

The Catholic Church teaches unequivocally that “human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception.”² If fertilization brings substantial change and the zygote formed is both alive and human—facts accessible to both philosophical and scientific analysis—a soul is present because the soul is the principle of life in a material body and the form of the body.^{3,4}

Guenin’s reference to the Vatican document *Donum Vitae* is misleading. That document does not teach that a person is a genome. It also does not teach that a person is a union of body and soul because this would preclude angelic persons and the 3 Persons of the Trinity. The classic definition of Boethius is “*persona est naturae rationalis individua substantia*,” a person is an individual substance of a rational nature.⁵ Actually, since person denotes a “who,” not a “what,” a person cannot be subject to strict definition, which refers only to the “whatness” of a thing. *Donum Vitae* explicitly affirms the human person as a substantial union of body and spiritual soul, the immediate creation of the spiritual soul of each human person by God, and the inviolability of the human person from the moment of conception. It also explicitly (and presciently) rejects the argument from nonenablement.⁶

Perhaps realizing the weakness of his argument, Guenin buttresses it with references to the embryo not being sentient or capable of forming preferences and adopting ends, thus confusing the actualization of various potencies with the underlying nature in which such potencies are grounded. He also buttresses it with references to the relief of human suffering, which is actually the utilitarian defense of embryo use he previously (and properly) rejected, a variant of the Machiavelian principle that the end justifies the means—a principle covertly or overtly embraced by today’s brave new world of bioethicists. According to Guenin, “Therefore nothing that we might do to an epidosembryo can cause it discomfort or frustrate it.” I would submit that killing is the ultimate frustration for the victim.

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1. Guenin LM. The morality of unenabled embryo use—arguments that work and arguments that don’t. *Mayo Clin Proc.* 2004;79:801-808.

2. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd ed. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference; 2000.

3. Aristotle. *De Anima (On the Soul): The Complete Works of Aristotle*. Barnes J, ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; 1984.

4. Denzinger H. *Enchiridion Symbolorum (The Sources of Catholic Dogma)*. Fitzwilliam, NH: Loreto Publications; 1955.

5. Tixeront J. *History of Dogmas*. Westminster, Md: Christian Classics; 1984.

6. Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. *Donum Vitae*. Vatican City; 1987.

To the Editor: In general, it is not possible to espouse any position that is truly free of bias, including the one I shall mention at the end of this letter. That is certainly true of the article by Guenin¹ on the morality of embryonic stem cell research.

I read Guenin’s article with great interest, being both a physician and an ordained minister of the Roman Catholic Church. Guenin’s argument from nonenablement appears to flow primarily from one simple premise, that the biologic mother of an embryo has the authority to decide that embryo’s fate and can therefore offer it for research or for intrauterine development, at her own choice. This is a premise that permits yet another interpretation.

The other position is that there is no human being who has such authority, because such authority rests only in God. This is a position that certainly seems irrational to us limited-view human beings, who can see only the physical world around us. However, I believe it is the ultimate truth on which all the other arguments must be based. Given this premise, no argument would seem “acceptable” to allow embryonic research. In any case, this is the position from which the arguments must start. As stated previously, this is my personal bias, although it certainly dovetails with that of many others in our society, not just those in my own church community.

Undoubtedly, Guenin will claim some ability to read the mind of God in this regard, since he did so twice in his commentary. However, having admitted my own bias in this regard, I invite Guenin to admit his.

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1. Guenin LM. The morality of unenabled embryo use—arguments that work and arguments that don’t. *Mayo Clin Proc.* 2004;79:801-808.

To the Editor: Does a human life begin at birth, during the formation of the neural tube, when the heart starts beating, or when a human form is recognizable? Logically, human life begins at conception, which means at the moment of the union of an egg and a sperm. Nonenablement, as discussed by Guenin,¹ is an interesting concept but inadequate to justify mass cannibalism of human embryos. Just because non-enabled embryos will otherwise perish, it does not follow that we have a right to manipulate and cannibalize their life.

The concept of a person being a union of a soul and a body implies that the 2 are joined at the moment of conception and grow together. An embryonic spirit/soul is still a spirit and soul. Once we deem an embryo unenabled, is it then nonhuman? Guenin strips all human personhood from unenabled embryos but quickly wants to cannibalize their tissue for replacement human organs. The basic intellectual contradiction is as glaring as the gaping portal onto the path descending into the moral abyss that is paved by the good intentions of scavenging embryonic and fetal stem cells.

Aborted fetuses are “unenabled.” Why not use aborted tissue for research as well? It could help ameliorate the feelings of guilt if a woman knew her dismembered or brain-evacuated child could provide tissue and organs for other people. Why don’t we just breed unenabled anencephalic (no brain) babies, grow them in tanks, and then harvest their organs? How about killing severely retarded people (who may

be unable to form preferences), death row inmates, or undesirable races for their organs? There is no fundamental difference between using stem cells from in vitro embryos or aborted fetuses and dehumanizing other people for the purposes of the “medical arts.”

Science will learn soon enough how to coax adult stem cells into the many roles that are beneficial to their recipients. Regrowing or regenerating our own organs with our own stem cells will eliminate all these ethical quandaries. Furthermore, self-donated stem cells will not require immunosuppression for reincorporation into the host body. Everyone is panting after embryonic stems cells as if they were the very water of life. Let’s not sell our ethical and heavenly birthright for a bowl of fleshly healing.

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1. Guenin LM. The morality of unenabled embryo use—arguments that work and arguments that don’t. *Mayo Clin Proc.* 2004;79:801-808.

In reply: Ontology is that branch of metaphysics concerned with the question of what exists, a subject into which I did not enter. I did speak of a woman’s morally permissible discretion to decline an intrauterine embryo transfer. In consequence of any such declination, the embryo in question will not develop beyond about day 10. From this we may draw inferences about how we should treat that embryo. Neither those inferences nor applying a generic name to such an embryo implies any ontological change.

It does not suffice for ensoulment, as Dr Nelson contends, that a being is alive and of the species *Homo sapiens*; any living human cell would satisfy that condition. In Aristotle’s metaphysics—which is presupposed by talk of substance, accident, and soul as the principle of life—there comes to bear the hylomorphic view, followed consistently by the fathers of the Catholic church (including Boethius) and their successors until 1869, that the *intellectiva anima*, the rational soul distinguishing humans as such, does not infuse any earlier than day 40 of development.¹ The modern Catholic magisterium does not follow Aristotle or any other view on ensoulment. It has abandoned the attempt to ascertain when a soul infuses, declaring that “the matter will not ever be established” (*non enim de re unquam constabit*).² The magisterium instead makes its stand on zygotic personhood. For that it offers the argument that I related, to wit, that “modern genetic science” has delivered “valuable confirmation” that fertilization creates a new person: “it has demonstrated that, from the first instant, the program is fixed as to what this living being will be: a man, this individual man with his characteristic aspects already well determined.”³ This argument appeals to the premise that a genome suffices for a person. That premise not only expresses a radical version of genetic determinism, it works an internal contradiction. It contradicts the doctrine that a human person is a union of body and soul. (In mentioning that doctrine, I referred only to human persons.) By dint of contradicting a

bedrock doctrine, this argument from genome to person cannot stand.

Does there obtain any other reason to treat every embryo as a person for purposes of the duty not to kill? If we think about in what instances we hold killing wrong, it becomes relevant to observe that an embryo cannot feel pain, and cannot form ends or preferences—not even a preference to live—that anyone else’s action could frustrate. Thinking more broadly, we come to realize that we cannot gain anything for an embryo that will never enter a uterus (an “unenabled” embryo), or gain anything for anyone else, by forbidding use of the embryo in experiment.

To say that a view that takes account of gain or suffering as a consequence of human action or inaction is utilitarian betrays a misapprehension of utilitarianism. Utilitarianism is the thesis that right conduct consists in maximizing aggregate utility, a thesis to which my argument nowhere appeals. “All ethical doctrines worth our attention,” observed John Rawls, himself no utilitarian, “take consequences into account in judging rightness. One which did not would simply be irrational, crazy.”⁴

But Dr Nelson goes on to say that my view neglects potential (or what he calls “potencies”). A claim that predicates obligations to an entity on its potential succumbs to the standard objection that potential to become an entity of valued attributes is not the same as being such an entity. An acorn is not an oak; we, most of us, do not consider it wrong to sacrifice an unfertilized oocyte. A more cogent claim predicated on potential asserts that we ought not thwart the coming into being of any possible person corresponding to a developing organism. My argument from nonenablement directly engages that claim. A consequence of the circumstance that an embryo will never enter a uterus is that there does not correspond to the embryo any possible person.

Dr Madden is correct that an opening premise of the argument from nonenablement is that the decision whether anyone will transfer her embryo into her, or into another, falls within a woman’s discretion. He holds to the contrary that as to this decision, “authority rests only in God.” This belief—I do not think that anything important turns on characterizing it as a bias rather than a belief—would seem to entail that any human decision about an in vitro embryo, including that of a woman who becomes pregnant by in vitro fertilization (IVF), is wrongful for usurping divine authority. (Official Catholic teaching condemns IVF, but on the ground that it is nonconjugal and risks eugenics.) In any system of religious belief, it may be held that some decisions (eg, at the Last Judgment) belong to God. But in everyday human life, it is impossible for humans to avoid decision, if only by inaction. Hence a more compelling version of Dr Madden’s view would assert that divine will is the ultimate arbiter of morality, that humans ought to act in accordance with God’s wishes, and that humans are obligated to ascertain those wishes. In such case one would have to ask, “What does God wish?” Who can claim to know the answer? We can only reason as best we can. The Catholic magisterium has condemned IVF and therefore does not regard intrauterine embryo transfer as God’s wish.