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Bioethics and the 2008 Presidential Campaign

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Serious questions about serious issues are often among the first casualties of a presidential campaign. The major media are part of the problem — as are the candidates themselves — but the largest portion of the blame must be put on the American people. The fact is that the American public just does not show much interest in issues outside of a narrow comfort zone.

Writing in the current issue of *TIME* magazine, Nancy Gibbs suggests that we should be interested in how the major candidates would deal with some of the most pressing issues in bioethics — issues that, after all, fall right within the pay grade of one who would serve as President of the United States. These issues are, as Gibbs explains, about “the hard choices our next President will have to help us make.”

Interestingly, Nancy Gibbs addresses questions directly to the two major party nominees for President. Let’s take a close look at the questions she poses:



For Barack Obama: Democrats have long argued for greater reproductive freedom. Do you think that should include the right to choose the sex of your child? The same genetic tests that screen for terrible diseases could in theory target many other predispositions. What if prospective parents could screen for short or shy or gay or blond? This is a largely unregulated universe of treatment; should it be?

This is a truly important question for Sen. Obama and others who champion “a woman’s right to choose” without any external restraint. One motto of the abortion movement has expressed this as a woman’s right to an abortion “anywhere, anytime, for any reason.” The feminist movement has long argued that abortion rights are essential in order for women to determine their own destiny. But how will feminists respond to the fact that sex selection abortions are, for many parents, a way to avoid having *girl* babies? There is a stunning silence from the feminist movement on this question.

Nancy Gibbs addresses this question to Barack Obama and expands the question to include abortions intended to produce “acceptable” babies on other grounds. This is a great question, and one that a prospective President should be required to answer. Would Barack Obama ever believe that an abortion would be categorically *wrong*? If so, he admits that at least some motivations are wrong, and thus puts himself on a collision course with *Roe v. Wade*. Given the fact that he and his party platform express total support for *Roe*, Sen. Obama is hard pressed to answer the question. Nevertheless, he should be asked, and should not be let off the hook with his answer that some questions are above his pay grade. These are policy questions that the federal government will confront.

Then:

For John McCain: About 8,000 people may die this year waiting for organ transplants. Do you think the free market should include kidneys? You’ve said human rights begin at conception. But fertility clinics create excess embryos that are frozen and often discarded, which you’ve favored using for research. So are some embryos more equal than others?

Gibbs sets this question with skill. She intends perhaps to put Sen. McCain in a vise between the free market and medical ethics. I have no idea how Sen. McCain would answer her question. It is an undeniable tragedy that so many

thousands of people will die this year without needed organ transplants. Would these organs become available if individuals could sell their healthy organs? If so, would organs simply go to the highest bidder — to those with the greatest ability to pay?

Clearly, there are serious moral and ethical concerns about a free market in human organs. The poor could be effectively coerced into selling their own organs. The rich could buy needed organs while the poor might do without. Most people probably recoil at the idea that something as precious as a human organ might be treated as a simple commodity. On the other hand, we commodify human labor and recognize the urgent need for donated organs. Why not allow individuals to pre-sell their organs for use after their death? Just imagine how revealing a discussion on these questions could be.

Gibbs also asks Sen. McCain about human embryonic stem cell research. She detects what she sees as a glaring inconsistency between McCain's new insistence that he wants to see stem cell research proceed without destroying human embryos and his apparent lack of concern for human embryos "wasted" in fertility clinics.

Well, I think she is exactly right in pointing to this contradiction. Furthermore, I think she could have pointed her question at many evangelicals, who seem to believe that embryos wasted in fertility clinics are of less concern than embryos destroyed in stem cell research. When Gibbs asks if some embryos are "more equal than others," she should ask a good many who believe themselves to be pro-life, but have not acknowledged this inconsistency.

Actually, Sen. McCain is moving in the right direction here, and I am hopeful that he will come to a deeper understanding of the sanctity and dignity of every single human embryo.

Then:

And for both: Would you forcibly quarantine people during a pandemic? Should police at a crime scene be allowed to ask everyone in the area for a DNA sample? Scientists around the world are building robots with real brain tissue; inserting a fish gene for cold tolerance into tomatoes; breeding bacteria that can eat oil spills. Should we be worried that we often learn what is happening in the labs only when the results come out of them?

Once again, these are real and relevant questions that might, under horrifying circumstances, be forced upon a president and the government. While candidates are being asked about matters ranging from the economy to foreign policy, who speaks for these questions?

Interestingly, a discussion of these important issues would, of necessity, reveal much about other issues as well. Every one of these issues connects with many others, getting right to the questions of human dignity, human life, human freedom, and human destiny. Thus far, these questions have gone unasked and unanswered.

I think Nancy Gibbs has offered a clever and creative analysis of at least one major set of questions now missing from this campaign season. In all probability, the candidates will not be asked these questions in the course of this race for the presidency.

But, as we must recognize, the new president may have to answer one or more of these questions in short order. The American people would be better served by having some of these questions asked before they vote.

SOURCE: Nancy Gibbs, "[Life and Death](#)," *TIME*, posted September 18, 2008.

