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Biotechnology and the Human Future — An “Exploding” Issue

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William Saletan covers biomedical issues and related controversies at Slate.com — and his instincts about what is important are very often right on the mark. He got it right recently when he pointed to the emergence of biotechnology issues in the 2006 mid-term elections. Biotech landed on the electoral agenda in a big way, and this will have long-lasting consequences for the culture.

The clearest example this year was Missouri, where voters narrowly elected the Democratic candidate for the U.S. Senate, Claire McCaskill. Her victory may well have been tied to the narrow success of “Proposition 2,” a measure that promoted embryonic stem cell research [ESC].

Here is Saletan’s assessment of the ESC issue as it played out in Missouri:

If you block ESC research, you’re closing off what might be the quickest path to saving many lives. And if you promote the research, along with the embryonic cloning that makes it therapeutically useful, you’re seriously messing with the foundations of life. You’re creating artificial human entities. You’re turning eggs and embryos into medical supplies.

These two truths aren’t going away. The life-saving potential of biological research will only increase its political power. The baby boomers are turning 60. They’ll reach for any technology that offers hope of staving off illness and death. So will the generations behind them.

Saletan is on to something of incredible importance here. As he notes, voters seem inclined to vote for whatever seems to offer the greatest benefit to their own lives. They are driven by desire to “stave off illness and death.” Therefore, they will find a way to support ESC, even if it means the intentional destruction of human embryos.

He sees even greater ethical (and thus political) challenges ahead:

Meanwhile, the technology grows more complicated. Stem cells from leftover embryos are only the beginning. To cure people reliably, you have to move on to cloning. To avoid cloning, you have to devise alternatives, such as reprogramming adult cells, which might enable any cell in your body to become an embryo. To eradicate diseases with today’s technology, you’d have to screen embryos and flush the ones with bad genes. With tomorrow’s technology, you’ll be able to re-engineer them. Each of these advances saves life at the price of dissolving it. We’re taking ourselves apart.

His tracing of the logic is unassailable. And we are taking human dignity apart as we are “taking ourselves apart.”

As Saletan acknowledges, Americans are not prepared for this debate. He writes: “We’re so not ready for this. But we can’t stop ourselves. So we try to simplify the oncoming technologies, treating them like issues we already know.”

Finally:

So hold on to your hats. A new kind of issue has arrived. It’s moral, it’s economic, and it’s life and death. Biotechnology is here to stay, even if humanity, as we know it, isn’t.

Yes, the biotech issue has arrived. Before long, biotechnology will be on the agenda of every state and present in one

way or another on every ballot. We demand technologies and treatments that extend our lives, even if these violate human dignity. After all, many of our neighbors will argue, we are only talking about microscopic cells and entities.

I am confident we would be shocked to know how many people close to us would make this choice — for the promise of medical breakthroughs at the expense of human embryos. The culture's descent into a purely instrumental vision of human dignity is fast gaining momentum. Those of us who would contend for full human dignity at every stage of human life have much ground to recover.

William Saletan is right. This is one of the most explosive issues of our times.

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