



Fetal Farming and the New Slavery

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"Slippery slope" arguments in bioethics are fairly popular, reminding us how initial ethical violations have a way of leading to further violations and misdeeds, and ultimately, to undesirable places. Once you "give away the principle" and start sliding, it becomes difficult to return to the point from which you started.

What is genuinely striking is how far down the biotechnology slopes we have already come. In the 1960's, contraception, or *sex without babies*, became widely accepted. By 1978, the flip side, *babies without sex*, arrived on the scene with *in vitro* fertilization, and it wasn't long before human embryos were being routinely created in the laboratory and implanted into women. Soon this snowballed into the storage of "spare" embryos in the deep freeze, to the point of about a half-million humans "trapped" in the United States, with no end in sight to the now-routine "assembly line" production and freezing of human embryos at fertility clinics.

The destruction of innocent human life in the womb also became commonplace after the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision. Researchers began using tissues derived from abortions to try to treat Parkinson's patients in the late 1980's, with minimal public reaction, so that today

abortion clinics have few qualms about providing freshly obtained "research material" to scientists at large universities or biotech companies. In 1998, the next step followed like a domino-in-line: previously frozen human embryos began to be destroyed to procure their embryonic stem cells.

Right on the heels of this development came an even more troubling proposal: making human embryos by cloning (cloned to be immune-matched to sick patients), then destroying them to get their stem cells. As cloned embryos (or identical twins of the patient), their stem cells could be implanted into the patient with minimal danger of rejection, since identical twins can exchange organs between each other without immune problems. Thus, in the short space of a few years, we have reached the point of creating human life merely to destroy it, harvesting young humans as biological raw materials and exploitable commodities.

The confluence of these various ethical violations points towards the next twist down the well-greased slopes of modern biotechnology. Although ominous sounding today, the prospect of *fetal farming* looms large, and may likewise become routine

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in our lifetimes if we continue to coarsen our moral sensitivities regarding these important bioethical questions.

Currently, researchers speak about stem cells as the ideal, flexible cells that should enable us to make tissues, organs and body parts in the future. The difficulty is that whole organs, like a kidney or a heart, are exceedingly complex structures with many different interacting cell types, and years, or even decades, of research will be needed before such organs can be reliably synthesized from embryonic stem cells.

But a convenient shortcut may be possible. Instead of destroying a cloned, five day-old embryo to get stem cells, and struggling to make those stem cells into a kidney, why not implant that cloned embryo, allowing him or her to grow into a fetus, and then schedule an abortion prior to the due date? This would provide a cadaver with fresh, whole kidneys ready to be harvested out of the aborted remains, saving us a good deal of time and trouble in terms of manipulating stem cells. These kinds of “fetal farming” experiments have already been done in mice and in cattle, and they provide usable tissues and organs.

In today’s society we almost nonchalantly sanction the production of a five day-old human life to destroy it. Tomorrow it may be a three month old, then an eight month-old fetus. How far is it, really, from a five day-old cloned embryo to fetal farming and the manufacturing of human fetuses to harvest their body parts? Not very far, once we acknowledge how slippery and well-greased the slopes have already become. This is one of the reasons why we must safeguard human life from its very beginnings, if we wish to avoid its destruction at any later stage.

As Charles Krauthammer, M.D., a syndicated columnist and former member of the President’s Council on Bioethics once put it: “We will, slowly and by increments, have gone from stem cells to embryo farms to factories with fetuses hanging (metaphorically) on meat hooks waiting to be cut open and used by the already born.” Or, as Richard Doerflinger has perceptively noted, this is all about a new slavery, with biotech companies as the plantation owners.

If we can awaken those around us to the dangers of science without ethics, we may still have time to avoid transitioning from the slippery slopes of biotechnology to the outright free-

fall of uncontrolled downhill skiing. Before ending up in an irreparable heap at the bottom of the hill, we would do well to respond decisively to those threats that arise whenever science becomes detached from a strong and robust moral vision.

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