

The ethics of stem cell research

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The Church is going to lose the battle over human embryonic stem cell research, as it should.

The current brouhaha ultimately reduces to the issue of whether organized religion still has the power to veto scientific progress. It doesn't. The Church has lost its veto power because a majority of citizens in every advanced western nation recognizes that ours is a pluralistic secular civilization.

. When the government of a secular society acts, the basis for its action should be the desire to improve the human condition rather than the desire to do God's will. Each religion has its own scriptural authority and its own authoritative interpretation of holy texts. But whatever one's private religious convictions, appeal to divine authority is no longer acceptable as the basis for social policy.

The Vatican has taken a leading role in the campaign to ban stem cell research because it considers every embryo to be the moral equivalent of a person and the extraction of the stem cells causes the embryos to expire. Although Christian scriptures nowhere mention extracorporeal embryos, the destruction of human embryonic life is claimed to violate the divinely ordained sanctity of human life.

Proponents of embryonic stem cell research point out that stem cells are extracted at a point when the zygote (newly fertilized egg) is nothing more than a microscopic blob, possessing neither a brain nor a nervous system. Thus, the early-stage human embryo is not a person, since personhood requires a functioning brain and nervous system. Indeed, since the zygote could still divide into twins or triplets, it cannot even be said to be an *individual* being.

On the other hand, the zygote is living and it is biologically human. Perhaps, therefore, it has some weak moral status and deserves some limited degree of moral respect. If it becomes scientifically possible to harvest good quality stem cells in sufficient quantity from adults then we ought to prefer this alternative. No living thing should be harmed or destroyed unless there is a justification for doing so

Keep in mind, however, that nature is profligate with embryos. Every time a woman menstruates there is a good chance that a newly fertilized egg is being flushed away with her menses. Billions of fertilized eggs never implant in the lining of the womb, and billions more spontaneously abort after implantation. Indeed, one commonly accepted form of birth control, the intrauterine device (IUD), operates precisely by preventing implantation of the zygote. Even within the Church, only a tiny minority regards this form of contraception as mass murder. Members of a faith community that

considers contraception to be wicked may choose voluntarily not to regulate their fertility. But they may not legitimately impose their religious faith on others.

The proper role of government, and its greatest challenge, is to obtain for humanity the maximum benefit from new medical technologies while minimizing the risks of serious harm. Governments should also ensure that benefits and harms are distributed equitably.

Both advocates and opponents of stem cell research concede that it has enormous potentiality for human benefit. The scientific goal is first to isolate stem cells and then to tweak them in such a way that they re-grow our own bodies, thereby enabling us to treat and perhaps to cure such dread diseases as Alzheimer's dementia and Parkinson's. Stem cell research could also hold the key to the discovery of effective treatments for cancer and heart disease. The possibilities are almost endless. Since millions of people worldwide suffer terribly from such diseases, the prospect of discovering effective treatment has generated huge and justifiable excitement.

Of course, it may be the case that with further research these hoped-for benefits will prove illusory. No one who follows news on the high-tech sector can fail to realize how regularly this week's medical miracle fizzles into next week's damp firecracker. The isolation and growth of stem cells is a very recent development, so no one can yet be confident of its therapeutic utility. Early experimental results are exciting, but potential problems lie ahead: for example, once cell growth is turned on, it may be difficult to turn it off. Cells that cannot be turned off could destroy the health or life of the patient into whose body they've been introduced.

One may concede to the opponents of stem cell research that the human zygote has *some* degree of moral value but nevertheless insist that it does not have the high moral value that we attach to personhood. The terror and suffering experienced by a patient with Alzheimer's disease, not to mention the suffering of the patient's family, has a claim on our moral concern which should out-weigh our concern for the zygote. When scientific research offers possible relief to millions of suffering people, to proceed with such research is not, *pace* Pope John Paul II, "a coarsening of consciences". It is morally obligatory.

The British government has sensibly passed regulations which permit embryonic research to proceed, while ensuring that the research is done ethically. For example, embryos are not allowed to be used for research without the informed consent of the couple that have contributed, respectively, their egg and sperm. The Canadian government has published draft legislation. It's weaker than the British, but better than nothing. Religious dogma should not be allowed to perpetuate avoidable human suffering.

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