

Embryonic Stem Cell Research: Hope or Hazard?

Moralists at times analyze the ethical implications of laws and public policies by mapping out "the slippery slope" or "wedge" argument." As a tool for interpreting the fallout from the moral logic of a position, the "slippery slope" approach can be helpful in moral disputes carried on in the public order, especially in circumstances where there are no shared principles on the inherent morality of a given practice.

In actuality, this metaphor describes reasoning about the possibility of "drawing lines" in the light of the far-reaching social impact of a specific policy in the future. *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics* offers an abstract explanation of "slippery slope" reasoning: "Accepting the act in question would cross a line that has already been drawn, and once that line has been crossed, it will not be possible logically or practically to draw it again to preclude terrible acts or practices."

For instance, in public disputes about the legalization of euthanasia, evidence for opposing "mercy-killing" can be garnered from the experience of the Netherlands that "voluntary euthanasia" will inevitably lead to "involuntary euthanasia."

In other words, will the legalization of physician-assisted suicide or euthanasia be restricted to terminally ill patients? If so-called "mercy-killing" were justified on the basis of a principle such as "privacy", it is doubtful that in the long run the legal line could be limited to terminally ill patients only. Or, a dynamic other than a flawed principle might come into play. The cultural ethos, e.g. a pervasive denial of death and aging, a cultural incapacity to find meaning in suffering, might weaken legal boundaries and expand the right to euthanasia beyond dying patients to individuals who are depressed or chronically ill.

Then, too, in bioethical matters, the "technological imperative" reigns ---"If it can be done, then it ought to be done." Science outside a moral framework can engender a mentality that views research as a value-free enterprise.

In making the moral case against cloning-for-biomedical-research, the majority opinion of members on the President's Council on Bioethics adopts some of the most persuasive and convincing features of "slippery slope" thinking.

First of all, in the considered judgment of the majority, support for banning cloning- for-biomedical-research is grounded in the recognition of society's responsibility towards the human embryo. Scientific and humanistic premises

argue against the early-stage embryo's being reduced to "simply the moral equivalent of all other human cells." As a result, to evaluate nascent human life as mere "biological material" rejects "the continuous history of human individuals from zygote to fetus to infant to child."

Hence, the intent to use human embryos for biomedical research risks conditioning researchers "either to ignore the truth of our own continuing personal histories from their beginning in embryonic life or to weaken our commitment to human equality that has been so slowly and laboriously developed in our cultural history."

After addressing the respect and rights due to the human embryo on the part of society, a second question is raised, namely, "*What we owe to society.*"

In this section, there is a strong presumption that there exist "powerful reasons to worry about where this research will lead us."

Opponents to cloning-for-biomedical-research can set forth "sound ethical-prudential reasons to refrain using embryos for utilitarian purposes," even if advocates for such research are uncertain about the moral status of the embryo. The perceived "insignificance" of the embryo paradoxically questions the humanity of the community, not that of the embryo.

The majority position then probes three issues which predictably "would harm our common life" as well as the heritage passed on to future generations. One serious concern revolves around opening "the door to other ...moral hazards, such as cloning-to-produce- children or research on later-stage human embryos and fetuses."

Since "horrible diseases" will remain a constant in the human condition, it is more than likely that research on embryonic human life could become so routine that a further numbing of reverence for unborn human life at all stages would be a sure bet. After all, a society which has lost its sense of moral outrage towards late term abortions and virtual infanticide would hardly take scandal at the destruction of embryonic or fetal life at stages much later than preimplantation.

In addition, the temptation to expand the research on embryos from the early stages of embryonic life to later phases of development might be overpowering. For the logic, which justifies destruction of human life in its earliest phase of development easily, evolves its own legs and begins to skip, then gallop, down the "slippery slope."

Misguided good intentions and growing pressures to discover cures will unharness scientific power, which ultimately will further dehumanize and

coarsen moral sensitivities of common social life and, in turn, erode respect for the equality of all humans.

After a sustained and principled exploration of these consequences, the majority opinion of the President's Council on Bioethics warns that "(w)e should not be self- deceived about our ability to set limits on the exploitation of nascent life." Without a stop light banning embryonic-cloning-for-biomedical-research, any yellow caution lights proposed by advocates of ESCR will become green lights for more moral hazards.

Religiously rooted beliefs on respect for the continuum of human life from conception to birth and to natural death also disclose the reality of the human good. Spelling out the social impact of ESCR can support a helpful interplay between religion, science, and the public good on some common ground.

The Catholic moral tradition stipulates that destruction of human embryos for the sake of research is morally wrong. As Richard Doerflinger has testified, such a practice is immoral "because it treats this distinct human being, with his or her own inherent moral worth, as nothing more than a disposable instrument for someone else's benefit."

In a paper delivered in February 2003, Bishop William Friend of Shreveport, La. identified a bedrock principle defended from the origins of Christianity to this day: "the embryo is a human being." In light of that continuous moral tradition, Bishop Friend states that "(i)n the moral order, the unborn child is considered a person because *he*/she possesses the same dignity of an innocent human being ..."

In *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), Pope John Paul II emphatically declared that "*direct abortion willed as an end or as a means, always constitutes a grave moral disorder.*" (EV n. 62). The prohibition against the killing of an innocent human being also applies "to recent forms of *intervention on human embryos* which, although carried out for purposes legitimate in themselves, inevitably involve the killing of those embryos." (EV n. 63) Experimentation on human embryos or fetuses "constitutes a crime against their dignity as human beings who have a right to the same respect owed to a child once born, just as to every person."

Catholic moral doctrine rejects both cloning-for-reproduction and cloning-for-biomedical-research as morally unacceptable.

Embryonic Stem Cell Research: Mercy Feigned, Not Found

The June 8 (2003) edition of the Chicago Tribune published an op-ed piece written by Gilbert Meilaender, a professor of Christian ethics at Valparaiso University. In "Arguing honestly about stem cells," the noted Protestant theologian tackled several specious arguments, often uncritically assumed to be valid, in support of embryonic stem cell research for therapeutic purposes (ESCR).

One common "disingenuous argument" misconstrues opposition to ESCR as the moral equivalent of responsibility for the continued suffering of persons afflicted with severe diseases or disabilities such as Parkinson's disease or spinal cord injuries. In this view, rejecting ESCR on moral grounds a priori throws one in to the ranks of "the anti-compassion party." Hence, such insensitivity to human suffering brands opponents of ESCR with the guilt of the proverbial "innocent bystander."

Meilaender questions the circular reasoning entailed in the justification of ESCR for the relief of suffering in the name of the weak and vulnerable. He challenges: "... we need less rhetoric and more argument explaining why the embryos all of us once were are not plausibly characterized as the weakest and most vulnerable of human beings."

A second deceptive impression propagandized in favor of ESCR is the unrealistic promise held out for a present cure for devastating diseases and disabilities. For example,

Meilaender notes that there is no present cure for Parkinson's stemming from "research hardly even begun."

Meilaender targets the inescapable seriousness underlying part of the societal debate about ESCR, for at bottom it is a controversy about "who belongs to that society." This public discussion is ultimately one concerning the common good, the commonweal that touches and promotes human flourishing for every man and woman.

Meilaender identifies the dilemma in terms of fundamental questions about the moral status of the human embryo: Can the human embryo be manipulated as a means to an end or is the embryo "the weakest stage of the human life we all share, not to be used solely as a means in self-interested projects?"

Gilbert Meilaender serves as a member of the President's Council on Bioethics. His personal religious and philosophical stance supports banning all embryo cloning.

However, the deliberations of the President's Council as a whole reached consensus for a moratorium of four years, thus halting cloning-for-biomedical-research by a majority vote of ten members (out of 17). Even though the proposal failed to recommend a permanent ban on ESCR, it did for the interim effect a consensus regarding a ban on cloning-to-produce-children as well as a temporary hiatus on cloning-for-biomedical-research.

The moral case against cloning-for-biomedical-research set forth a multipronged rationale against ESCR. One of the counterarguments specifically addresses the implications of what society owes to the suffering. The majority position reaches common ground in admitting that "it would be less than human to turn a blind eye to those who suffer and need relief, or to stand silent in the face (especially) of suffering and premature death." But, lack of mercy would be an unfair evaluation of the Majority Recommendation. That judgment is a misreading of the crux of their argument, namely, that "for very strong moral reasons, medical progress must come by means that do not involve the production, use, and destruction of cloned embryos and that do not reduce nascent human life to a resource for our exploitation."

The refusal to use an immoral means to attain a desirable end does not entail the "guilt of causing that suffering." In other words, the refusal to engage in complicity with an immoral practice is not an indictment of responsibility for causing human suffering.

Otherwise, the logical consequences of complicity in moral wrong would be tantamount to a capitulation of conscience to ethical extortion and becoming entrapped as a "moral hostage."

The Majority Recommendation does not view the relief of suffering as the highest human good. On the contrary, there is a prospect that the values of "health and longer life" will be undermined in the long run "if we care only for how long we live, and not also for how we live."

The consensus of the majority crafted a hypothetical response to the charges of failing to help future sufferers of disease and disability. Their response reflects an admirable moral wisdom. The dialogue reads: "Yes, perhaps so. But we would have done so only by destroying, in the present, the sort of world in which both we and you want to live ---a world in which, as best we can, we respect the human life and human individuals, the weak and the strong." The text goes on to state that bequeathing relief of suffering for future generations is a noble goal but it cannot be achieved at the cost of "stepping across boundaries that are essential to our humanity."

Accordingly, a necessary part of that heritage to be handed on to the future is "a world that honors moral limits, a world in which the good of some lives is not entirely subordinated to the good of others, a world in which we seek to express, as best we can, the time each human being has and the place each fills."

In reference to ESCR, Richard Doerflinger, associate director for policy development of the Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, has written that "intentional destruction of innocent human life at any stage is inherently evil, and no good consequences can mitigate that evil."

Catholic moral doctrine on this question is explicitly treated in Pope John Paul II's encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life, 1995). The Holy Father firmly condemns scientific procedures which exploit human embryos or fetuses as " 'biological material' or as providers of organs and tissues for transplants in the treatment of certain diseases."

In reference to such practices, Pope John Paul II declares that "(t)he killing of innocent human creatures, even if carried out to help others, constitutes an absolutely unacceptable act." (EV n.63)

The Catechism of the Catholic Church simply quotes *Donum Vitae*, the 1987 Vatican instruction dealing with bioethics and reverence for life: "It is immoral to produce human embryos intended for exploitation as disposable biological material." (CCC n.2275. See DV I, 5)

To reverse Portia's declamation on mercy in *The Merchant of Venice*, "The quality of mercy ...ought to be strained..." by moral boundaries when justice is violated in the name of mercy.