

Thinking about the ethics of stem cell research

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At bottom, the great brouhaha about embryonic stem cell research is really about whether religion still has the power to veto scientific progress.

On all sides it is conceded that the potentiality for human benefit is enormous. 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 disease. Stem cell research could also hold the key to the discovery of effective treatments for cancer and heart disease. Damaged knee cartilage could be regrown, sparing countless people from crippling arthritic pain. The possibilities are endless. Since millions of people worldwide suffer terribly from such diseases, the prospect of discovering effective treatment has generated huge and justifiable excitement.

The Vatican has taken a leading role in the campaign to ban this research, because when stem cells are extracted from the extracorporeal embryos, the embryo expires. This, says the Church, violates the sanctity of human life and is to be counted, morally, as the killing of an innocent human being. In short, as murder. If the quantity and quality of stem cells needed could be acquired in some other way, religious opposition might disappear.

source for obtaining the necessary quantity and quality of stem cells appears to be from human embryos

in the first two weeks of their development, when they are microscopically tiny blobs without even the beginning of a nervous system or brain.