



Debating the Embryo's Fate

"As I watched him, the rhetorical thought flashed through my mind, patterned on the language of embryonic stem cell advocates: '...he's so small, so insignificant: what if a cure for Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and diabetes could be developed to benefit all of suffering mankind, by promoting scientific research that depended on killing just a single little boy like him.'"



I am sometimes invited to participate in public debates on stem cell research and cloning. My sparring partners are usually other scientists, politicians, or public policy experts. The debates are typically held at universities or colleges, and audiences generally have the opportunity to ask questions of both sides afterwards. Having participated in a number of these debates over the past few years, I've been surprised by how often certain arguments are trotted out with great solemnity, as if they were obviously right and true, even though a casual observer can quickly recognize their flaws and inadequacies.

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to debate a stem cell researcher at a gathering of physicians at the New York Academy of Medicine. Our discussion was cordial and civil, even though we clearly disagreed with each other's positions. Not infrequently, such discussions tend to take the form of a dispute over the relative merits of the two major categories of stem cells: adult vs. embryonic (adult stem cell research does not require the destruction of young human embryos while embryonic stem cell research generally does). I did my best to avoid letting our discussion slip into a polemic about what might work best, about *efficiency*,

even though this was one of the key arguments used by my opponent. He stressed how embryonic stem cells may one day be able to work better than adult stem cells, and if cures do end up being derived in the future, then, in effect, it must be ethical to do such research, and to destroy human embryos.

In responding to his argument, I recounted a story from when I traveled to the Philippines to give a lecture about stem cells. One day, as we drove along a boulevard lined with people living in hovels made out of cardboard boxes, I noticed a boy, a street child, rummaging through piles of trash for food. His clothes were dirty, and he seemed quite frail. It looked like he did this on a daily basis in order to survive. As I watched him, the rhetorical thought flashed through my mind, patterned on the language of embryonic stem cell advocates:

"...he's so small, so insignificant: what if a cure for Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and diabetes could be developed to benefit all of suffering mankind, by promoting scientific research that depended on killing just a single little boy like him, who,

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after all, is living no better than an animal? He's probably just going to die anyway in his difficult circumstances..."

After sharing this Philippine experience with my audience at the debate, I asked them a question: "Could a scientific research program like that ever be ethical?" The obvious answer to that question reminds us how *ethics must always come before efficiency*. Taking the lives of young humans (whether as little boys or little embryos) cannot be pronounced ethical simply because it might result in huge benefits to older, more powerful, or more wealthy humans. The fact remains that objective moral limits constrain all areas of human endeavor, including the practice of the biological sciences. Whenever the siren-call of healing and progress blares in our ears, we are obliged to be particularly attentive to those absolute moral boundaries.

A second argument that comes up quite often in debates about the embryo is the so-called *argument from wastage*. The starting point for this argument is the medical observation that most pregnancies don't survive and are flushed from a woman's body. One well-known embryology

textbook summarizes it this way: "The total loss of conceptuses from fertilization to birth is believed to be considerable, perhaps even as high as 50% to nearly 80%". The fact that most embryos don't survive is then taken and used as a justification for destroying embryos to get stem cells. As another opponent of mine once put it during a debate at Southern Methodist University in Texas,

"If Mother Nature destroys so many embryos naturally, why shouldn't we be able to as well? Why get all worked up about using frozen embryos in research, when so many early embryos die naturally from miscarriages?"

But the difference between a natural miscarriage and the intentional destruction of embryos is precisely the difference between the case of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome vs. the case of smothering an infant with a pillow. What Mother Nature does and what I freely choose to do as an acting person are two separate realities, not to be confused.

The embryo debates are sure to intensify in the future, and we need to insist on careful and rationally

supported arguments from all parties in the debate. Where vulnerable and defenseless human life is concerned, the stakes are much too high to allow specious and imprecise arguments to carry the day.

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