

# Bush's 'Slippery Slope' Could Drag Roe Backward

By BART KOSKO

**D**oes life begin at conception? The debate over fetal stem cells has given new force to that old question and produced some silly answers.

Many U.S. senators base their support for stem cell research on the specious claim that a fetal cell cluster in a test tube is not alive in God's eyes because the cell cluster doesn't grow in a woman's womb. This view that fetal life depends on place implies that those same senators would not be alive if they had come to term in an artificial incubator.

The British Parliament permits doctors to use fetal stem cells that are not more than two weeks old. An embryo can, until then, split into identical twin embryos, or twin embryos can combine into one.

This raises the religious issue of when an embryo becomes "ensouled." The assumption is that the invisible "soul" is not divisible.

But killing either an ensouled or a non-souled embryo would still be murder if human life begins at conception.

President Bush's decision Thursday to fund some stem cell research suggests he shares this pro-

life view because he wants funding for discarded embryos only "where the life-and-death decision has already been made."

So does life start at conception? Logic and technology offer little comfort to those who answer either yes or no.

The pro-life view that life starts at conception rests on two errors in logic. The first error is equating life with growth. Growth indeed begins at conception. But simply equating growth with life begs the very question at issue: Is growth life? The pro-life view states a definition in place of an argument.

The second error is that the pro-life view equates life with the start of a unique gene map. This view confuses a blueprint with an object grown or built from that blueprint. Yes: Each parent provides 23 of a growing cell cluster's 46 chromosomes. Yes: That chromosome pattern is unique. But uniqueness does not equal life. A software program can create trillions of such genome patterns that are just as unique. Technology will someday let us grow designer children from these mathematical patterns. Is each pattern "alive" as soon as the software picks it? Again simply saying so does not make it so. The view also suggests that identical twins are one person (since their gene maps

are the same) and that a decaying corpse (which retains its unique gene map) is still alive.

Or consider the pro-choice movement. It has largely cast its fate to the law since the 1973 Supreme Court decision in *Roe vs. Wade*. But the law is fickle. California law lets a mother freely abort her early-term fetus while it counts the same outcome as murder if a stranger intentionally kills the fetus. That may be good politics but it is bad logic.

And *Roe* is a sword that cuts both ways. The ruling permits

back so far that *Roe* could allow states to outlaw abortion.

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**It's useful to view life using fuzzy logic. Life no more begins all-or-none at conception than outer space begins exactly 100 miles up.**

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early abortions but it expressly denies an absolute right to abortion. It allows states to outlaw abortion once the fetus is "viable" or capable of "meaningful life outside the mother's womb." Technology pushes back this point a little more each day. One day it may push it

ably higher medical risk for the woman"—i.e., extracting a fetus from the uterus—"against the increased chance of fetal survival."

"Fuzzy logic" offers a reasonable alternative.

It views life as a fuzzy or gray concept with inexact borders. Life