

Edmund D Pellegrino

The chairman of The President's Council on Bioethics talks about why scientists and policymakers would be wise to draw on both religion and reason in that endeavor.

At lunch in a hotel on Washington's Embassy Row, Edmund Pellegrino tells the waiter, "Just water, please. *From the tap.*" It's just one of the many ways that he is unapologetically old-fashioned. Until recently, he put on a shirt and tie to go to the gas station. He does not use e-mail.

From a quick glance at his CV—attended a Jesuit college, past president of Catholic University of America, appointed by President George W. Bush in September 2005 to oversee his bioethics council, which among other things sets moral guidelines for biotech policy—one might be tempted in today's highly partisan US politics to brand him a religious-right yes-man for the President, and a Luddite to boot. That couldn't be farther from the truth, according to those who know the 86-year-old physician and ethicist.

"Ed Pellegrino is a straight shooter who goes about things in a very deliberative and respectful way," says Thomas Murray, president of The Hastings Center bioethics research institute in Garrison, New York. "He's not going to be anybody's political wingman." Nonetheless, partly due to the administration's hard line against expanding embryonic stem cell research, the council has been labeled as a stacked advisory group to the President. Pellegrino and other council members point out that the council is, in fact, made up of a balanced group of scientific liberals and conservatives, who often give split decisions on policy recommendations.

In the past year, many in the research community have lodged complaints about administrative decisions on biotech policies that appear to reflect the trumping of scientific evidence by a set of particular religious beliefs—a Presidential veto to expand embryonic stem cell research, delays to approve emergency contraception for over-the-counter sales, abstinence-only policies for sex education and AIDS relief. And scientists fear the trend may continue to obstruct scientific advancement in areas such as regenerative medicine, bioengineering and reproductive biology.

Pellegrino would argue in just those cases, it may be impossible and inappropriate to divest religious views from moral decisions.

Raised in Brooklyn, New York, Pellegrino went from being a resident fellow in renal medicine straight to chair of medicine at his first hospital post at the Hunterdon Medical Center in Flemington, New Jersey, in the late 1950s. He instituted a program to teach the medical students ethics. He can still be found teaching bioethics at the patient's bedside during clinical rounds at Georgetown University Medical Center.

A pioneer of US bioethics, Pellegrino is known widely for his approach, which starts with the ill patient and the physician, who is a steward of medical knowledge, and extends an ethical framework from that special relationship.

He sees these concepts extending to biomedical researchers as well, because the goal is some manner of therapy. The kind of scientists we want are people who could be trusted wearing the mythical ring of Gyges, which makes its wearer invisible, he says. "Science and medicine can both be extremely powerful for good and for evil," he says. Because society cannot check everything the scientist does, she must be extraordinarily trustworthy, he explains.

Pellegrino believes that "bioethics is everybody's business," not just the purview of bioethicists or technocrats. Advances in biotech deserve special scrutiny and deliberation. "[Biotech] can affect who we are, what we are and what it is to be human when you deal with such things as enhance-

ment, regenerative medicine, reengineering the human species," he says. "Can there be anything more pertinent to humanity?"

But such decisions cannot be made in a moral vacuum, Pellegrino argues. He calls the idea of moral neutrality (the belief that morals are not fixed values, but rather, are set by current society's acceptance) "hokum." Yet he does not use theological arguments in the public square. Nor does he see a conflict with studying the hard sciences and holding deep religious convictions—as long as one realizes "there is a difference in method and a difference in the rules of evidence—you can't use one for the other.

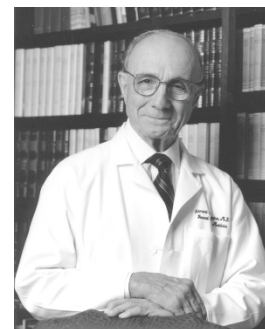
"If you accept the notion of *fides et ratio* [the Catholic intellectual tradition of faith and reason], then you can appeal to either camp," he goes on. On the questions of assisted suicide or embryonic stem cell research, Pellegrino can give you reasons why they are morally wrong without necessarily mentioning any religious concept.

For example, one of his arguments against destroying embryos for stem cell research is that as soon as egg and sperm are joined, that cell becomes genomically unique and the genetic apparatus is set for a particular developmental trajectory. Interrupting that trajectory, he says, destroys a human being in the earliest stages of development.

"I'm only talking about biology right now," he points out. "People of good will can differ on this, but that's the *ratio* response."

Daniel Sulmasy, a Franciscan friar, internist and director of ethics at

"Bioethics is everybody's business," says Pellegrino, not just the purview of bioethicists or technocrats.



New York Medical College and St. Vincent's Hospital in Manhattan, was mentored by Pellegrino. He explains why Pellegrino rarely gets brushed off as pushing a Catholic agenda. "He is speaking out of the natural law system that begins with the fact that God has given us reason and the possibility of good will. We can go far in discourse if we just have those two expectations."

Pellegrino, Sulmasy and Murray agree that it is a mistake for any person to try to dissociate their religious views from ethical decision-making—any belief system will be a filter for analyzing complex ethical issues. But it is also a mistake to translate a specific religious view directly into public policy for a religiously diverse nation.

"The turmoil over stem cell research is the fallout from that," says Murray. "Ed and I would disagree over embryonic stem cell research, but we could have an intelligent and respectful conversation about it." Pellegrino adds that it is important to recognize that atheism or materialism are not "any less a belief system than a religion is."

He trusts that continuing the rational discourse will often lead to common ground among people of different religious views or cultures. "That's not old-fashioned. What's old-fashioned about me is that I know some history and I don't think that our age is that much brighter than the ancient Greeks, Romans, Persians or Chinese. They had amazing insight into human nature."

Kendall Powell, Denver, Colorado