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■ In my opinion

A step forward for stem cells

This weekend, scientists unveiled what may be the first step toward resolving one of the great ethical debates of the early 21st century.

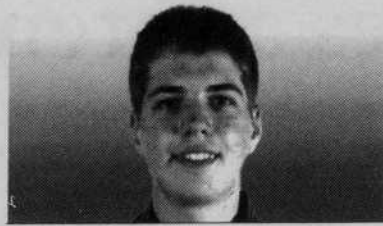
For years now, controversy has surrounded the development and use of embryonic stem cells. These cells, which have the potential to form in any type of human tissue, are believed to have incredible potential in the study and treatment of numerous degenerative diseases.

The only catch is that most methods for obtaining these cells involve the destruction of human embryos. This catch is no small matter for those who believe that personhood begins at conception. Those who hold that belief argue that the destruction of embryos is the destruction of human life; therefore, they oppose stem-cell research almost without exception.

Most of us agree that the deliberate destruction of human life is an unacceptable research method. If we all believed that embryos were human life, we would probably also agree that it is wrong to deliberately destroy them in the name of science.

So the core issue is not what to do with these embryos, because that question is itself wrapped up in the question of what embryos really are: Are they people or not? Sadly, even if there were an answer to this question, we would have no way of knowing it.

I'm not coming at this issue from a "what's right for you may not be right for me" perspective, mind you. I absolutely believe in right or wrong answers, and I can't stand it when intellectually lazy people don't bother looking for those answers in an effort to appear tolerant or open-minded. In this instance, however, we cannot find a correct answer because it's a question of intuitive, subjective differences disguised as a question of semantics disguised as a question of science. No matter how



GABE BRADLEY
THE WRITING ON THE WALL

we answer the question, we're still pasting clean, inaccurate labels onto a messy, organic process.

Life is a process. There are certain points in the process on which we almost always agree and certain parts of the process on which we find it impossible to reach consensus. When an adult is walking around, eating, and talking, we agree that this being possesses personhood. Upon looking at someone in a persistent vegetative state — alive only by way of a feeding tube — it's harder to reach consensus on whether this someone has personhood, or what personhood even means, in this specific case.

Similarly, when considering human embryos, it's difficult to agree whether these embryos have personhood. The embryonic stage is a part of the process of life; there are points during this process when we regard the subjects as people possessed of certain rights and entitled to certain protections. But after that, it gets a bit foggy.

A taxonomist's approach on the subject is to establish a set of criteria for personhood, observe a specimen and decide the category in which it fits: Person or non-person. Various attempts to do this have resulted in the line between person and non-person being set at different points in the process of life. This couldn't be any other way. These criteria are not based on any objective or even common understanding. The criteria are largely based on a

gut check — intuition. Because the concept of personhood is an abstraction, our understanding of the concept is almost entirely subjective, making agreement on the topic quite difficult.

The question of personhood is equal parts science, language and intuition.

There are those who say, "when in doubt, err on the side of life." I normally agree with this old adage; however, there's something I'd like to know: Which life are we talking about? The potential life of the embryo or the life that could be saved through research on embryonic stem cells?

As a political issue, this controversy has crossed party lines with prominent members of both parties coming down on either side of the issue. Recently, experiments on mice have led to the development of two new methods allowing researchers to develop stem cells without destroying the embryos. These discoveries, published Sunday in the journal *Nature*, may lead the way toward a solution to this impasse. If human embryonic stem cells can be extracted without destroying embryos, we won't have to wring our hands about the issue.

This discovery also represents everything I love about human ingenuity. The human spirit has done a nice little run around an ethical dilemma, reaching a solution that we can all appreciate. The way of the future is a slick, elegant method of extracting stem cells that need not ravage embryos, unlike current methods that will no doubt become antiquated and obsolete.

The most important thing that may come from this discovery is the easing of political pressure that blocks increased freedom and funding for this crucial medical research.

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■ Editorial

Estate tax is necessary; it should not be repealed

As national debate continues over the repeal of the federal estate tax, it is upsetting to observe how such a government decision could affect Oregon citizens and University students.

The estate tax — spun by the current administration as a "death tax" — allows the government to tax a person's property, cash and other assets after they die at rates up to 47 percent, but only if those assets total more than \$1.5 million.

It should be clear from this statistic that this tax only affects a select group of wealthy individuals. In fact, estate taxes have only applied to the wealthiest 2 percent of Americans in recent years, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

Yet lawmakers in Washington, including Sen. Gordon Smith, R-Ore., continue to campaign for repealing the tax. They say it hurts small business owners and farmers.

Although determining the exact effects of the estate tax is difficult, calculations suggest just the opposite — that abolishing the estate tax will benefit few farmers and entrepreneurs while potentially limiting a much-needed source of income for Oregon and public universities, including this one.

Foremost, we must question why Republicans in the House of Representatives chose to rekindle this debate last spring. Iraq war debt, financed by emergency loans to the tune of roughly \$300 billion, had already caused our national debt to skyrocket. Moreover, Bush tax cuts had already decreased revenue using the misguided philosophy that cutting taxes will spur our national economy. Didn't anyone pay attention to the section of high school economics class about Reaganomics?

Moreover, the estate tax has already been reformed under the Bush administration. During the final year of the Clinton era, the tax applied to people who made \$650,000 or more, according to the CBO. Following the Economic Growth and Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2001, the amount of assets exempt from the tax is scheduled to rise until 2009, at which point the tax will equal about 45 percent of an estate's assets worth more than \$3.5 million.

Even ignoring historical implications, we must remember our nation remains in the midst of a serious deficit. Costs from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita continue to mount while neither the House, nor the Senate offers any tangible method to finance rebuilding efforts.

Closer to home, some experts predict repealing the estate tax would slash Oregon's revenues. Should the federal government stop collecting the death tax, every state will have to deal with the financial ramifications of such a move.

Likewise, the effect of a federal tax repeal upon our University can only be detrimental. We increasingly rely on private donations to construct new facilities and improve our University. Some donations are made after people die, and some of this giving is likely spurred by the fact that charitable contributions are tax write-offs. If the tax is repealed, the incentive to donate may decline, leading to fewer donations.

The University, Oregon and the nation simply cannot repay its debt or begin to thrive without the assistance of tax revenue. Now is not the time to repeal the estate tax, and we urge Smith to consider who will benefit if the tax is repealed. Hint: It's not University students, and it's not average Oregonians.

INBOX

Cartoon misrepresents College Republicans

In response to the cartoon in Thursday's paper depicting College Republicans as "misdirected," stressed-out alcoholics, I am literally outraged and disgusted.

As the chairman of the UO College Republicans, I am disappointed with the cartoon reflecting all College Republicans as drunks. Many members within our club identify as Christians — ones who don't drink, to be more specific. This cartoon was pathetic and Aaron DuChateau should be ashamed for labeling anyone with the College Republicans the way he did. Why is it he felt the need to attack CRs? Aaron has never spoken with me about the College Republicans' cause on campus, our activities or our membership. I find it comical that Aaron can assume all these characteristics and has never spoken with

virtually any College Republican that I am aware of. Who did Aaron get his opinions from, Chuck Hunt?

As for the "misdirected passion" comment, I'm sorry, Aaron, that you obviously don't have any grasp on American politics, or else you might know the meaning of the word mandate. It is what the American public awarded President Bush with his reelection. Not only did the Republican Party win the White House again, it also retained majority in the House, Senate and Governorships. Not to mention the 11 or so states that passed very conservative constitutional amendments banning gay marriage. Smell that, Aaron? That is the smell of freedom and the conservative movement once again solidifying its leadership across the country.

If you disagree with the Republican Party or with the presence of College Republicans — who voice a much-lacking opinion — on cam-

pus, please don't hesitate to stop by the office for a fireside chat. If you like guns, a strong defense, individual rights and freedom, we might get along. Though I will say kudos to you, Aaron, for getting my attention. If it wasn't for this horrible comic I doubt I would have ever noticed your existence on campus. However, your cartoon was offensive to those within the College Republicans who take their faith and prohibition of alcohol seriously. Your "misdirected passion" comment, however, just shows your inability to understand politics and what an election can teach you. We at College Republicans are saddened by your confusion, Aaron, for a mind is a terrible thing to waste. And unlike the depiction of College Republicans in your cartoon, you definitely fall under the wasted category.

Anthony Warren
Chairman, College Republicans

OREGON DAILY EMERALD LETTERS POLICY

Letters to the editor and guest commentaries are encouraged, and should be sent to letters@dailyemerald.com or submitted at the Oregon Daily Emerald office, EMU Suite 300. Electronic submissions are preferred. Letters are limited to 250 words, and guest commentaries to 550 words. Authors are limited to one submission per calendar month. Submissions should include phone number and address for verification. The Emerald reserves the right to edit for space, grammar and style. Guest submissions are published at the discretion of the Emerald.

CORRECTION

Because of an editor's error, the headline for Monday's "OSPIRG proposes project to support progressive candidates" should have clarified that speaker Jefferson Smith described such a project at the meeting and OSPIRG didn't propose it.