

Preface

*A Letter from the Chairmen of the
Witherspoon Council on Ethics and the Integrity of Science*

We all owe an enormous debt of gratitude to modern science. The scientific enterprise is among the greatest collective intellectual achievements of mankind. The honest, dispassionate, and tenacious pursuit of truths about the natural world has elevated us and, in myriad ways, improved the conditions of our lives. From the very founding of the United States, the American character has been distinguished in part by its appreciation for science and its fruits.

Yet for all their blessings, modern science and technology pose immense and complicated legal, social, economic, and political problems. And underlying those practical problems are deeper moral and philosophical questions raised by our growing scientific knowledge and the power of our technologies—including questions about what it means to be human and about the meaning and protection of human dignity.

The Witherspoon Council on Ethics and the Integrity of Science, which we have the honor to chair, has been established to help the American public think through these practical problems and moral questions. Convened under the auspices of the Witherspoon Institute, a research and educational organization based in Princeton, New Jersey, this diverse body of academic experts studies the human and moral significance of modern science and technology, as well as the questions of policy, law, and politics raised by scientific and technological advancement. It focuses especially on the ethical and policy questions related to the human life sciences, including medicine, biotechnology, genetics, assisted reproductive technologies, embryo research, and neuroscience. Its members are drawn from a wide range of fields—science and medicine, political science and law, philosophy and theology.

In this inaugural report, the Witherspoon Council considers the proper relationship between science, ethics, and politics by examining the most prominent science-related controversy of the past decade: the stem cell debates. These debates touched on fundamental questions concerning the governance of science and the moral status of embryonic human life. More than just a scholarly assessment of those debates, this

report seeks to improve the public understanding of how science and democratic politics relate, including the responsibilities of scientists and policymakers. We consider the inevitable interplay between science and ethics and the conflicts of interest that arise when scientists are both advisors to policymakers and petitioners for their allocations. Among the report's most crucial lessons is that, in our system of participatory republican government, we are responsible for considering not only the potential benefits of scientific research but also the ethical implications of that research.

There is reason to hope that scientific advances may soon offer technologically superior alternatives to embryo-destroying research. But some of those technological solutions may raise novel ethical concerns of their own. And even if we do find a satisfactory technological resolution to the debate over embryonic stem cell research, we are left with the underlying moral questions raised by our growing power over the natural world, including over our own biology. It is to the work of understanding, clarifying, and answering those questions that this Council is dedicated.

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