The Confusing Moral Logic of Embryonic Stem Cell Research

*The embryonic stem cell research debate is remarkable because neither side, pro-life or pro-abortion, seems to understand the moral logic of its views.*

*September/October 2004*

Presumably, people who are pro-life hold their views for a reason and are not just emoting. The same could be said of pro-choicers. I've long suspected that's not always the case, though. The recent debate about embryonic stem cell research (ESCR) confirms my doubts. ESCR is an amazing effort on the leading edge of medical science that some suggest offers promise of effective treatment for Alzheimer's, diabetes, Parkinson's, and a host of other tragic and debilitating diseases. Human embryos in the first two weeks of gestation are comprised entirely of unique stem cells that have the remarkable ability of transforming into a wide variety of spare cellular parts. There's an abundance of these embryos currently available that are destined for the trash can: the frozen remnants of over-ambitious in vitro fertilization (IVF) attempts. Though ESCR destroys these living human zygotes, in the minds of many this research is ethically permissible. "The embryos are going to die anyway. Why not make good use of them?" Two questions in this debate need to be carefully considered and not dismissed with name calling, histrionics, or political posturing. First, is it reasonable to expect that the scientific community can fulfill its buoyant (and as yet thoroughly unsubstantiated) claims of future medical miracles? Second, even if ESCR proponents' wildest dreams were realized, is research on human embryos right? I'm concerned here with the second question. Is it justified to take the life of some innocent human beings to bring benefit to others?

**Moral Logic**

The ESCR debate of the moral question is remarkable to me for two reasons. First, how could those who are pro-abortion feel the need to defend the act of cutting up a human embryo to farm it for its cells? Second, how could those who are pro-life countenance the thought? The answer to both is the same: To a large degree, neither side seems to understand the moral logic of its views.

An action is unethical when it violates a moral rule. Car theft is wrong because it violates a larger principle: It's wrong to steal another's property. That same rule has other applications, however. The moral principle covering car theft equally covers plagiarism. If someone objects to car theft, but condones her own theft of another's ideas, it's fair to question her commitment to the broader principle: Stealing is wrong. It begins to look like emotions and personal preferences are driving her choices, not moral thinking. The moral logic pertaining to any pre-born human life can be stated simply. It's wrong to kill innocent human beings. Both abortion and ESCR kill innocent human beings. Therefore, both abortion and ESCR are wrong. Pro-lifers, presumably, affirm this moral equation. Pro-choicers, by and large, deny it because of the second premise. To them, no bona fide human being is sacrificed, just a "clump of cells."
Only One Question

I have argued elsewhere that only one question needs to be answered to resolve what many think is a complex moral problem. That question is, What is it? Both abortion and ESCR kill something that is alive. In fact, both destroy the same thing at different stages of development. Whether it’s right or not to take that life depends entirely on what it is we’re killing.

Let me put it as clearly as I know how. If the zygote or embryo or fetus is not a human being, no justification for either abortion or ESCR is necessary. However, if it is a human being, no justification for taking his or her life is adequate. This single, succinct ethic is adequate to cover contingencies on both sides of the question.

Ethical Confusion

The pro-life view stands or falls on this moral equation. So does the pro-choice view, which makes the conduct of many on both sides confusing.

If abortion itself is morally acceptable, if it’s legitimate to destroy fully-formed human children right up to the point of birth (and even during delivery, in the case of partial-birth abortion), why would anyone flinch at the idea of carving up a week-old embryo? Why the compulsion to defend destroying a "lump of cells" the size of a pinhead for medical benefit when it’s completely legal and acceptable to destroy a fully-formed human fetus for any reason what so ever? Equally incomprehensible to me, a stunning number of pro-lifers have rallied in support of ESCR for the very same reasons pro-choices classically have justified abortion: It doesn't look human; it's in the wrong location (a petri dish, not a uterus); it’s too small to be of moral consequence; it’s human, but not a human being; it’s alive, but not a life; and others will gain tremendous benefit. When pro-lifers embrace a pro-choice rationale in support of ESCR, though, they undermine their entire moral enterprise.

What Is It?

By any objective, scientific standard, the embryo qualifies as a member of the human race. From the moment of conception the embryo is an individual. The zygote is distinct from mother, father, and other living things, having her own unique genetic fingerprint.

The embryo is living, characterized by metabolism, growth, reaction to stimuli, and reproduction. The embryo is human, carrying DNA with a human genetic signature. Finally, the embryo is an individual being: a self-contained, self-integrated living entity with her own nature. She has the innate capacity to proceed through the full series of human developmental stages. All that’s needed is proper nurture and environment, the same as you and I. The embryo, therefore, from the very moment of conception is an individual, living, human being, a bona fide member of the human family. Her cells are not yet individuated (they haven’t developed unique vocations as bone cells, skin cells, etc.). Yet she is still an individual self (though not yet self-aware), and will remain herself for her entire life until death. She will never become a human; she already is one. That’s incontrovertible science.

Whence Value?

The crux of the moral puzzle has to do with value: What gives human beings their worth? There are two general possibilities. Either human value is derived from some extrinsic, changeable quality (size, level of development, location, social convention, etc.), or humans are valuable in themselves because of some intrinsic, unchangeable quality that is part of their created nature.
Classically, western civilization has affirmed the latter, a conviction summed up eloquently by our Founding Fathers as the cornerstone of our human rights: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." This one moral conviction has been the impulse for every human rights crusade up to the end of the 20th century, from the abolition of slavery in the United States and England, to child labor laws, to the war crimes trials at Nuremberg, to Dr. Martin Luther King’s crusade for civil rights in the ‘60s. Of course, the Founders may have been wrong, but such ideas have consequences.

Remove the moral foundation and the moral edifice built upon it topples.

Here’s the problem. If humans are valuable because of some transcendent quality, then human value is intrinsic. It exists regardless of any physical or functional changes, size, location, abilities, etc. Conversely, if any physical or functional change affects human value, then that value can only be extrinsic, dependent on external factors. Human value becomes conditional. The danger is, when value is functionally defined, there is no basis for inalienable human rights. Whatever can be functionally defined, can be functionally defined away.

"Personhood" and Value

To say that an embryo is human but not a human being is shorthand for saying the embryo is property, not a person, and therefore has no privileged status. But what is the relevant moral difference between human beings and human persons? If the standard is sound that has always grounded human rights, transcendent human value, then this is a false move.

If humans beings are intrinsically valuable because of something innate, something non-physical, then their physical status has no bearing on their membership in the human family. Humans are valuable simply in virtue of their shared humanity. They do not become valuable only if they satisfy some additional "personhood" requirement. It turns out that personhood language is a ruse. As a rule, it has merely been legal terminology used to exclude certain human beings from protection under law. Historically, this subterfuge has consistently disenfranchised the weak and vulnerable: Black slaves in the Dred Scott decision of 1857, defective children and the elderly under the Third Reich, the unborn since Roe v. Wade in 1973, and now ESCR on the threshold of the brave new world of the 21st Century.

The Horns of a Dilemma

These facts place both groups supporting ESCR, pro-lifers and pro-choicers, on the horns of a painful dilemma. For the pro-life crowd, every reason offered for affirming the sanctity of human life at later stages of development applies to human life at the earliest stages. The same continuity of moral logic decides both questions.

Similarly, pro-choicers can only succeed in their task by denying intrinsic human worth, valuing only those humans they deem to have the right size, to be in the right location, or to have the "proper" functional capabilities. But this undercutts all the human rights campaigns they hold so dear. The objection of some to creating embryos for the purpose of ESCR (as opposed to limiting research to IVF discards) is equally confusing. Why not create embryos for research if they have no intrinsic value anyway? Further, some proponents of ESCR have distinguished between therapeutic cloning (cloning done for research), and reproductive cloning (that done to eventually produce a human baby). They affirm the first, but oppose the second, (for the moment). But what moral argument distinguishes the two that still keeps any commitment to inalienable human rights intact?
**Functionalism Fails**

The pro-choice enterprise in any of its forms is doomed to fail because it ultimately reduces human value to functional terms.

For example, columnist Michael Kinsley dismisses embryonic value because of size. They are "microscopic groupings of a few differentiated cells." First, this only works if human size determines human value. Second, since size is relative, human value based on size would be relative, too. If bigger is better and smaller is lesser, what is the proper frame of reference for comparison? All human beings are much bigger than some things and much smaller than others. For Kinsley, embryos are so small compared to him that their moral status is negligible. But for others, contemplating the size of the universe is enough to convince them all human beings are insignificant. Compared to Michel Kinsley, embryos have no value. Compared to the size of the cosmos, Mr. Kinsley has no value. Both conclusions are flawed for the same reason: Size does not determine value. Location fares no better as a criteria for human worth. If you are a valuable human being, do you cease being valuable because you move from the kitchen to the den? Or from the store to the sidewalk? Or simply roll over in bed? If it's wrong to kill an innocent human being at one location, then it's wrong to kill that same innocent human being located somewhere else. This is obvious and axiomatic. Even so, some pro-lifers lose sight of this logic when it comes to ESCR. Senator Orrin Hatch thinks that the moral status of an embryo in a petri dish is different from one in it's "proper" environment attached to a uterus. He believes the first will never become a human being and the second already is one. Note, the only difference between the two is location. The embryo itself is exactly the same in each instance. Following this rationale to its logical conclusion reveals its flaws. What if science were to advance beyond IVF to the point where artificial wombs could successfully domicile human embryos for the full nine months of gestation until "birth" (a technological eventuality, some say). Applying this same moral logic, the human isn't a real human unless it's in the right environment, what is pro-lifer Hatch to do now? This full-term fetus would not be human and, following the logic of ESCR, could legitimately be mined for his spare biological parts. Clearly, location can't be the deciding factor. All human beings have some core quality that gives them equal and unalienable rights, and this valuable thing is not altered by anything physical or functional. This is why the "benefit" argument for ESCR ("Think of all the people it will help"), even if true, has no merit. If embryos are in fact valuable human beings, then the end does not justify the means in this case. We do not sacrifice human beings for medical purposes regardless of the good it might bring others. Eric Cohen, resident scholar at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, is particularly cogent:

> They appeal to the suffering of loved ones (or celebrities) to make the argument for destroying human embryos. Such suffering is real and often horrible. But suffering is not an argument, and the case for embryo research must rest on some notion of what embryos are [i.e., "only one question"], what standing they should be accorded, and the moral consequences of using them as means for our own benefit. [emphasis added]

Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission calls ESCR "nothing more than biotech cannibalism, in which we eat our young in order to better our own medicinal condition."

**Consistently Pro-Life**

The moral logic of the pro-life position, consistently applied, is adequate to inform not only the abortion issue, but ESCR as well.

When asked "What gives any human being value?" Christian pro-lifers have the resources to answer that question. When the human being exists, all of her intrinsic qualities exist, including
her transcendent value. This answer, though, does not allow us in ESCR to tie human value to size, location, or level of development without destroying our case for innate human worth at the same time. This logic also answers another question: What should we do with the extra embryos? Following our moral principles, since embryos are each valuable human beings, we should treat them like anyone else. They should neither be wantonly destroyed, auctioned off for medical experimentation, nor farmed for their valuable body parts. Instead, they should be adopted (implanted in new mothers) or allowed to die naturally. To avoid this problem in the future, IVF should be done only with the number of eggs that can safely be carried by the mother without risking "selective reductions" (abortion). In ESCR, most embryos are harvested at seven days. A seven-day-old embryo is just 14 days away from a beating heart. For those who are pro-life, there is only one answer to the question of embryonic stem cell research: No. Anything else undermines our entire moral endeavor and completely destroys the transcendent case for all human rights. That’s what the moral logic requires. Unless, of course, there really is no moral continuity to our position. Unless we are just emoting.

For the Kingdom,

Gregory Koukl
President, Stand to Reason