

Four fibs and a waffle

On March 9, President Barack Obama gave my pro-life mother a nasty 95th birthday present: an executive order rescinding the restrictions that President Bush had placed on federal funding of embryonic stem cell research. As policy, the executive order was even more an irresponsible blank check than many had feared it would be, according to Yuval Levin, who once worked on these questions at the president's Council on Bioethics. Nor did the executive order deign to even nod to the moral debate that has raged around this issue for years. The president tried to do that in a speech announcing the executive order. Yet the speech, containing four fibs and a waffle, was even worse.

Fib One: According to the president, his executive order will “lift the ban on federal funding for promising embryonic stem cell research.” But as Ryan Anderson quickly pointed out, “There never was a ban on federal funding for embryonic stem cell research. President Bush was, in fact, the first president in history to fund embryonic stem cell research “The Bush compromise was to order funding restrictions that prevented the further destruction of human embryos in order to obtain their stem cells. Federal funding of research using existing stem cell lines was permitted.

Fib Two: President Obama claimed that the Bush compromise was a “false choice between sound science and moral values.” That is a false portrait of the choice Bush made, and of its effects; for by following the path of moral reason, President Bush pushed the science in a more fruitful direction, such that stem cells that have the same properties as embryonic stem cells can now be obtained by morally acceptable means. Furthermore, what “moral values” inform an executive order condemning the smallest members of the human family to death?

Fib Three: The president claimed that his executive order was the first step in “letting scientists ... do their job, free from manipulation or coercion ... ” This is a favorite Obama rhetorical device: set up straw men, then huff and puff eloquently until the straw man is no more. The truth of the matter, as Ryan Anderson pointed out, is that “critics of embryo-destructive research have never been hostile to science. The dispute is not about whether stem-cell research should proceed; it is

about how it should proceed.”

No one who opposes the Obama policy is against listening to scientists; but since when is science absolved from moral scrutiny? Obama seems to think of scientists as secular high priests whose work cannot be questioned or subjected to the legal boundaries erected around every human activity that touches on the integrity of life. Perhaps the insightful German film, *After the Truth*, in which a fictional trial explores the “humanitarian” rationale for medical “experiments” under German National Socialism, should be screened in the White House theater; I’m sure the good folks at Ignatius Press will donate a DVD.

Fib Four: The President promised that the research allowed by his executive order would be “scientifically worthy and responsibly conducted.” But his policy flies in the face of the current trends in stem-cell science, where the most exciting possibilities involve “induced pluripotent stem cell” technology. iPSC technologies not only avoid embryo-destruction; they hold out the possibility of creating regenerative therapies that are patient-specific through the re-programming of a patient’s own adult cells.

The Waffle: The president vowed to oppose cloning for human reproduction; he did not say he would oppose so-called “therapeutic cloning,” in which clones are created and then destroyed for research purposes. But there’s no need for waffling if you really know the science: at the present state of research, iPSC technology looks likely to do whatever “therapeutic cloning” would do - and do it better.

His claims to the contrary, neither the president’s executive order nor his speech exhibited any serious wrestling with the arguments of those who believe embryo-destruction is immoral. The issues were misrepresented and the opponents’ views caricatured; the relevant science was ignored. This is change no morally reflective person can believe in - a presidentially mandated advance for the culture of death.

George Weigel is Distinguished Senior Fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C.