The Good News and Bad News About Creating Embryos for Research

Post Date: 07/10/2001
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Issues:
Biotechnology
Cloning
Human Dignity
Reproductive Ethics
Research Ethics
Stem Cell Research

There is good news and there is bad news. First, the bad news. Confirming what we knew all along, scientists at the Jones Institute for Reproductive Medicine in Virginia, do not think it is sufficient to do research on human embryos that are "going to die anyway," to follow the popular mantra. They announced 11 July 2001 that they intentionally created human embryos from donor eggs and sperm with the sole purpose of conducting destructive research on those nascent humans.

Previously, researchers had only done experiments using so-called "spare embryos" left over from in vitro fertilization procedures or from embryos harvested through abortions. In the Virginia experiment, the researchers solicited egg and sperm donors, performed IVF to produce the embryos, and then, wantonly destroyed the embryos to harvest their stem cells. It is a bit like grave robbing, only the person being robbed of his or her organs is not dead yet.

According to the journal Fertility and Sterility, the ethics committee hired by the Institute for Reproductive Medicine opined that "the creation of embryos for research purposes was justifiable and that it was our duty to provide humankind with the best understanding of early human development." Under an older and nobler science, researchers studied human development by studying developing humans. Under this new protocol, understanding human development requires the destruction of the developing human. You tell me which method makes more sense.

Moreover, just what ethical theory permits the destruction of one smaller group of human beings for the benefit of a larger, more powerful group of human beings? Utilitarianism. According to the
logic of utilitarianism—the greatest good for the greatest number of people—the lives of a minority may be sacrificed for the benefits of the majority. In this case, it is difficult to imagine a more vulnerable minority than human embryos. They are the tiniest members of the human community and they deserve at least a right not to be unnecessarily harmed. They are genetically unique individuals of the species Homo sapiens, just like you and just like me. They do not look like you and I do today, but they look just like you and I did when we were their age. The notion that someone would bring those embryos into the world for the purposes of research is bone chilling.

It gets worse, I am afraid. The twelve egg donors were paid $1500 to $2000 each, about what the average egg donor gets. The sperm donors were paid about $50 each. So, that means that the destruction of human offspring can pay a month's house mortgage for a woman and dinner for two for a man. How convenient! Let the bartering begin. Human embryos may soon be bought and sold on the market, just as their parts are sold to scientific laboratories all over the world.

Is there any good news? Barely. The good news is this: those who are paying attention will understand that what we have all been saying about the camel's nose being under the tent is, in fact, true. When we opened the moral floodgate to permit human embryonic stem cell experimentation, we let in a host of moral evils. Now, embryos are being created for the purposes of research. Next, we will be told that "quality control" demands that we clone those embryos to ensure that they are all identical. Then, we will be informed that, in order to learn more about human development, of course, we need to bring a human clone to term. Once the utilitarian calculus is operative, there is no turning back. You would have thought we had learned that a half-century ago when a very intelligent, highly technological culture destroyed well over 6 million members of the minority community for the sake of the majority. Their argument was identical to that of the ethics committee in Virginia: "it is our duty to provide the greatest benefits for humankind," only the German doctors had a very narrow definition of humankind. The similarities are simply remarkable. Wisconsin professor of law, Alta Charo, suggests that "if one focuses on the adults' interests, rather than on the moral status of the embryo, then making embryos solely for research is not as odd as it may sound." That sounds a lot like: "if one focuses on the states' interests, rather than on the moral status of the Jews, gypsies, and homosexuals, then using them for destructive research is not as odd as it may sound."

The good news is that some people are "getting it." And not the usual suspects. This report will awaken even the most news-hardened to the horrific logic of scientific utilitarianism. Odd coalitions are building between traditional enemies in the culture wars, including pro-lifers and environmentalists, civil libertarians and social liberals. Even Robert Lanza, head of Advanced Cell Technologies, a biotech firm that has pioneered similar research, understands the implications of this announcement. "This is not good timing," he said. "They are throwing gasoline on the fire." Indeed!
It is time for Americans to get over their infatuation with the fads of scientific research, their scientific illiteracy, and their utilitarian pragmatism. We need to step back, take a deep breath, and have a lengthy discussion about what it means to be human, who counts in the moral equation, and where we are going to let science take us. Make no mistake about it, we are not unwilling pawns in some kind of grand social experiment. We make choices about what we fund, about whose research gets our approval, and about what we will and will not countenance as a society.

The best news in all this may be that the 21st century—the biotech century—will force us to take a long look at who we are, who we want to be, and what we want our children’s children to say about us when we are all gone. Surely we want our legacy to be different that of our German cousins of the 1930s and 1940s.