

and reason are put up and worked out through argumentative engagements. (p. 6)

Controversy, then, is the focal point of discussion in the public sphere, particularly as it relates to policy solutions. The stem cell controversy is an excellent area in which to study the execution of public argument, particularly after a policy has been enacted.

Morality in the Stem Cell Controversy

The first lines of embryonic stem cells were created in 1998, and ever since their creation they have been a subject of public controversy (Dresser, 2005). Both sides staked out their territory and made strong claims for their respective sides. Opponents of the practice sought to give a days-old embryo the same moral equivalence as a human person, emphasizing the sanctity of human life (D. McGee, 2002). Some of those against embryonic stem cell research have even assumed "a sort of super status that outweighs the needs of others in the human community" (G. McGee & Caplan, 2003, p. 152; see also Dresser, 2005). On the other side, supporters of embryonic stem cell research have argued that the promise of cures for diseases is so great that it outweighs any moral protection that an embryo would have (D. McGee, 2002). Scientists have also been accused of overstating the potential for embryonic stem cell research to heal diseases and improve the lives of people around the world (Outka, 2002).

A primary focus of this controversy has been the moral debate over when human life begins. Where one stands on this issue can be a determining factor for the question of the ethics of embryonic stem cell research. Those who argue that embryos are morally equal to people are usually opposed to any destruction of this life, regardless of the reason (Dresser, 2005). Many who hold this view are usually not swayed by arguments in support of embryonic stem cell research. Conversely, those who are less inclined to accept such a high moral status for embryos are more willing to accept that the potential medical benefits outweigh the destructive means used (Dresser, 2005). While this is usually a determining factor in one's view on embryonic stem cell research, it is not the sole aspect of the controversy upon which people base their judgments. Senator Bill Frist, in fact, famously broke with some of his conservative colleagues to support the expansion of embryonic stem cell research, and in doing so, he said, "I am pro-life. I believe human life begins at conception" (2006). While Frist does not mention his background as a medical doctor explicitly, he does say "I have seen firsthand how new medical discoveries and techniques can save lives and make life more fulfilling for others" (2006).

The debate over when life begins is ultimately a religious question, and religious denominations are all over the spectrum as it relates to embryonic stem cell research. No religious consensus exists, for example, regarding when human life begins (Herold, 2006). Religious organizations that oppose stem cell research have come forward to offer

their views on both the beginning of life and the moral status of embryos that would be destroyed. They cite passages in the Bible to support their interpretation of human life, like, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5, New American Standard Version). Two of the most outspoken denominations to voice their opposition to the practice have been the Roman Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention. The Southern Baptist Convention primarily cites the Bible as the basis of its moral stance in opposition to embryonic stem cell research (Cohen, 2006). The Roman Catholic Church has cited church tradition above and beyond the writings of the Bible as the moral basis for its disdain for embryonic stem cell research (Jones, 2005; Kalbian, 2003).

Other denominations, however, have expressed a more permissive attitude toward embryonic stem cell research. The United Church of Christ, for example, has noted that their views on the beginning of human life support expanded stem cell research (Commission, 2003). Both the Presbyterian Church and the Jewish faith have expressed support for expanded stem cell research (Abernethy, 2001). While different religious institutions have expressed various perspectives on the stem cell controversy, those groups who oppose stem cell research have been much more vocal in their opposition than groups who support it have been (Cohen, 2006).

Some scholars have questioned the role of religious arguments in matters such as these where governmental policy is being decided, particularly in response to religious leaders who have expressed their opposition to embryonic stem cell research. They have argued that these religious leaders "should keep their convictions within the walls of their houses of worship and allow public policy to be developed on the basis of commonly held secular reasons and values" (Cohen, 2006). Ronald Reagan Jr. has also noted such frustration: "It does not follow that the theology of a few should be allowed to forestall the health and well-being of the many" (qtd. in Bellomo, 2006, p. 98). Indeed, the role of private morality in discussions of public policy has complicated this controversy because people on all sides of the issue feel very strongly about their respective positions. Cynthia Cohen (2006), however, notes the importance both of including religious arguments in the public sphere and determining their best role within it:

The free expression of religious belief in the public square is morally grounded in the value that we assign to freedom of religion and to free expression generally. This, of course, presumes that such views are offered in a spirit of respect for others as free and equal persons. It requires that those presenting their views in the public square, be they religious or secular, *not take a back-door route to attempting to write their views into public policy determinations but present their arguments and attempt to persuade others* [italics added]. That is, those speaking out in the public square

should not attempt to exert overbearing pressure on legislators and citizens to adopt their views in lieu of presenting those views and engaging in discussion and argument about them. (p. 140)

Herein lies a crucial distinction for the role of religious argument in the public sphere. Arguments based in religious backing should serve the purpose of advancing discussion in the public sphere, not closing it off. Many religious arguments in the stem cell debate appeal to religious traditions or passages in the Bible, often disregarding the fact that many other people do not accept the backing as legitimate (Goodnight, 1993). This has two effects: 1) it attempts to create undue influence on public policy without the input of other members of the public sphere, and 2) it attempts to close off debate within the public sphere and resolve the matter artificially. The use of religious principles (characterized as the more generic "moral principles") in this way can be seen in the Bush Administration's policy on embryonic stem cell research. In this paper, I discuss the morality of stem cell research in conjunction with religious beliefs. While it should be obvious that religion and morality are not synonymous, I use the two terms together primarily because President George W. Bush has openly expressed his religious views as a guiding principle of his policy discussions. He has noted that his favorite philosopher is Jesus (Wead, 2004). The analysis that follows will first discuss this policy, and will turn to the discussion between Tim Russert and White House Chief of Staff Josh Bolten on *Meet the Press* that followed President Bush's July 19, 2006 veto.

A Compromise Between Morality and Scientific Progress

On August 9, 2001, President George W. Bush announced his Administration's policy establishing guidelines on federal funding for embryonic stem cell research. He allowed federal funds to support adult stem cell research and research on embryonic stem cell lines in which the embryo has already been used, but he decided to prevent federal funds from being used to support the creation of new embryonic stem cell lines because embryos would be destroyed in the process. He said, "This allows us to explore the promise and potential of stem cell research without crossing a fundamental moral line, by providing taxpayer funding that would sanction or encourage further destruction of human embryos that have at least the potential for life" (Bush, 2001).

The policy decision was important in two ways: 1) it was the first time that a President had to confront this delicate issue with some degree of clarity, and 2) given the importance of the issue, it was "essentially a political compromise, underscoring on the one hand his pledge to protect the innocent future lives of embryos, while at the same time acknowledging the medical breakthroughs that embryonic stem cell research can offer" (Brannigan, 2004, p. 54). His decision was met with mixed reaction. Some lauded the decision as a good bal-

ance of ethical issues, but others expressed concern that President Bush had actually undermined the moral principles that he had professed to support even as he explained his decision (Novak, 2003). Regardless of the initial reaction, however, the decision sought to bring the issue to some sort of closure. As a result, some discussion continued, but the issue was overshadowed by others as time went on. It became an issue in election years, resurfacing prominently in 2006 for two reasons.

First, Michael J. Fox, a famous actor who suffers from Parkinson's disease, filmed a political commercial in support of Missouri Democratic Senate candidate Claire McCaskill. The ad was immensely popular and stirred up a lot of discussion, particularly after Rush Limbaugh criticized Fox for the ad, saying "in this commercial, he is exaggerating the effects of the disease. He is moving all around and shaking. And it's purely an act. This is the only time I have ever seen Michael J. Fox portray any of the symptoms of the disease he has....this is really shameless of Michael J. Fox. Either he didn't take his medication or he's acting, one of the two" (qtd. in MediaMatters, 2006). Limbaugh's comments sparked a controversy over the nature and effects of Parkinson's disease, but it also bolstered sympathy for Fox's cause.

Second, on July 18, 2006, the Senate passed the "Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act of 2005," a bill passed a year prior by the House of Representatives that would extend federal funding for embryonic stem cell research to use embryos discarded from in vitro fertility clinics for the creation of new stem cell lines. The next day President George W. Bush vetoed the act despite the pleas of many across the country that supported the bill. In a ceremony at the White House the day of the veto, President Bush said, "This bill would support the taking of innocent human life in the hope of finding medical benefits for others. It crosses a moral boundary that our decent society needs to respect, so I vetoed it" (2006). As noted at the beginning of this article, President Bush's appeal to a "moral boundary" is based on the religious interpretation that embryos are equivalent to human life and should not be harmed or killed. Sam Harris notes the influence President Bush's religious beliefs had on the veto when he argues that President Bush "used his first veto to deny federal funding to this research. He did this on the basis of his religious faith.... Here, as ever, religious dogmatism impedes genuine wisdom and compassion." (2006, p. 42). Former White House Press Secretary, the late Tony Snow, rationalized the decision much more bluntly:

The President believes strongly that for the purpose of research it's inappropriate for the federal government to finance something that many people consider murder; he's one of them. Furthermore, it is worth pointing out that this government did make available already existing lines — to sort of get back to your question, there were existing lines.... The simple answer is he thinks murder is wrong. (Snow, 2006)

Snow's comment suggests a stronger moral stance than the one outlined in the August 9, 2001 policy decision establishing guidelines for federal funding of embryonic stem cell research. Snow also, however, attempts to emphasize that President Bush has supported some forms of embryonic stem cell research, a position in tension with his argument that such research is "murder." The following Sunday, White House Chief of Staff Josh Bolten was a guest on *Meet the Press*, and during the interview, Tim Russert asked Bolten about the Bush Administration's policy, President Bush's recent veto, and Tony Snow's comments. This exchange is important for scholars in argumentation and public sphere theory because many of the arguments in favor of embryonic stem cell research clashed with the Bush Administration's position. To understand the argumentation, the focus turns now to the interview with Tim Russert on *Meet the Press*, July 23, 2006.

"A Very Difficult Balance"

In this interview, White House Chief of Staff, Josh Bolten attempted to emphasize three main themes: 1) President Bush believes that embryos are human life that deserve protection, 2) President Bush's policy on embryonic stem cell research struck "a very delicate balance" between supporters and opponents of such research (Russert, 2006), and 3) embryos should not be discarded because, as is evidenced by the "Snowflake" babies (embryos that were adopted from in vitro fertilization clinics that were inseminated and born) that were present at President Bush's signing ceremony where he announced the veto, they can become human life. Russert's questions focused on three themes: 1) the tension between the Bush Administration's rhetoric of stem cell research as "murder" and its willingness to allow exceptions, 2) why President Bush does not take more aggressive steps to prevent embryonic stem cell research, and 3) the merit of Karl Rove's claim that adult stem cells "show far more promise than embryonic stem cells" (Russert, 2006).

Bolten echoed the Bush Administration's position that embryos constituted "human life that deserves protection" (Russert, 2006). He made such a reference four times during the interview and stressed that tax dollars should not go to destroy this life. His discussion in this area, however, was limited and became repetitive primarily because none of Russert's questions asked what President Bush thought the status of an embryo was. Russert asked about exceptions in President Bush's policy regarding stem cell research and whether President Bush agreed with Press Secretary Snow that such research could be called "murder." Bolten relied on the standard characterization of an embryo as human life rather than respond directly to the questions asked. In fact, he was unwilling to agree with Tony Snow's assertion that embryonic stem cell research was murder. This unwillingness to keep a strong stance against stem cell research undermined his position by making him appear inconsistent.

Bolten referred to President Bush's actions as a "balance" seven times in the interview, attempting to emphasize both the complexity of the issue and the way that President Bush's policy constituted a compromise. Russert's first question was whether President Bush agreed with Snow's comment that embryonic stem cell research constitutes "murder." Bolten responded with the history of the Bush Administration's policy and emphasized that President Bush's policy struck "a very delicate and difficult balance" (Russert, 2006), functionally dodging the question. He proceeded to use this phrase in response to questions about President Bush's willingness to tolerate exceptions that would allow private companies to destroy embryos for stem cell research, whether President Bush accepts the word "murder" to describe the practice, and the relative effectiveness of adult stem cells versus embryonic stem cells. Bolten built on the first theme of the interview, arguing that, while President Bush believed that embryos were human life, he "recognizes that there are millions of Americans who don't recognize that as a human life" (Brannigan, 2004, p. 54). Bolten attempts to characterize President Bush's position as a win for all sides of the debate, but he does so to no avail. The futility of Bolten's repetition suggests that while President Bush's policy "sought to appease many parties...it ended up satisfying no one in particular" (p. 54).

Bolten's third main point dealt with the argument that many embryos created by in vitro fertilization clinics should not be discarded because they could still be adopted and turn into living, breathing people. To emphasize this point, he referred to President Bush's ceremony following the veto. On stage with President Bush were a handful of the so-called "Snowflake" babies and their families who were there to emphasize the potential that still exists for these embryos. Bolten was never asked a question directly about the ceremony or the children, but he referred to the ceremony three times in the interview, mentioning that a clip of the ceremony was shown at the beginning of the program. His reference was meant to emphasize the potential that embryos could have in becoming a person and use the image of the cute children to support the Bush Administration's stance against expanding embryonic stem cell research. The problem with his discussion of this staged ceremony is that it was forced into the interview at points that did not call for it. For example, he mentioned the ceremony after the question concerning President Bush's stance on Tony Snow's characterization of embryonic stem cell research as murder.

In contrast to Bolten's verbosity and repetition, Russert's questions were pointed and efficient. He began by asking whether President Bush agreed with Tony Snow that embryonic stem cell research was "murder." Bolten attempted to talk around the central issue of the question, but Russert continued to ask it, adding questions about exceptions in the policy. Russert's overarching question dealt with the tension between the Bush Administration's stance that all destruction of embryos for research was "murder" and the willingness to allow 1) research on stem cells that have already been created by the destruc-

tion of embryos and 2) private companies to continue destroying human embryos to create new stem cell lines. He followed up on Bolten's diversionary responses with more direct language meant to elicit a direct response regarding the tension. The closest response that Russert got to this line of questioning was that President Bush's policy constituted "a very delicate and difficult balance" (Russert, 2006), but as discussed earlier, this statement was not directly responsive to the question of terminology or beliefs. In other words, the tension between the Bush Administration's policy and its exceptions was broached without proper refutation.

Russert's second line of questioning was similar to the first in that it dealt with the application of the general moral statement that an embryo is "human life that deserves protection" (Russert, 2006). Instead of dealing with tension directly, however, Russert wondered about the limits of the Bush Administration's moral stance in terms of practical application. He asked whether the Bush Administration would be willing to close down in vitro fertilization clinics, since these clinics are "creating embryos that, in the president's view, will be murdered" (Russert, 2006). Bolten's response to this question is slightly more direct: "That's not where the President has, has drawn the balance. He's drawn the balance with—the line with federal funding" (Russert, 2006). Bolten attempted to shut down discussion over the (in)consistency in President Bush's embryonic stem cell policy and private research by narrowing the issue, but Russert continued to appeal to the general ethic that the Bush Administration evoked. His refusal to accept Bolten's attempts to discard the question of President Bush's moral stance opened up a space for discussion and called into question the rhetoric of the Bush Administration.

The final theme that Russert discussed was the claim by Karl Rove that adult stem cells "show far more promise than embryonic stem cells" (Russert, 2006). Bolten asserted that adult stem cells show significant promise, but he was unwilling to show the same level of endorsement that Rove expressed, particularly when Russert asked Bolten to name any scientist that could support the claim. Bolten attempted to draw the claim to the larger question of the "delicate balance" that President Bush struck, realizing that both adult and embryonic stem cell research showed great promise. Russert asked for any evidence that supported the statement, and Bolten did not even attempt to assert any.

Overall, the interview featured the central arguments for the Bush Administration's stance that embryonic stem cell research should not be expanded, yet the discussion cast significant doubt upon the strength of the Administration's claims. Bolten repeated talking points in response to Russert's direct questions and left such doubt unresolved. Bolten was unable to reconcile the internal discrepancies that exist in the Bush Administration's policy and corresponding rhetoric. His arguments were primarily defensive in nature, and they did not sufficiently respond to Russert's criticisms. He even conceded

that embryonic stem cell research had great potential, a position that lends credibility to the arguments put forward by supporters of expanded embryonic stem cell research. Ultimately, Bolten's appearance shows the limits involved in making private morality a primary basis for public policy.

Private Morality vs. Public Policy

President Bush's "delicate balance" is a political compromise meant to respond to the debate in the public sphere with a policy. The problem is that this "compromise" is ultimately problematic in function; very few people are happy as a result of the so-called "balance." The decision attempted to assert a final word into the discussion, but the authoritative voice did not resolve the issue or even bring moral clarity from which citizens and government officials could proceed. The logic underpinning President Bush's policy attempts to co-opt both sides of a debate that are ultimately incommensurate, and the hypocrisy in this compromise was revealed with both the veto and the *Meet the Press* interview that discussed it. President Bush attempted to take a strong stance against the destruction of embryos, but his stance only applies to federal funding on the creation of new stem cell lines. Given the strength of his moral stance against the destruction of life in this very limited instance, President Bush's veto opened up his actions to challenge in a way that ultimately strengthens the case of those who favor expanded embryonic stem cell research.

In the interview Bolten participated in on *Meet the Press*, we see the rhetorical and ethical limits of President Bush's stance regarding embryonic stem cell research. Part of the problem for the Bush Administration is that its officials have taken such an uncompromising rhetorical stance that it makes the compromise appear hypocritical. Tony Snow called embryonic stem cell research "murder." Such language assumes that the Bush Administration believes that no embryonic stem cell research is justified, but the policy reveals a bargain that undercuts those principles. As a result, the Administration's policy regarding embryonic stem cell research is called into question in this interview, not only because Russert asked direct questions and followed up for clear answers, but because Bolten was unable to provide direct answers or the clarity that Russert wanted. President Bush's stance on embryonic stem cell research was proven to be internally contradictory. In order for President Bush to follow his moral principles, he would have to disregard the ethical beliefs of those that disagreed with him. In order for President Bush to tend to the diverse beliefs that exist on this issue, he would necessarily have to compromise his personal moral beliefs.

Bolten's interview with Russert points out the limits of such an unyielding ethical stance as well. Snow's characterization of embryonic stem cell research as murder forces the Administration into a position of either defending such a politically alienating position or backing off the claim and showing moral uncertainty. Bolten charac-

terizes the Bush Administration's position as a "difficult and delicate balance" (Russert, 2006). Given other ambiguities regarding policy specifics, President Bush is put in a very restrictive position by simply keeping federal funding restrictions on future stem cell lines while allowing private research on new lines or federally supported research to continue on embryos that have already been destroyed. Religious leaders and proponents of stem cell research alike can decry President Bush's policy as the wrong answer to the morally complex issue of embryonic stem cell research.

Recall Cohen's argument above that religious arguments could be accepted within the public sphere as long as they are meant to persuade others, not secretly influence policy outcomes. According to this standard, the Bush Administration's policy constitutes an inappropriate use of religious arguments for two reasons. First, President Bush relied on his belief that life begins at conception, and that belief assumes that an embryo should have the same moral and legal status as a person. He did not base his conclusion on any consensus of religious and/or scientific thought; he let his personal beliefs guide how he crafted his policy. Second, he did not attempt to persuade the public to agree with his interpretation. Rather, he dictated policy to others and claimed it was based on the best compromise he could conjure up for the American people. Those that have objections can only voice them privately or in a public forum after the fact, so their voices can have no direct effect on policy. The goal of President Bush's stance on embryonic stem cell research is to provide a measure of closure to the debate, no matter how artificial.

How does this move affect deliberation in the public sphere? President Bush's veto is a policy stance meant to close off debate on the issue of stem cell research. In fact, his act does the opposite. By taking such a strong, yet hypocritical stance, President Bush has opened himself up for deliberative challenge from all sides. The moral ambiguity of his position opens a space for supporters of embryonic stem cell research to show moral clarity. Only debate and deliberation within the public sphere can reveal that space because on the surface one would think that President Bush's policy is a good compromise. Further investigation, however, shows it to be internally contradictory, and this fact alone is enough to spark debate. It can not only allow people the space to discuss the merits of President Bush's embryonic stem cell research policy, but it can also give them a forum in which they can discuss what *they* think individuals and governments should do to resolve the moral complexity that surrounds this issue.

President Bush's actions on this question are particularly salient because they are an attempt to appear certain, when in fact it is clear that his position is anything but certain. His moral stance is filled with caveats and exceptions, yet he and his supporters are unwilling either to acknowledge these shortcomings in the policy or to admit that this policy cannot be the final word on the issue. This performative contradiction invites deliberation because, as Russert's questions

show, a space exists where it becomes necessary to question the rationale of leaders, even if you agree with them. Uncertainty in public policy provides that space, and uncertainty dressed up as certainty only makes that debate stronger because it engenders a motivation to expose the myopic view of those in power.

Conclusion

Stephen Mansfield (2003), author of *The Faith of George W. Bush*, writes of President Bush that “[f]or him, the personal and the public are intertwined, as are public policy and personal morality” (p. 146). This conflation of public policy with personal morality has limitations that can be seen in the discourse used to justify President Bush’s decision to veto a proposal to expand embryonic stem cell research. The Bush Administration’s inconsistent and problematic policy regarding embryonic stem cell research was difficult for Josh Bolten to justify on *Meet the Press*. As a result of the exchange, fundamental aspects of the Administration’s moral stance were called into question, opening space for deliberation on the issue that the government has been attempting to tackle. This exchange, also, highlighted the limited effects of unyielding moral principles when applied to public policy. It is this uncertainty regarding a significant political or social controversy that can become a starting point for discussion in the public sphere, as Goodnight (1991) has argued. President Bush’s original policy seemed on the surface like a reasonable solution. As the idea required a specific application of the principles, however, the distance between the generic moral guideline and the policy that must conform to it was seen as quite large. Being able to identify similar spots of moral ambiguity disguised as certainty can open up space for deliberation on both the general moral principle and its application to specific circumstances. It can help people take deliberative power into their own hands, rather than rely on institutions to do the thinking for them.

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