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Target Article

Visual Bioethics

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Although images are pervasive in public policy debates in bioethics, few who work in the field attend carefully to the way that images function rhetorically. If the use of images is discussed at all, it is usually to dismiss appeals to images as a form of manipulation. Yet it is possible to speak meaningfully of visual arguments. Examining the appeal to images of the embryo and fetus in debates about abortion and stem cell research, I suggest that bioethicists would be well served by attending much more carefully to how images function in public policy debates.

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In the spring of 2007, a diverse group of scholars ranging in fields from cognitive science to theology met at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland (OH) to explore the idea that there is now a sufficient body of scholarly literature (and sufficient interest) to constitute a field that might be called visual ethics. The statement adopted by the group gives some sense of what this field might encompass. The statement reads: “Visual ethics is an emerging interdisciplinary field of scholarship that brings together religious studies, philosophy, photo and video journalism, visual arts, and cognitive science in order to explore the ways human beings relate to others ethically through visual perception.”

One of the forces animating the exploration of such a field is the conviction that the study of ethics has historically relied almost exclusively on rational-linguistic approaches to controversial issues in a way that downplays the significance of images and visual representation to moral argument and human behavior. Barbara Maria Stafford (1996) has made a similar point in complaining about the “deep logocentrism” of our culture, which she defines as the cultural bias that is “convinced of the superiority of written or propositional language, and thus devalues “sensory, affective, and kinetic forms of communication” (23). In the face of this bias, Stafford argues, we need “to produce a new world of perspicuous and informed observers [and] (not just literate readers) . . . (23).

I have more modest ambitions than producing a world of perspicuous observers or launching a new field, but I think it is worth asking whether bioethics might learn from the study of visual culture. Should we not at least think about a visual bioethics? Images have, of course, always played a role in bioethical debate and they have frequently shaped how we think of medicine generally. Some images have functioned almost iconically. One thinks of Dax Cowart’s badly burned and suppuring body as representative of the violation of a patient’s autonomy through medical paternalism. Other images, such as the video clips of Terri Schiavo apparently responding to her parents, have functioned rhetorically to overwhelm empirical evidence that took other forms. Still other images, such as those found in direct-to-consumer advertising of pharmaceuticals have affected how physicians and patients interact. Yet, despite the fact that images are ubiquitous and powerful, we have not, as a discipline, thought very carefully about how images function to persuade or move us, how arguments can take visual form—think of political cartoons—or how to deploy or evaluate images responsibly.

With the goal of examining what Barbara Stafford (1996) calls the “communicative modes and tactics of images” (22), I want in this essay to discuss the way images have been deployed in bioethics debates that have involved the moral status of human embryos. Attending to the ways in which depictions of the embryo have functioned rhetorically in debates about abortion, in vitro fertilization, and stem cell research, for example, is not only intrinsically fascinating, but instructive for understanding how visually mediated arguments work. Although it may seem counterintuitive, I believe it is possible to talk about visual arguments and that, as with other forms of arguments, visual arguments can be cogent or unconvincing. Obviously, I cannot offer a comprehensive treatment of the use of images in debates about abortion or stem cell research, but noting some of the ways images have been mobilized in public debates on these issues is a useful starting point for understanding the communicative modes and tactics of images and why bioethicists should pay more attention to the use of images.

We can begin with the issue of abortion, where the appeal to images is actually proliferating. Public debate about abortion has, of course, often included the use of images, often for shock value, but 12 states have now moved to require...
women seeking abortion to have ultrasound images taken of their fetuses and be offered the opportunity to view these ultrasound images. The bill signed into law in Mississippi in March 2007 is fairly typical. The relevant section of the law reads as follows: “Before the performance of an abortion, defined in Section 2 of this act, the physician who is to perform the abortion, or a qualified person assisting the physician, shall:

(a) Perform fetal ultrasound imaging and auscultation of fetal heart tone services on the patient undergoing the abortion; (b) Offer to provide the patient with an opportunity to view the active ultrasound image of the unborn child and hear the heartbeat of the unborn child if the heartbeat is audible; (c) Offer to provide the patient with a physical picture of the ultrasound image of the unborn child; (d) Obtain the patient’s signature on a certification form stating that the patient has been given the opportunity to view the active ultrasound image and hear the heartbeat of the unborn child if the heartbeat is audible, and that she has been offered a physical picture of the ultrasound image; and (e) Retain a copy of the signed certification form in the patient’s medical record. (MS Code §41-41-55 [2007])

Bills of this sort suggest that the battle over abortion is increasingly being fought in visual terms.

Or consider the image that appeared on the cover of Time Magazine in February 2007. The cover story, “The Abortion Campaign You Never Hear About,” by Nancy Gibbs, was accompanied by an illustration of a human hand in which rested four scale images of fetuses at different stages of development (Gibbs 2007, 23–31).

The image nicely illustrated one of the central themes of the article, which was that many pro-life advocates have adopted a personal and pastoral approach to dissuading women from having abortions. Rather than seeking to induce guilt and fear by showing pregnant women grisly images of aborted fetuses, many “pregnancy crisis centers” strive to foster hope and a sense of caring by displaying images or models of intact fetuses. The goal is no longer to shock but rather to facilitate an emotional identification between a pregnant woman and a fetus.

Attending to the use of ultrasound images or scale models as communicative forms of presenting a particular view of abortion immediately leads us to consider the complex interplay between the visual and the verbal, between image and text. In the case of the use of models and scans at pregnancy crisis centers, the relation between the visual and the verbal is apparent, as Gibbs’s (2007) description of her meeting with Joyce Wilson, a nurse at the Asheville Pregnancy Support Services center in Asheville, North Carolina, makes clear. “She brings out a black velvet box,” Gibbs writes, “that looks as if it holds a strand of pearls. Inside are four tiny rubber fetuses, the smallest like a kidney bean with limbs, the biggest about the size of a thumb.” Gibbs continues: “This is what your baby looks like, she [Wilson] tells clients . . . ‘When we do the ultrasound, we ask the girl how she’s feeling . . . I ask what she would like to put on the picture for her baby book’” (2007, 24).

Notice that the invitation to code the ultrasound image as a parent’s first picture of her child, as well as the suggestion that it would be useful to caption the image, functions in a complex and multi-layered way to reinforce the pro-life commitment to defining the fetus as a person from the moment of conception. Whatever ambiguity—visual or ontological—that a blurry, ultrasound image may call forth is defined away by providing a visual/textual frame for the image, namely, that of a baby picture.

Now one way to understand the pairing of the image (a kidney bean with limbs or a grainy ultrasound picture) with the text (baby or, more precisely, my baby) is to think of the interplay between image and text as a form of emotional manipulation, and there are certainly notorious examples of this in the battle over abortion. Perhaps the most well known example of a kind of visual/verbal framing for purposes of emotional manipulation is found in the “documentary” The Silent Scream (Several Sources Shelters 2007). The film shows an ultrasound of an abortion accompanied by a description of the procedure by a narrator, Bernard Nathanson. The narration is clearly designed to evoke certain emotions from the viewer. Nathanson describes the fetus as “child moving serenely in the uterus.” He describes the “child” as “sensing danger in its sanctuary.” And, in a bit of narration from which the film takes its name, Nathanson points at the screen and says that here “we see the child’s mouth wide open in a silent scream . . . This is the silent scream of a child threatened imminently with extinction” (Several Sources Shelters 2007).

Although I would argue that The Silent Scream is an example of emotional propaganda, the important point to note is that in order adequately to evaluate and respond to this film, one must pay close attention to the way in which the verbal framing is crucial in structuring how the audience sees the images. Apart from the narration, the images would probably elicit nothing more than puzzlement because they are simply too granular and indistinct to strike a viewer in any strong way, much less evoke a passionate moral response. Viewed through the frame of the narration, however, the images seem fairly to shimmer with emotion.

I am not suggesting that the pairing of images and texts is always manipulative or that noting the interplay of image and text is only useful in debunking propaganda films. The point is rather that humans are visual beings and we do well to monitor the interplay of words and images. As the example of The Silent Scream illustrates, texts can give images a life they would not otherwise have. But it is also the case that images can bring texts to life and the complex interplay of words and images can be found where you might least expect.

2. For the image, see http://www.time.com/time/covers/0,16641, 20070226,00.html (accessed November 11, 2008).

3. It is worth noting here that both the United States Food and Drug Administration and the American Medical Association (Chicago, IL) discourage so-called keepsake videos because there is some evidence that ultrasound imaging may cause subtle brain changes in the developing fetus (Rados 2004; American Medical Association 2005).
Consider, for example the trajectory of federal partial-birth abortion legislation, which the Supreme Court upheld in the spring of 2007 in *Gonzalez v. Carhart* (550 U.S. [2007]). As Cynthia Gorney has pointed out, the term *partial-birth abortion* was crafted for the purpose of writing legislation and capturing the public imagination (2004). Like its companion legislation, the Unborn Child Pain Awareness Act, the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act of 2003 was clearly intended to provide a verbal description of abortion that would force all parties to picture what abortion is and does. Yet, as evocative as the language of “partial-birth” abortion is, it took the pen and ink drawings of Jenny Westberg to bring out the full resonance of the term.

As Gorney (2007) tells the story, Westberg was an occasional contributor to an Oregon right-to-life publication called *Life Advocate* (2004). In 1992, Westberg happened to read an account by Dr. Martin Haskell of an abortion procedure that he routinely used for late-term abortions. Haskell called the procedure a *dilation and extraction*, or D&X, and described how he used forceps to pull the whole fetus through the vagina. “The skull,” he wrote, “lodges at the internal cervical os.” Haskell continued:

> Usually there is not enough dilation for it to pass through. The fetus is oriented dorsum or spine up...

> The surgeon takes a pair of blunt curved Metzenbaum scissors in the right hand. He carefully advances the tip, curved down, along the spine and under the middle finger until he feels it contact the base of the skull under the tip of his middle finger.

> Reassessing proper placement of the closed scissors tip and safe elevation of the cervix, the surgeon then forces the scissors into the base of the skull or into the foramen magnum. Having safely entered the skull, he spreads the scissors to enlarge the opening.

> The surgeon removes the scissors and introduces a suction catheter into this hole and evacuates the skull contents. With the catheter still in place, he applies traction to the fetus, removing it completely from the patient (quoted in Gorney 2004).4

> It was this description that Westberg sought to capture in a series of five pen-and-ink line drawings, stylized like cartoons. The first three drawings show a uterus in cross section and gloved hands pulling a small, fully formed (and clearly live) fetus in profile out of the vagina. The fourth drawing shows the gloved hand with scissors posed to penetrate the skull. The fifth panel depicts a limp and lifeless fetus with a suction instrument about to remove the contents of the skull.5

After Westberg’s drawings appeared in *Life Advocate* in 1993, they came to the attention of national pro-life organizations and were quickly reproduced on a massive scale. The National Right to Life Committee modified them slightly and then reproduced them in newspaper advertisements and brochures distributed throughout the country. Gorney explains the power of the images this way: The pictures “were gruesome but not gory . . . The fact that they were cartoonish line drawings made them widely reproducible without the aversion factor; and more to the point, the Westberg pictures made D&X compelling to look at . . . ” (Gorney 2004, 9). In short, they brought Martin Haskell’s description of a dilation and extraction abortion to life.

There is no disputing the fact that Martin Haskell’s description of the D&X procedure and Westberg’s illustration of Haskell’s description together generated the public interest that gave rise to the congressional hearings, federal legislation, multiple court cases, and dozens of state laws on partial-birth abortion. And the relation between image and text is instructive. Consider, for example, the interplay between image and text in the Supreme Court decision, *Gonzalez v. Carhart*.

To appreciate fully the way in which the interplay between word and image works to shape the decision reached by the Court, it is important to recognize that one of the central questions in the case concerned whether the federal ban covered only dilation and extraction (D&E) procedures or whether it was so general that it extended also to dilation and evacuation (D&E) procedures as well. This in turn raised the question of whether a D&X procedure is sufficiently different from a D&E procedure that banning the former is effectively to ban the latter. In both *Carhart v. Ashcroft* (331 F. Supp. 2d 805, 2004 U.S. Dist.) and *Planned Parenthood Federation of Am. v. Gonzales* (435 F.3d 1163; 2006 U.S. App.) the two cases that ultimately gave rise to *Gonzalez v. Carhart*—the lower courts held that that the federal ban on partial-birth abortions could also be understood to prohibit dilation and evacuation procedures. As Justice Kennedy summarized *Carhart*, “the District Court found the [Partial-Birth Abortion Ban] Act deficient because it covered not merely intact D&E [i.e., D&X] but also certain other D&Es” (*Gonzalez v. Carhart* 550 U.S. [2007]). For that reason, the lower court concluded that the federal ban violated the “undue burden” standard that the Supreme Court set out in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*.

The fact that the question about the reach of the federal ban was so central helps explain why the Court goes into such detail in describing both D&E and intact D&E procedures. And it is here that the interplay between word and image is striking, if very complex.6 Obviously, there is no

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4. Haskell’s description is also quoted in the Supreme Court case, *Gonzalez v. Carhart*.


6. It would be interesting to explore the way in which text and image can be either explicitly or implicitly paired when they are used in bioethics arguments. An example from the art world might be instructive here. The artist Barbara Kruger is renowned for her explicit pairing of photographic images and text, a pairing that confronts the viewer/reader politically in a way that neither image nor text alone would. In a piece that is itself relevant to the debate about abortion, Kruger’s trademark white text on a red background overlays a photographic image of a woman’s face split in two and staring out at the viewer. On one side is a photographic image of half of the woman’s face; the other half of her face appears tonally inverted
explicit pairing of image and text in the Supreme Court decision, but the Court's use of language does in fact have visual associations that are worth noting. The word *fetus* appears 106 times in the *Gonzalez v. Carhart* decision, the word *unborn* 10 times, *child* 15 times, and *baby* eight times. Which of these terms is used is significant, because *fetus*, for example, conveys an entirely different emotional tone than *baby* and that difference is at least partly mediated by the visual associations the two words evoke. Of course, in discussing the Court's use of language it is important to note that in most instances where the language of *child* or *unborn* or *baby* is found, the Court is quoting language used in the federal statute or a previous court decision or by a third party. Nevertheless, this language is not always used with quotation marks around it and, even when the Court is quoting the language of others, placing that language at particular points in the decision is significant.

There are two instances where the use of this language is particularly striking and appears to reinforce the Court's conclusions. The first comes immediately after Justice Kennedy quotes from Dr. Haskell's description of a D&X. Up to this point, the Court has used the language of *fetus* almost exclusively to describe what happens in an abortion procedure. In characterizing a D&X, the Court refers to "fetal material," the "fetal body," and "fetal demise" (*Gonzalez v. Carhart* 2007, 5). When it turns to describe a D&X, the Court begins by using "fetal" language (*Gonzalez v. Carhart* 2007, 5), including quoting Haskell's description of the procedure, which refers to "the fetus" (quoted in Gorney 2004). However, the Court then quotes dramatically different language taken from the testimony before the Senate Judiciary of a nurse who had worked with Dr. Haskell. The contrast between Dr. Haskell's language and that of the nurse is so jarring that it is worth quoting the nurse's testimony, as it appears in the Court decision, at length.

Dr. Haskell went in with forceps and grabbed the baby's legs and pulled them down into the birth canal. Then he delivered the baby's body and the arms—everything but the head. The doctor kept the head right inside the uterus . . .

The baby's little fingers were clasping and un-clasping, and his little feet were kicking. Then the doctor stuck the scissors in the back of his head, and the baby's arms jerked out, like a startle reaction, like a flinch, like a baby does when he thinks he is going to fall.

The doctor opened up the scissors, stuck a high-powered suction tube into the opening, and sucked the baby's brains out. Now the baby went completely limp...

He cut the umbilical cord and delivered the placenta. He threw the baby in a pan, along with the placenta and the instruments he had just used (*Gonzalez v. Carhart* 550 U.S. [2007]; ellipsis in original.)

The passage is striking, not merely because we find the language of "baby" used eight times in a passage that is only 150 words long, but because, with the exception of the last paragraph, the physical description found in this passage very closely approximates Jenny Westberg's drawings of Dr. Haskell's technique. Indeed, three of the four paragraphs in this passage could serve as captions for Westberg's drawings. If the Court did not feel that they could illustrate their arguments with Westberg's actual drawings, they could hardly have found a better substitute.

The second passage of note comes much later in the decision at a point where the Court is discussing whether banning partial-birth abortions furthers an appropriate State interest. The Court notes that promoting respect for human life is a legitimate government interest and that "respect for human life finds an ultimate expression in the bond of love the mother has for her child" (*Gonzalez v. Carhart* 2007, 28). Moreover, the Court says, "it is self-evident that a mother who comes to regret her choice to abort must struggle with grief more anguish and sorrow more profound when she learns, only after the event, what she once did not know: that she allowed a doctor to pierce the skull and vacuum the fast-developing brain of her unborn child, a child assuming the human form" (*Gonzalez v. Carhart* 2007, 29).

I said before that the Court's original use of "child" language and its placement of some of the quoted "non-fetal" language reinforces the substance of the Court decision, and we can now see why that is the case. Restricting the use of the language of personhood (e.g., *unborn, child, baby*) to places where the D&X procedure is discussed and not using this language to refer to a D&E procedure, rhetorically reinforces the Court's conclusion that Congress can prohibit partial-birth abortion and thereby draw a bright line between abortion and infanticide because a D&X procedure is different from a D&E; the former kills a child, the latter only kills a fetus.

Thus far I have suggested that attending to debates about abortion with an eye to the use of images and to the interplay of words and images is instructive because it helps us to see how images function in bioethical debate. Whether we are watching a "documentary" film on abortion, casually flipping through the pages of a national news magazine, or carefully studying a Supreme Court decision, attending to the subtle and not-so-subtle use of images is important. But why? To rephrase (and steal) a question that John Arras (1997) once famously asked about narrative approaches to bioethics: Nice picture, but so what?
To answer that question fully is impossible here, but it is an important question that must be addressed in at least a preliminary fashion. The beginning of an answer is suggested by the fact that carefully noting how images are deployed in bioethics debates is a necessary first step in evaluating and responding to arguments that are largely or partially visually based. Consider an example that we have already briefly discussed. When the film The Silent Scream (Several Sources Shelters 2007) first came out, it received an enormous amount of attention and was a source of great consternation to pro-choice advocacy groups. The dismay among these groups was rooted in the fact that the film, although clearly manipulative and misleading, was effective in facilitating an emotional identification between the viewer and the fetus seeming to recoil in fear from the suction cannula displayed on the ultrasound monitor.

One way to respond to a film of this sort is to point out the factual inaccuracies, to highlight the way images are manipulated, and generally to point out the bias that pervades the film. And, indeed, this is precisely what Planned Parenthood Federation of America, Inc. (Washington, DC) did in response. They convened a panel of “expert” physicians to review the film and they released a pamphlet entitled, “The Facts Speak Louder than ‘The Silent Scream’” (Planned Parenthood 2002), which catalogues the many errors in the film. Here is a typical example from the pamphlet:

—Claim: The fetus emits “the silent scream.”

—Facts: A scream cannot occur without air in the lungs. Although primitive respiratory movements do occur in late stages of gestation, crying or screaming cannot occur even then (Planned Parenthood 2002).

Responding in this way is important because arguments or positions based on factually inaccurate information are weak and need to be challenged. Yet, it is also worth noting that the argument in The Silent Scream, such as it is, is visually mediated, and a rhetorically effective response may need to take that into account. What would a visually mediated counterargument look like here? The answer is a Gary Trudeau cartoon.

In 1985, Trudeau penned a series of “Doonesbury” comic strips entitled, “Silent Scream II: The prequel.” Although designed as a humorous parody of the original film, the series is in fact a visually mediated argument that makes essentially the same point as Planned Parenthood’s response just quoted, only more powerfully. The strip, which purports to show ultrasound images of a abortion of a 12-minute-old fetus, has the physician narrator of The Silent Scream, Bernard Nathanson, pointing to a tiny dot on the panel and offering the following commentary.

Through the magic of fiber optics, we’ve been able to take a computer-enhanced photo of the child in repose. As yet, he is unaware of the danger he faces . . . Let’s call him “Timmy”.

As the moment approaches, Timmy seems almost oblivious to the charged debate that attends his fate. Minutes later, the die is cast. The mother has made the unconscionable decision that sets in motion the doctor’s grisly procedure. The final seconds. By studying his mouth through stop-action imaging, we can determine Timmy’s final words, which are almost certainly, “Repeal Roe v. Wade” (Trudeau 1985).7

As a parody, the strip is certainly inspired, but it is also worth noting that the strip serves as a kind of counterargument to The Silent Scream. The juxtaposition of words and images in the panels functions to show the weakness of the position adopted in The Silent Scream. Planned Parenthood’s response noted the exaggerations at the heart of the film, but the Trudeau cartoon showed them. For example, the Nathanson character in the strip is displayed holding a Hoover vacuum cleaner and the fetus, treated in the narration as if it is a fully formed person, is depicted in the cartoon as a barely-visible dot. In one panel, Nathanson points to the dot and says, “While his main pre-occupation at this point is cell division, in most respects, he’s as human as you and I” (Trudeau 1985).

For those familiar with debates about embryology research and embryo status, Trudeau’s (1985) panel may call to mind the oft-repeated description of the early embryo used by stem cell research advocates as “no bigger than the period at the end of this sentence.” Critics of embryonic stem cell research deride this description, but rhetorically it has been extremely effective. And unlike many of the characterizations of the fetus in The Silent Scream, it is also accurate.

Here, then, we see one way in which visually mediated arguments may be assessed: they can be checked against the facts. One reason The Silent Scream can be rejected as propaganda is precisely that it is factually inaccurate and uses images to propagate the deceit. By contrast, Jenny Westberg’s drawings, while clearly put to political use, are not easily dismissed because they do not mischaracterize what D&X abortions involve. Westberg’s images are effective, at least partly, because they are accurate and thus force us to confront the reality of late-term abortion. To be sure, they do not capture the whole reality, but they do capture part of it. The accuracy of images is clearly important to some visual arguments and sometimes mobilizing competing (and more accurate) images is the best way of responding to a visually mediated argument.

Just as visual arguments can be checked for accuracy, so too can they be assessed in relation to issues of consistency. We can see this by noting one sort of difficulty that pro-life advocates may well confront given their successful use of images of the fetus to secure a ban on partial-birth abortions. If the analysis I have just offered is accurate, the reliance on images of the fetus in public policy debates about partial birth abortion may actually be deeply problematic for pro-life advocates in their efforts to restrict embryonic stem cell research. The problem that pro-life advocates will confront here is precisely that, although they use the language of personhood to refer to both the early in vitro embryo and the fetus killed in a partial-birth abortion procedure, the early

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7 Although this set of strips did not run in Trudeau’s syndicate, it was published in The New Republic (Trudeau 1985).
embryo does not look like a 24-week-old fetus, and the difference in appearance is not like that between a newborn and a 12-year-old child. The difference is categorical. Thus, the tight connection that pro-life groups have sought to draw between images of late-term fetuses and the language of personhood raises a problem of consistency. Because the early embryo does not look like the late-term fetus, pro-life advocates need either to discount the importance of images or to give up the language of personhood when talking about the early embryo.

In fact, I think this connection haunts pro-life arguments in a number of areas. Consider, for example, the debate among some Catholic moral theologians over whether frozen in vitro fertilization (IVF) embryos should be “adopted.” Although Gary Trudeau (1985) was accused of an unfair reductio ad absurdum of the pro-life position, I have been struck by how apt Trudeau’s parody seems to be to these recent debates. Consider Nicholas Tonti-Filippini’s (2003) comments about frozen IVF embryos. “Standing in one of the Melbourne clinics before the freezer unit where frozen embryos were stored,” he writes,

> these questions [i.e. May they be rescued? How may they be rescued?] struck me with some force. There was a sense in which they cried out: The Lord said to Cain: “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground” (Gn 4:10). The voice of the blood shed by men continues to cry out, from generation to generation, in ever new and different ways (Tonti-Filippini 2003, 112).

One can almost hear Trudeau’s Nathanson: “Through the miracle of micro-acoustic enhancement, we can hear this 8-day-old embryo from across the frozen tundra. Let’s call him Abel.” Nor is Tonti-Filippini (2003) alone in using this kind of language about frozen embryos. E. C. Brugger has described cryopreserved embryos as “tiny persons;” Mary Jo Iozzio has talked about the “plight of frozen embryos;” and Mary Geach has referred to their “horrible situation” (Brugger 2005; Iozzio 2002; Geach 1999).

As a shorthand way of conveying a sense of awe about procreation and the value of human life generally, using the language of personhood to describe the embryo makes sense. However, that is not how the language is being used here. Instead, there is a tendency in the embryo adoption debate literature to use the language of personhood non-metaphorically, as if a frozen embryo is literally a very tiny person being held in captivity against his will. Nor is this way of speaking about and envisioning the early embryo confined to the embryo adoption debate. For example, in their book, entitled Embryo: A Defense of Human Life, Robert George, a member of the President’s Council on Bioethics, and Christopher Tollefson describe embryos that were frozen in a clinic in New Orleans but recovered before they thawed as “the youngest residents of New Orleans to be saved from Katrina” (George and Tollefson 2008, 1).

The child that resulted when one of the frozen embryos was thawed and implanted was named Noah by his parents. This is what George and Tollefson say about Noah’s “rescue”:

> But if those officers had never made it to Noah’s hospital, or if they had abandoned those canisters of liquid nitrogen, there can be little doubt that the toll of Katrina would have been fourteen hundred human beings higher than it already was, and Noah, sadly, would have perished before having the opportunity to meet his loving family (George and Tollefson 2008, 2).

How else can we understand these kinds of claims than as the articulation of a view of the embryo as a really, really tiny person?

It is almost as if these writers are so captivated by the image of a late-term fetus and its association with the language of personhood that when that language gets projected backwards in time to fertilization, these writers literally cannot imagine the early embryo as anything other than a very tiny version of a late-term fetus. Noting the tight connection between the language of personhood and the image of a nearly newborn child thus helps us to see how decidedly peculiar it is to talk about the early embryo as a person and how imagining (image-ing) the early embryo in visual terms may be a useful exercise. Speaking of the early embryo from which stem cells are derived as no bigger than the period at the end of this sentence is not to engage in a mere rhetorical gesture; it is to mobilize a complex nexus of visual and philosophical associations bound up with an account of personhood starkly at odds with that set out by George and Tollefson (2008).

The contemporary artist, Ann Hamilton, has talked of exploring “hierarchies of our habits of perception” and of how “if something can be contained within the discursive structure of words, that we trust it will have more legitimacy than other kinds of information or knowing” (Coffey 2001, 15). Nevertheless, Hamilton says, the “felt-quality of words” should not be thought to be dominant over “other kinds of sensory perceptions” (15). In suggesting that bioethics

8. I have explored this more fully in “From Rescuing Frozen Embryos to Respecting the Limits of Nature: Reframing the Embryo Adoption Debate” (Lauritzen 2008 [in press]).
would do well to attend to the role of images in contemporary debate, I am not advocating the abandonment of traditional forms of philosophical, theological or social scientific analysis. Instead, I am agreeing with Hamilton that language is not the only vehicle through which we arrive at moral conclusions.

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