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Is Embryonic Stem Cell Research Morally Complex?

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Case closed: Research that destroys one human being so that another may benefit is immoral.

When advocates of embryonic stem cell research say that we have a moral obligation to save lives and promote cures, what they really mean is that human embryos should be cloned and killed for medical research. But you would never know it by listening to their rhetoric. Now I'm all for saving lives. I'm also for stem cell research. But I'm opposed to one kind of stem cell research that requires killing defenseless human beings so that others may (allegedly) benefit. That's immoral.

What are stem cells?

Stem cells are fast growing, unspecialized cells that can reproduce themselves and grow new organs for the body. All 210 different types of human tissue originate from these primitive cells. Because they have the potential to grow into almost any kind of tissue including nerves, bones, and muscle, scientists believe that the introduction of healthy stem cells into a patient may restore lost function to damaged organs, especially the brain. Human embryos have an abundant supply of stem cells which scientists are eager to harvest in hopes of treating Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease, and other illnesses. There's only one problem: You must kill the embryo to get its stem cells. Advocates of Embryonic Stem Cell Research (ESCR) often reply that the embryos in question are not human organisms, but stem cells with the potential to become human beings. This is an unabashed lie. Embryos don't come from stem cells; they are living human beings that have stem cells. And extracting these cells is lethal for the tiny human subject.

Closely related to ESCR is the cloning process known as Somatic Cell Nuclear Transfer, which involves creating an embryo that is a genetic clone of the patient and then using that embryo as a source for stem cells. Advocates of ESCR euphemistically called this "therapeutic" cloning which they sought to distinguish from "reproductive" cloning. But the distinction is totally misleading *because all cloning is reproductive*. So-called "reproductive" cloning means allowing the cloned human to live. "Therapeutic" cloning means creating him for research and then killing him before birth. In either case, the act of cloning is exactly the same and results in a living human embryo. The only question is how we will treat the newly cloned human being.

Is ESCR complex?

Regrettably, moral concerns with ESCR are often dismissed as anti-science and anti-progress. "Our conviction about what is natural or right should not inhibit the role of science in discovering the truth," Prime Minister Tony Blair told critics of Britain's plan to clone human embryos for research.¹ Echoing these same sentiments, U.S. Senator Orin Hatch remarked, "It would be terrible to say because of an ethical concept, we can't do anything for patients."² However, if Blair and Hatch are correct that scientific progress trumps morality, one can hardly condemn Hitler for grisly medical experiments on Jews. Nor can one criticize the Tuskegee experiments of the 1940s in which black men suffering from syphilis were promised treatment, only to have it denied so scientists could study the disease.

Despite claims to the contrary, ESCR is not morally complex. It comes down to just one question: Is the embryo a member of the human family? If so, killing him or her to benefit others is a serious moral wrong. It treats the distinct

human being, with his or her own inherent moral worth, as nothing more than a disposable instrument. Conversely, if the embryos in question are not human, killing them to extract stem cells requires no more justification than pulling a tooth.

The science of embryology is clear that from the earliest stages of development, embryos (whether produced through normal reproduction or cloning) are distinct, living, and whole human beings. True, they have yet to grow and mature, but they are whole human beings nonetheless.³

Pro-cloning advocates like Ronald Bailey insist that we gain no real knowledge from these scientific facts. Bailey argues that embryonic human beings are biologically human only in the sense that every cell in the body carries the full genetic code, meaning that each of our somatic (bodily) cells has as much potential for development as any human embryo. Put simply, Bailey would have us believe that there is no difference in kind between a human embryo and each of our cells.⁴ This is bad biology. Bailey is making the rather elementary mistake of confusing parts with wholes. The difference in kind between each of our cells and a human embryo is clear: An individual cell's functions are subordinated to the survival of the larger organism of which it is merely a part. The human embryo, however, is already a whole human entity. It makes no sense to say that you were once a sperm or somatic cell. However, the facts of science make clear that you were once a human embryo. Robert George and Patrick Lee say it well. "Somatic cells are not, and embryonic human beings are, distinct, self-integrating organisms capable of directing their own maturation as members of the human species."⁵

What makes humans valuable?

Some ESCR advocates concede that zygotes (early embryos) are biologically human but deny that they are complex or developed enough to qualify as valuable human beings with a right to life. The argument goes that humans have value not in virtue of the kind of thing they are (members of a natural kind or species), but only because of an acquired property, usually the immediate capacity for self-awareness. Embryos do not have this immediate capacity and therefore fail to qualify as subjects with rights. There are two problems that underscore the arbitrary and counterintuitive nature of this claim. First, the self-awareness argument proves too much. Newborns lack meaningful self-awareness until several months after birth, so what's wrong with infanticide? Second, George and Lee point out that if humans have value only because of some acquired property like self-awareness or sentience and not in virtue of the kind of thing they are, then it follows that since these acquired properties come in varying degrees, basic human rights come in varying degrees.⁶ Do we really want to say that those with more self-awareness are more human (and more valuable) than those with less? Philosophically, it's far more reasonable to argue that although humans differ immensely with respect to talents, accomplishments, and degrees of development, they are nonetheless equal because they share a common human nature.

The crux of the matter

Here's the question to ask your critics at work, school, or church: Given a choice between a therapy that happens to be lethal for human subjects and one that is not, wouldn't we be inclined to favor the therapy that is not lethal? Wouldn't that be even more the case if that non-lethal therapy turns out to be vastly more promising, and far less speculative, than the lethal therapy?⁷ Stem cells drawn from adults have already yielded some striking achievements, and they do not require the killing of the human being from whom they are drawn.⁸ The extraction of stem cells from human embryos does, however, result in the destruction of defenseless human beings. Therefore, it is morally wrong. There's nothing complex about it.

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Notes:

1. "Don't turn Against Science, Blair Warns Protesters," *London Daily Telegraph*, November 18, 2000
2. Cited in "Clone Wars," *National Review On-Line*, July 1, 2002
3. See, for example, Keith L. Moore, *The Developing Human: Clinically Oriented Embryology* (Toronto: B.C. Decker, 1988) p. 2; Ronand O'Rahilly and Pabiola Muller, *Human Embryology and Teratology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Wiley-Liss, 1996) pp. 8, 29.
4. Ronald Bailey, "Are Stem Cells Babies?" *Reason*, July 11, 2001.
5. Robert George and Patrick Lee, "Reason, Science, and Stem Cells," *National Review Online*, 7-20-01.
6. Robert George, "Cloning Addendum," *National Review Online*, 7-15-02; Patrick Lee, "The Pro-Life Argument from Substantial Identity," Tollefsen Lecture, St. Anselm's College, 11-14-02.
7. I owe this question to Hadley Arkes, "Senseless on Stem Cells," *National Review Online*, 8-23-04.
8. For a complete summary of these adult stem cell treatments, go to www.stemcellresearch.org.