Beyond the Impasse to What? Stem cell research may not need human embryos after all. But why are we researching in the first place?

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Stem Cell Research

The human embryonic stem cell debate has been at an impasse since the discovery of the unusual properties of unique precursor cells. In 1998 two teams of privately-funded researchers were able to isolate and culture stem cells from human embryos. Some scientists believe these cells may be used to treat and cure a number of diseases including Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, diabetes, and other afflictions. The problem has been that in the process of harvesting the stem cells the embryos are necessarily destroyed. For many Christians and others, that's simply too high a price to pay for scientific progress.

To make matters more troublesome, in January 1999, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) announced that U. S. tax-dollars might be used to finance embryonic stem cell research, even though there has been a congressional moratorium on federally funded human embryo research since 1994. DHHS's interpretation of the ban has been quite controversial, resulting in congressional hearings on the matter.

Both sides have been at loggerheads because the debate ultimately focuses on the moral status of the human embryo, a topic that has plagued American culture since at least the 1970s. While opponents of human embryonic stem cell research have called for maintaining the ban on such research, they have universally supported other forms of stem-cell research that do not harm embryos.

A report published in the August 14, 2000, Journal of Neuroscience Research, may portend an end to the impasse. According to news reports, Dr. Ira Black of the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey has been able to transform blood stem cells into neurons, which may be used to repair brain cells and spinal cords. In this case, these stem cells were not derived from
embryos, but from adult animals. If this method of deriving stem cells proves successful in humans, then embryos would not have to be destroyed. The use of these cells would also carry the advantage of not being rejected by the immune system of the patient.

Apparently, stem cells are very "plastic" and may be directed to make many different kinds of tissue. If blood stem cells from adults can be directed to make neurons, perhaps they can be directed to make other cells and tissues. We are truly "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14). The flexibility of these cells ought to cause us to worship and serve the Creator more than the creature, because his creation is elegant and magnificent.

We are in the early stages of what may well be revolutionary research. The key to the success of such research will be found in its morality. If research can be conducted ethically, we can all celebrate the benefits of such research and enjoy those benefits with thankfulness. If, on the other hand, treatments are derived from morally illicit sources, like human embryos, then we sacrifice one group of vulnerable human beings for the benefit of other human beings. This would be unconscionable and, as this latest news may indicate, unnecessary for the progress of science.

Of course, this debate also begs us to ask, What's the goal? Why invest in this type of research in the first place? Few people would question the value of curing degenerative illnesses like Alzheimer's or Parkinson's or working to repair the damage caused by spinal injuries like Christopher Reeve's. It seems to me this is reason enough to pursue this kind of research.

Nevertheless, lurking behind the scenes is a not-so-subtle quest for immortality. And a scientific cottage industry is developing to ward off not just age-related diseases, but aging itself.

At a recent conference held at the University of Pennsylvania, several scientists argued that through genetic advances we might be able to extend the human lifespan by 10, 15, or maybe even 150. Would anyone really want to live 150 years? It occurred to me while listening to the arguments at that conference that the answer to that question is not a unequivocal "yes." For the largely affluent, mostly youthful, American audience members present at that conference, most have the kinds of lives they would like to extend. But I recall asking my aging grandmother if she would like to live forever on this earth. Her answer was an enthusiastic "no." She felt she had been here long enough, worked hard enough, and experienced enough of life's troubles to bid a fond adieu to this world and its pains. And could you imagine how a Kosovar refugee might answer that question? Or a beggar in New Delhi? Or a dissident in communist China? Under those conditions one might want to see an end to what Shakespeare called "this mortal coil" that is nearer rather than farther away.

All of this is to say that we must not only attend to the means of scientific research but to its goals as well. Standing just inside the threshold of this new millennium, with all of the tempting technologies it may have to offer, it is more important for us than ever to ask Who are we? and What have we been made for? or, more importantly, For whom have we been made?

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