

“The Stem Cell Controversy”

What if we were to learn that some of the finest medical anatomy illustrations used in medical training had come from victims of the Holocaust, dissected by anatomists who were Nazi party members? This chilling indictment was made in 1996 when questions were raised about the Pernkopf Anatomy, an authoritative multivolume text produced during the Third Reich by Eduard Pernkopf and his four associates, all members of the Nazi party. While the identities of the cadavers used have not yet been conclusively determined, should we allow ourselves to study and learn from illustrations that may well have been made of the corpses of those killed for that purpose? On the other hand, is it ethical to let such excellent illustrations, so useful to medicine, go to waste? Ethical responsibility seems to pull in two directions.

Today, Americans suddenly are wrestling with such questions as, "Is it ethical to use human embryos in experiments that will destroy them in hopes of deriving cures for a variety of human ailments?" Or, "Is it ethical to forego medical progress that might greatly benefit large numbers of people out of concern for embryos, many of which are leftovers from in vitro experimentation that otherwise would be destroyed anyway?" These vexing dilemmas recently have caught the attention of the media and the President and seem to have caught most American Christian unawares. Yet, the discussion of the ethics of experimentation on human embryos is not new. Serious public discussion of the topic dates back at least three years, when in 1998, the White House asked the National Bioethics Advisory Commission to review the matter. While this Commission had previously recommended against human cloning, in the matter of stem cell research they concluded that "in the light of public testimony, expert advice, and published writings, we have found substantial agreement among individuals with diverse perspectives that although the human embryo and fetus deserve respect as forms of human life, the scientific and clinical benefits of stem cell research should not be foregone." They recommended that the federal government sponsor and fund such research, " but only if it is conducted in an ethically responsible manner." (For the full text, see <http://bioethics.gov/pubs.html>).

The pro-life community is divided on the ethics of stem cell research, and even more sharply on the ethical acceptability of the Bush compromise, which allows funding only for research on already established stem cell lines, not the creation of new ones by the further destruction of embryos. Some would argue that the use even of existing lines would be to profit from and thus to condone the destruction of embryonic human lives, and might draw an analogy to the use of the Pernkopf Anatomy. Others, while uneasy about the source of the stem cell lines, share with most people the desire that important research be done to benefit the sick.

To some extent the public debate in American society about stem cell research reflects worldviews, and in particular views about human dignity and sanctity. A clearer contrast to Christian ethical views could not be found than those of Peter Singer, redoubtable

bioethicist at Princeton University, well known for his controversial views endorsing animal rights and denying traditional views of the sanctity of human life. Singer vigorously argues that we have a moral obligation to do stem cell research, particularly if it means that we will need to do less research on animals. In his view,

Other things being equal, there is less reason for objecting to the use of an early human embryo, a being that has no brain, no consciousness and no preferences of any kind, than there is for objecting to research on rats, who are sentient beings capable of preferring not to be in situations that are painful or frightening to them. (Manchester Guardian, August 21, 1999)

Is Singer right? Do we have a moral obligation to use human embryos so that we can avoid the use of animals? He objects that

"It is sheer species-bias that makes us permit all kinds of trivial uses to be made of sentient non-humans and then prevent far more significant research from being carried out because it requires cells from early, non-sentient human embryos."

How can Christians and others who uphold traditional values distinguish morally between adult animals and human embryos of much less biological complexity? Singer reaches his conclusion by comparing embryos and animals in terms of their degree of sentience, or capacity to feel, as well as their preferences. Since 64-cell human embryos arguably have less such qualities than an adult animal, the embryo ought to be the one sacrificed. He admits that the human embryo has a much greater potential, but he insists that we compare it to the animal as they are at this moment. He would not condone research on embryos who are intended to reach maturity as children and who might be handicapped by the experiments, nor would he endorse it if, per impossible, embryos could suffer. Their undeveloped nervous systems rule out that possibility.

What does Singer make of the standard claim made in the Hebrew-Christian moral tradition that human beings have a special place in the world, that there is a world of moral difference between a human being and any other creature? The closest that Singer comes to acknowledging the special status of the human embryo is his discussion of potential. Human embryos are indeed potential children but that does not convey on them any special sanctity according to Singer. He argues that "The potential of the embryo should ...make a difference if we have a good reason for wanting to bring into existence the entity that the embryo has the potential to become," as for example if a childless couple is trying to conceive using the embryo. However, if "the embryo is not wanted by the couple from whose gametes it developed," then there is no reason to give it a chance at developing, unless we irrationally believed that there ought to "be more people in the world." Embryos are only valuable if they are valuable to someone who has a reason or desire to bring them into the world. Thus, it is only sensible that such embryos be used freely for research, and even more so if this means that animals will need to be used less.

Singer's conclusion seems odd, however, even if we wish to call the embryo only a potential person and not a person from the moment of conception. If something has the potential to develop into and become a thing of great value, it would normally be valued

even before the time that it comes to realize this potential. For example, if we had a bulb of a rare and valuable species of tulip, the value of the flower it will become would cause us to value the bulb now, perhaps every bit as highly as an adult specimen. It is inconceivable that we could value the tulip but disregard the tulip bulb, or that we could value the living child or adult, but fail to value it in its earlier stages of development into that state.

President Bush's decision has not ended the stem cell debate, of course. Perhaps the most crucial and fundamental debate will be between those with a traditionally, biblically based view of the sacredness and inviolability of human life and those who, like Singer, find no intrinsic value in embryonic human life in comparison with the values that can be promoted by its destruction.

David B. Fletcher, Ph.D.
Chair, Steering Committee of CACE
Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois
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