



The Confusing Moral Logic of ESCR

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, 2001

Dear Friend,

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 offering 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 being transformed 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?"

The ESCR debate is remarkable 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.

Moral Logic

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 you object to the first, but condone your own plagiarism on term papers, it's fair to question your commitment to the broader principle. It seems ad hoc, an expression of mere emotive preferences for the moment.

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 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.

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) because they're not valuable human beings—why would anyone flinch at the idea of carving up a week-old embryo? Why would anyone feel compelled to defend destroying a "lump of cells" the size of a pinhead for scientific reasons when it's completely legal and acceptable to destroy fully-formed human fetuses for any reason what so ever?

Equally incomprehensible, a stunning number of pro-lifers are scurrying to support ESCR for the very same reasons pro-choicers 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.

Abandoning their pro-life view for a pro-choice rationale, pro-lifers 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, no different than 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 a unique, 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 because of some intrinsic, unchangeable quality.

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...."

The biblical grounding the Founders relied upon is found in Genesis 1:27: "And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." The moral ramifications of this *imago Dei* are clarified a few chapters later: "Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God He made man" (Genesis 9:6).

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, metaphysical quality, then that value is intrinsic and obtains regardless of physical/functional changes—size, location, abilities, etc. Conversely, if physical/functional changes affect human value, then the value is not intrinsic. It is instrumental and temporary, contingent on external factors. Human value becomes transient. Whatever can be functionally defined, can be functionally defined away.

"Personhood" and Value

To say that the embryo is human, but not a human being is just as dubious as saying "It's a human being, but not a person." The trick is to find the relevant moral difference between the two.

In virtually every occurrence in public discourse, "personhood" is legal language used as a tool to arbitrarily determine which human beings we currently choose to protect under law. Therefore, to say that the embryo is not a person is the same as saying "No bachelors are married." It's simply a definition, not an argument.

If the biblical standard that grounds our human rights is sound, though, the "personhood" issue is completely moot. Human beings are intrinsically valuable because something *non-physical* about them bears God's image. Humans are valuable *qua* human, that is, simply in virtue of their humanity. They are not valuable only if they satisfy some additional functional personhood requirement.

Historically, altering that equation has only served to disenfranchise the weak and vulnerable: Black slaves in the Dred Scott decision of 1857, Jews under the Third Reich in the '30s and '40s, the unborn with Roe v. Wade in 1973, and the ethnic cleansing of the late 20th 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 contingently (for the moment) deem to have the right size, to be in the right location, or to have the "proper" functional capabilities. But this undercuts all the human rights campaigns they hold so dear. Their objection to *creating* embryos for the purpose of ESCR (as opposed to limiting research to IVF discards) is equally confusing. Why not make embryos for research if they have no intrinsic value anyway?

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." This only works if human size determines human value. Since size is relative, then human value based on size would be relative, too. Bigger is better, relatively speaking. Change the perspective and you change the value.

For thinkers like Kinsley, embryos are so small compared to adults that their moral status is negligible. But for others, contemplating the size of the universe is enough to convince them of their insignificance even as adult humans. If value is related to size and size is relative, then all humans are tiny from one vantage point. 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. Congressman Orrin Hatch thinks that the moral status of an embryo in a petri dish is different from one in its "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 thing 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 growing 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 its spare biological parts.

Clearly, location can't be the deciding factor. All human beings have something by virtue of their core humanity 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 has no merit. If embryos are in fact valuable human beings, then the end does not justify the means. We do not sacrifice human beings against their will regardless of the good it might bring others.

Scott Klusendorf, Director of Bio-Ethics at Stand to Reason, puts it this way:

The morality of ESCR comes down to just one question: Is the embryo a member of the human family? If so, killing it 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 having a tooth pulled.

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 value to human beings?" Christian pro-lifers have the resources to answer that question. Our answer, though, does not allow us to tie human value to functional or developmental elements without destroying our case for innate human worth. When the human being exists, then all of her intrinsic qualities exist, including her transcendent value.

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 nor farmed for their valuable 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 "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 less undermines our entire moral endeavor and completely destroys the transcendent case for all human rights.

Unless, of course, there really is no logic to our position. Unless we are just emoting.



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Yours for the Kingdom

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