them.

Much has been made of the fact that some embryos used for such research are the frozen leftovers of in vitro fertilization and thus would be destroyed anyway, so why not get some good use out of them?

One response would be to draw this analogy: people on death row are going to die anyway. So why not experiment on them, even if those experiments involve killing them? After all, we might as well get some good use out of them. The same thing could be said for, say, millions of people with terminal illnesses, or in nursing homes in their very last days.

The counter to this analogy would be that death row inmates or people in nursing homes are human beings, and embryos are not. But that is precisely what the argument is about—the moral status of the unborn, even the embryonic unborn. The claim in dispute cannot be used as a premise in the argument.

Now, let us step back from moral argument to a broader view for just a moment. Republican Mike Pence of Indiana, a supporter of the president’s view, acknowledged this week that advocates of this stance were losing the argument with the American people. It is probable, in fact, that President Bush is the last president, Republican or Democrat, who will block federal funding for embryonic stem cell harvesting. So by 2009 our government will likely be fully invested in this research.

This is not really surprising. What is truly surprising is that in a country that legalized abortion on demand over thirty years ago, that embryo research would have been slowed down even for this long. In the average elective abortion, a fetus (not an embryo) is destroyed, with no correlated medical or research benefit for anyone. Our nation sees over one million of these events each year, and most hardly bat an eye anymore. So it is in fact quite surprising that on the stem cell issue, where an embryo (not a fetus) is destroyed, here with a (possible) medical benefit for others someday, that there would be significant resistance in the name of the embryo’s moral standing.

Opposition to embryonic stem cell harvesting is rooted in an expansive understanding of precisely who belongs to the human community, in a country that since 1973 has been busily contracting the boundaries of that community in the name of freedom and utility.
The policies of President Bush have been marked by an inconsistent application of the principle of the sanctity of every human life, from womb to tomb, friend or foe (minimum wage, health policy, enemy detainees, etc.). This badly hurts his credibility when he talks about life’s sanctity.

But I do think that he is right on the embryonic stem cell issue, however quixotic his stand may seem.

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