

Embryos and us

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What respect and protection are owed to the human embryo in its first days of existence? The rise of stem cell research has forced the question. Scientists believe that the stem cells extracted from the earliest stages of the embryo have the capacity to grow into any type of tissue, and that these cells can be used to repair or replace damaged tissue and organs in people suffering from diseases like diabetes, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's.

In the face of such possible uses of humanity's freedom to explore and shape life, what respect is owed to the embryo? It's hard to give an absolute answer. A recently fertilized egg, only a few days old—at which point it is a cluster of 100 to 300 cells, which all together can fit on the head of a pin—does not seem to merit the same respect owed to an embryo with, say, a developed neurological system. Nor does it make sense to call the embryo a person.

On this point, it's significant that most Protestants have approved of the use of in vitro fertilization (IVF) for infertile couples, thereby tacitly accepting a process in which some spare embryos are created. The embryos judged unviable or unnecessary for implantation are eventually discarded. Though some people have qualms about IVF (and the Roman Catholic Church opposes the practice as a violation of natural law), one rarely hears even strict opponents of abortion say that IVF involves the murder of embryos, or argue that every embryo created by IVF must be implanted in a uterus and brought to life.

There appears, then, to be a consensus not only in U.S. society but among Christians that the embryo in its earliest days is something less than a person and may be subject to some manipulation. Given, furthermore, that the excess embryos created by IFV are slated to be discarded, it makes sense to allow these same embryos to be used for research, especially when the research holds the promise of curing devastating diseases.

Yet the question won't go away: What respect is owed to the human embryo? Is the embryo simply one more bit of research material, indistinguishable in kind from

other elements in the chemistry lab? Can the embryo be subject to any use whatsoever? To those questions, the answer must be no. As an entity capable of developing into a fully formed person, the embryo merits special respect. Indeed, once one ponders the matter, the embryo elicits a certain kind of awe. From this we came! The more rudimentary the embryo is, the more miraculous it seems.

Can these two sets of judgments be held together? Can we retain a profound respect for the embryo as God's creation while acknowledging that it is less than a person? Can we avoid regarding the embryo as merely cellular material without claiming that it deserves absolute protection?

In light of the debate over federal regulation of embryo research, one way these two concerns can be joined is to permit stem cell research on embryos taken from storage at fertility clinics, but ban the creation of embryos for the sole purpose of research. It is the latter activity that most threatens to undermine respect for the embryo. By treating the embryo from the start simply as research material, these projects enforce the view that the embryo is just a commodity. By contrast, the embryos stored at fertility clinics were at least intended to be implanted in a uterus and brought to life.

The creation of embryos for research is well under way in private biomedical firms and will continue regardless of President Bush's decision on federal funding. Therefore protection of the embryo requires a legislative ban on such activities. Further steps are also needed to regulate the nature and purposes of embryonic research. (Great Britain, for example, requires that embryos used in research be destroyed after 14 days, the point at which a primitive neurological system emerges.)

Allowing limited research on existing embryos will allow humans to exercise their God-given freedom. Barring embryo manufacturing will help humans avoid the sin of attempting to be God.