

Yuval Levin Gets it Right on Embryonic Stem Cells

Today's New York Times includes an op-ed piece titled "A Middle Ground for Stem Cells." The author, Yuval Levin, a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center and former executive director of the President's Council on Bioethics, had this to say:

It is a simple and uncontroversial biological fact that a human life begins when an embryo is created. That embryo is human, and it is alive; its human life will last until its death, whether that comes days after conception or many decades later surrounded by children and grandchildren.

But the biological fact that a human life begins at conception does not by itself settle the ethical debate. The human embryo is a human organism, but is this being – microscopically small, with no self-awareness and little resemblance to us – a person, with a right to life?

Many advocates of federal financing for embryo-destructive research begin from a negative answer to that question. They argue that the human embryo is just too small, too unlike us in appearance, or too lacking in consciousness or sensitivity to pain or other critical mental capacity to be granted a place in the human family. But surely America has learned the hard way not to assign human worth by appearances. And surely we would not deny those who have lost some mental faculties the right to be regarded with respect and protected from harm. Why should we deny it to those whose faculties are still developing?