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Adventures in Misleading Argument

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British Prime Minister Gordon Brown is in big political trouble. His Labor Party suffered a recent humiliation in local elections and he appears to be losing support from within the party's parliamentary ranks. He also faces a host of controversial issues, including big policy decisions about human embryonic stem cell research and the development of animal/human hybrid embryos for medical research.

The Prime Minister offered his argument in favor of both proposals in the May 18, 2008 edition of *The Observer* [London]. Brown offers at least what poses as an argument. But, in reality, his article is not an argument but an announcement. There is no serious moral argument to be found in his statement, only pretense.

Take a look at these paragraphs:

Should scientists be given the legal framework they say they need to pursue new cures and treatments through stem cell research or will we turn our back on these potential advances?

Should children who face death or critical illness find new hope in scientific advances that would allow their new brother or sister to be not just a blessing to their family, but also a saviour sibling to them? And should people be able to approach IVF clinics without fear of discrimination on the grounds of their sexual orientation?

My answer to all those questions is an unequivocal yes.

The language he chooses in the first paragraph betrays the fact that there will be no serious argument in his essay — no real acknowledgement of the fact that truly serious moral objections are to be faced. Instead, he simply asks if scientists are to be given a legal framework for these experiments, “or will we turn our back on these potential advances?” Is that a fair question? Of course not. It is a trademark of propaganda.

He then goes on to affirm that he will support the human embryonic stem cell research, the development of animal/human hybrid embryos, and access to IVF clinics without regard for sexual orientation. To all of these, his answer is “an unequivocal yes.” Not, please notice, a hesitant yes, or even a humble yes or a tentative yes, but an unequivocal yes.

Then, he offers these words:

I have deep respect for those who do not agree with some of the provisions in the bill because of religious conviction. But I believe that we owe it to ourselves and future generations to introduce these measures and, in particular, to give our unequivocal backing, within the right framework of rules and standards, to stem cell research.

And later:

The doctors and scientists I speak to are committed to what they see as an inherently moral endeavour that can save and improve the lives of thousands and, over time, millions of people.

They believe they can combine this work with a deep commitment to the highest ethical standards and a sincere respect for religious beliefs.

The Prime Minister speaks here of his “deep respect” for those whose convictions clash with his own, but his respect does not extend even to acknowledging what these convictions are. Then, he speaks enthusiastically of the scientists, who he assures us “are committed to what they see as an inherently moral endeavor” and will combine their work with “a sincere respect for religious beliefs.”

The statement that these scientists see their own work as “inherently moral” says absolutely nothing in itself. What scientists would set forth a proposal they would claim as “inherently immoral?” The eugenics scientists of Germany were certain to the end that their experiments to “improve” the human race were “inherently moral.” The scientists who used human beings in horrible tests such as the Tuskegee medical experiments thought that their work was intended to save (other) lives — in their eyes “inherently moral.”

When the Prime Minister assures his people that the scientists declare themselves to be about an “inherently moral” experimental science, he does nothing but evade his own responsibility to deal with the questions seriously. If he did face them seriously, he would have to at least acknowledge why so many people (including many in his own Labor Party) oppose him so vociferously.

Adding insult to injury, Mr. Brown then claims that these scientists will conduct the experiments with “a sincere respect for religious beliefs.”

Let’s get this straight. The “religious objections” on this question are rooted in the affirmation that every single human being — including the tiny human embryo — is made in the image of God, and it never to be used as a commodity, but always respected as a person. The embryo is never to be used — much less destroyed — as a means to any other end, however good that end may be in itself.

On the matter of animal/human embryos, the grounds of objection are basically the same, with the added concern that combining animal and human genetic material diminishes human dignity. This is no small matter.

Mr. Brown proposes to let these scientists proceed in using and destroying human embryos and in creating animal/human embryos for research. And yet he has the audacity to claim that this can be done with “a sincere respect for religious beliefs.” The scale of that audacity is breathtaking.

The Prime Minister would have been far more honest if he had simply stated that he thinks the “religious objections” are rubbish or nonsense, or if he had just stated outright that his government would not be restrained by these convictions.

Instead, he claimed that, in effect, the scientists should respect these beliefs while violating them. It takes an audacious but clever politician to come up with that. Write this up as yet another adventure in misleading argument.

