CENTER VALLEY (August 13, 2006) – There seems to be no end in sight to the debate about stem cells. The presidential veto of legislation to expand federal support for embryonic stem-cell research may have settled the matter for the current congressional session, but the issue will no doubt affect the November elections. Even now state governments are entering the fray, with the governors of California and Illinois promising monies that will nearly double the current financing of such research.

The debate can and should continue because it far exceeds the question of funding. Partisan politics and scientific agendas aside, this issues touches the very core of how we think about who we are. The beginning of this ethical controversy extends back more than three decades, and its future remains open to changing thoughts.

The questions affect undeniably beneficial goods, and the values touch upon truly fundamental rights. For this reason, and for the validity of the debate, it becomes important to situate the progressive arguments in their cultural context. There we see differing principles at work in an ethical trajectory that leads down a path we may not wish to trod.

With regard to the goods being affirmed, the acceptability of abortion championed what is fundamental to humanity, our free choice. The possibility of in vitro fertilization acknowledged the naturally good desire to bear children. And the potential of stem-cell research now seeks to affirm the dual goods of scientific knowledge and improved healthcare.

Opposing arguments do not deny these goods. Choice is clearly fundamental to who we are and who we will become. Procreation remains a deep-seated desire that impels us to continue our species. And knowing how to heal keeps us and our loved ones alive. To argue otherwise is to miss the mark completely and leads to a false dialectic as, for instance, when the lead lobbyist for the stem-cell legislation claims that this bill “sends a strong signal to patients that there are some politicians that
care about them and want to see them taken care of” – thereby implying that the debate is really about caring.

What remains objectionable are the supposed “rights” being engaged. The history of these issues discloses an ever-widening succession of rights: over our own bodies (of which a fetus is just a part), to the bodies of our own children (created “in vitro” as embryos from our own parts), to the bodies of any children (cryopreserved as “left over” parts from someone else). If this last becomes acceptable, one can readily claim an economic right to create or sell embryos for this same scientific purpose.

The foundational question is whether the part is actually a whole, whether the fetus or the embryo is an “entire” person, genetically speaking, and therefore endowed with his/her own inalienable rights, despite the relatively small size of what we can see. As these debates continue, several ethical principles come into play.

Proportionalism suggests an action can be ethically acceptable if it seeks some greater good. The health of a mother, however broadly construed, is seen to be a greater good than that of an unwanted or unintended pregnancy. But if mother and fetus are both persons, do we wish to argue that one is opposed to the other, or that one is of greater good than the other?

Utilitarianism suggests an action can be ethically acceptable if it is used for a good purpose or a good result. The joy of parenting and of creating a family is considered such a good. But if an embryo is a person, do we wish to argue that a person is a means to an end, that one person (a parent) can use another person (even one’s child) for his/her own benefit?

And now the debate includes ethical relativism, which suggests an action can be acceptable when it is held to be so by personal preference or majority opinion. Because the potential benefit of stem-cell research has broad popular and scientific appeal, support seems warranted. But if the embryo is a person, do we wish to argue that the end justifies the means, that embryonic life can be destroyed so that cellular knowledge can be gained?

Unfortunately, our sound-bite era makes it all too easy for both sides to miss the mark of addressing each issue squarely. As a democratic society, we certainly can, and probably will, disagree about ethical questions. But for the debates to be worthwhile, we must at least be honest and accurate about what is at stake. Goods and rights eventually do collide. Only by drawing the ethical line with sound principles will we as a society ultimately prevail.