Chapter 1

HISTORY AND FUTURE OF BIOETHICS

ALBERT R. JONSEN
San Francisco, USA

On August 9, 2001, President George Bush made his first formal media address to the American people. In this first speech, delivered from his home in Crawford, Texas, he announced his decision to allow federal funds to support research only on existing stem-cell lines, and concluded what was, in effect, a moral sermon as much as a policy statement with the words, “As we go forward, I hope we will always be guided by both intellect and heart, by our capabilities and our conscience…”[^1]. This was an extraordinary moment. One commentator noted that the President chose to appear before the nation for the first time as a bioethicist! His decision came after months of public debate that had exposed the American people and its politicians to a large dose of bioethical language and argument. I intend to use this event to illustrate the nature of American bioethics. I shall suggest that its general contours follow the lines of moral argument that are deeply drawn in American history, and then comment on the role of the American bioethics community in the debates and the policy formulation. Finally, I will attempt to relate this American story to the broader theme announced in my title, the “History and Future of Bioethics”.

1. PRESIDENTIAL BIOETHICS

I am aware that the debate over stem-cell research has taken place in many of the nations represented here and that law and policy have been developed in several jurisdictions. Although I have followed the European and British discussions on this contentious issue, I can hardly consider myself familiar enough with them and with the cultural values behind them to make comparisons with the American debate. I cannot, of course, claim...
that the debate over this issue is uniquely American: it has the same general form wherever it has been raised. But I will occasionally claim that some feature of the American debate is peculiarly American. European scholars who could find analogous ideas and arguments in their own moral traditions can certainly contest this claim. And, after all, we are all, Americans and Europeans, heirs of the same broad moral traditions of western Christianity and European enlightenment. Still, as a long-time participant and observer of American bioethics, I have found the stem-cell debate an intriguing paradigm for the way in which Americans deal with bioethical issues.

There has been continuing debate over the scientific use of the human embryo and fetus for over thirty years. Indeed, I have suggested in my history of American bioethics, *The Birth of Bioethics*, that the vigorous arguments between theologian Paul Ramsey and scientist Joshua Lederberg on human cloning during the 1960s initiated bioethical reflection in the United States (see Jonsen 1998: 306f.). I will not review that long history, except to say that a series of governmentally appointed commissions have recommended limited use of fetal and embryonic tissue and the Congress of the United States has persistently imposed restrictions and prohibitions. The question is obviously related to the extremely contentious matter of abortion, which has been a perpetual irritant in American politics and policy since the crucial Supreme Court decision of 1976 in the case Roe vs. Wade, which allowed legal abortion with almost no restrictions. The immediate precursor of the stem-cell debate was a decision by President Clinton to permit some embryo research to be done with federal funding and a determination by the National Institutes of Health that stem-cell research could be done but that federal funds could not be expended on the derivation of the cells from embryonic sources (NBAC 1999). George Bush, during his campaign for the presidency, voiced opposition to that policy and promised to stop any research that involved destruction of the human embryo. His political support among Christian conservatives and among Roman Catholics strongly endorsed that position. In the early days of his presidency, the matter was muted and other political issues, such as tax policy, dominated the public scene. Beginning in the spring of 2001, hints that the president was considering action on his campaign promise began to appear and, with surprising rapidity, the anti-abortion constituency and the scientific community began to form sides. What might have been a rather silent administrative decision about an obscure topic took on huge dimensions and by fall, scholarly articles and media interviews with scientists, politicians, advocates, religious figures saturated public attention. The government instituted studies of the problem and consulted with experts of all sorts. The president, not known for his intellectual interests,