Stem Cells & Our Moral Culture

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Issues: Stem Cell Research

In the midst of the debate over using embryonic stem cells in research, a more fundamental issue has often been overlooked. It is a reality that will not only affect the outcome of this debate, but of numerous moral quandaries in the days ahead. It is the issue of our moral culture—that is, how we think about and seek to resolve moral issues. Our moral culture is ultimately more significant than is a given moral issue because it directly influences the decisions that are made regarding all such issues. It serves as the lens through which we understand much of life and our sense of goodness, justice and the morally right. It impacts not only individuals' thinking, but the larger cultural ethos and its perspectives on a myriad of moral issues.

If we listen closely to the moral discourse arguing that embryonic stem cells should be employed in medical research, we get a glimpse into the prevailing moral culture of our time. At its heart is a utilitarian calculus, combined with an unlimited emphasis on the virtue of compassion and undergirded by a worldview of what we might call "spiritualistic naturalism."

Utilitarian Calculus

In addition to being a conscious commitment of certain ethicists, utilitarianism is also a subconscious commitment of the masses and a powerful moral impetus that will likely shape thinking and action for years to come. Utilitarianism emerged in the nineteenth century as an attempt to establish the field of ethics as a scientific exercise distinct from religion or any worldview commitments. Contrasting their ethical system with the prevailing "principle ethics" of the day, people like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill argued that the foundation for ethics was consequences of a particular kind: namely, the greatest good (defined as happiness or pleasure) for the greatest number of people. In this formulation, ethics could actually be quantified and freed from dependence on any prior commitment to ethical norms (such as love, justice, or human dignity) or metaphysical outlooks, including religious ones. Here was an ethic for the entire society that could unite all peoples, whatever their religious or worldview
commitments.

When we look at the arguments supporting the use of embryonic stem cells, they invariably incorporate utilitarian sentiments. Using both sophisticated and populist argumentation, proponents contend that the end result of sacrificing embryos to harvest their stem cells would be so overwhelmingly positive for a large number of suffering people that it must be the right thing to do. The moral calculus points to the alleged potential good of treating or healing illnesses such as Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease, or diabetes. According to a commonly-heard argument, without the use of embryonic stem cells critical research cannot move forward, and the amelioration of human suffering and the saving of lives will be thwarted. The end goal of healing justifies the destruction of human embryos to procure stem cells. Healing is regarded as the "greatest good" which will usher in the most happiness or pleasure for the greatest number of people. Therefore, it should be pursued at the expense of embryonic life.

At the popular level the utilitarian argument is evident in the following statement by a 41-year-old man who has fought diabetes for 23 years: "It seems to me that it's an easy choice to make--take a shot at saving lives and making life easier for people" (Associated Press, 7-11-01) The utilitarian calculus is at the heart of a letter from the Association of American Medical Colleges to President Bush. While acknowledging that some people consider embryonic stem cell research to be wrong because of the ethical issues it raises, the AAMC states, "We are persuaded otherwise by what we believe is an equally compelling ethical consideration, namely that it would be tragic to waste the unique potential afforded by embryonic stem cells, destined to be discarded in any case, to alleviate human suffering and enhance the quality of life" (http://www.aamc.org/research/stemcell, 5-10-01).

Utilitarianism, however, has always faced some critical problems and objections. First, it is not at all evident why human happiness or pleasure for the greatest number of people should be regarded as the defining end of moral action. Utilitarianism purports to rely upon an amoral criterion in weighing the consequences of human action, but happiness is hardly an amoral criterion. Second, this approach to ethics argues that the sought end (happiness or pleasure for the greatest number of people) justifies the means of achieving that end. The problem with this is that some means to obtaining this goal are clearly morally suspect. In the late 18th century, Thomas Malthus justified the dying off of large numbers of poor and hungry people for the good end of curbing population growth. Utilitarians assume that no means are problematic as long as the end result justifies them. And third, utilitarianism has to make some difficult factual judgments when it comes to calculating the greatest good for the greatest number. It assumes an objectivity in making this assessment. With regard to embryonic stem cell research, it assumes that embryonic stem cells will prove to have significant therapeutic value; however, this is still only a projection (though not without some warrant given the animal research done thus far). Also of interest is the fact that proponents tend to downplay the potential of adult stem cells, which have already proven to be therapeutic in clinical trials. This should tell us something about the objectivity (or lack thereof) of weighing consequences.

The Virtue of Compassion

The second major approach to defending the use of human embryos for harvesting stem cells
extols the virtue of compassion. Virtue ethics tends to focus less on moral actions and more on internal moral dispositions or character, from which actions naturally flow. For a number of ethical issues today (e.g., abortion, physician-assisted suicide, and homosexuality), compassion as a virtue has become the moral trump card. It is heralded as the virtue above all virtues, for to subjugate compassion to any other moral claim is to exhibit an insensitivity toward and a lack of empathy for others.

With regard to embryonic stem cell research, the public campaign for federal funding was carried primarily by actors such as Christopher Reeve and Michael J. Fox, who utilized media blitzes to appeal to people's passions. Seeing Reeve in his wheelchair hardly evoked solid ethical reflection, but instead moved the masses to feel compassion for him. A letter to President Bush signed by a group of Nobel Laureates urging funding for research with human embryos exalted the virtue of compassion over all other values. While it "recognized the legitimate ethical issues raised by this research," it also asserted that "it would be tragic to waste this opportunity to pursue the work that could potentially alleviate human suffering" (http://www.washingtonpost.com, 2-21-01). Alleviating human suffering strikes a chord in American culture, for in this "happiness-oriented land" we seek above all else to wipe away pain and discomfort. Thus, as one scientist put it, it really is quite simple to decide whether to protect a "mass of cells in a dish" or to protect a "43-year-old father of two" (Quoted by Amy Laura Hall, "Letter to President Bush," 2-23-01).

While appeals to compassion are becoming increasingly common in public debate, regarding compassion as the moral trump card is problematic. Oliver O'Donovan of Oxford University rightly reminds us that the virtue of compassion can never stand alone. "Compassion is the virtue of being moved to action by the sight of suffering.... It is a virtue that circumvents thought, since it prompts us immediately to action. It is a virtue that presupposes that an answer has already been found to the question, 'What needs to be done?'" (Begotten or Made, p. 11). The appeal to compassion overlooks divine givens in which there are inherent meaning and worth within the created realities of this world. Compassion, conversely, brings its own meaning to the suffering situation in such a way that all else becomes secondary, for it appeals primarily to our emotions. Socrates was certainly right when he warned us that ethics cannot be built on emotions--not because they are unimportant, but because they alone cannot be trusted to discover the human right and good within the perils of human finitude and fallenness.

In the final analysis, compassion as the moral trump card is one more example of how our culture seeks to determine what is right, good and just on the basis of what will secure self-enhancement or self-actualization. Of course, compassion should indeed be reflected in the habits and actions of all persons. We can never be indifferent to human need and must in fact seek ethically legitimate solutions to disease and suffering. However, when set apart from the moral givens of a loving, gracious Creator, compassion will lead us to the abyss of moral nihilism.

**Spiritualistic Naturalism**

Underlying all moral principles and virtues is a larger narrative or worldview. Humans never develop their ethical norms in a vacuum, but always in relation to their understandings of transcendence and human nature, perspectives on what is fundamentally wrong in the world, beliefs about how that wrong should be rectified (i.e., salvation), and perceptions of the course of
human history. How we put "our world" together invariably determines which moral principles or virtues we espouse and which ones we reject.

In contemporary American culture, we seem increasingly to be reflecting a worldview that might be termed "spiritualistic naturalism." Though institutional religion may be on the decline, spirituality seems to be flourishing. Indeed many people today say they are not religious, but are deeply spiritual. However, their spirituality is often not grounded in a strong sense of transcendence and divine givens. Rather, it is, as sociologist Robert Wuthnow puts it, "a new spirituality of seeking... [in which people] increasingly negotiate among competing glimpses of the sacred, seeking partial knowledge and practical wisdom" (After Heaven, p. 3). In their search for fleeting moments of sacred encounter, today's spiritualists tend toward a fragmented worldview which bears little resemblance to classical supernaturalism--which holds that God not only created the world, but provided meaning, significance and content to it. There is in the classical theistic worldview a sense that God has spoken and that we must therefore respond by seeking life's full meaning and the morally good.

In contrast, spiritualistic naturalism functions without recourse to moral and world-view givens, seeking instead experiences that engender a sense of spirituality with minimal content, essence, and direction. In spiritualistic naturalism, meaning is self-made and moral direction is derived from within a self that defines the good, the right, and the just. Subjectivity takes the place of providential design and direction. It is a naturalism in that functional transcendence plays no meaningful role in the moral direction of people's lives, but it is a spiritualism in that spiritual experiences that evoke a sense that people are not alone in this world--and that enhance their selfhood and compassion for others--are sought. Utilitarianism flows from the naturalistic side of this worldview and compassion from its spiritualistic side.

Thus, in the moral discourse about embryonic stem cells the utilitarian calculus and the virtue of compassion emerge out of this particular worldview. The well-being of human embryos has for many taken a backseat to the greatest happiness of the whole, precisely because of an ethos that minimizes inherent meaning in life and the existence of God-given directives. Compassion has become the moral trump card because it is an emotional response that reflects the "fleeting moments" spirituality of our time.

Spiritualistic naturalism may well be the emerging worldview of Western culture. Unlike old naturalisms it seeks a spiritual ethos, albeit one in which God is functionally absent in the formation of moral character and the adjudication of moral decisions. Because of its spirituality, this form of naturalism tends to blind us to its true reality--a worldview in which the human subject reigns supreme and becomes the ultimate arbiter of the good, the just, and the right. It is this worldview which tends to render moral issues amoral, as when Panayiotis Zavos, the aspiring cloner, told Time magazine, "Ethics is a wonderful word, but we need to look beyond the ethical issues here [with regard to cloning]. It's not an ethical issue. It's a medical issue. We have a duty here. Some people need this to complete the life cycle, to reproduce" (Time 2-19-01, p. 50). Similar sentiments have led the masses of our culture to embrace the use of embryonic stem cells for the greater good--out of a sense of compassion--precisely because there are no perceived providential renderings to order our lives.

This is the ethos in which we now find ourselves. We must recognize it for what it is and bear
witness to a better way.

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