



Theology, or Embryology?

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Embryonic stem cell researchers typically marshal several arguments to encourage public approval of their research, which requires the direct destruction of 5-7 day old human embryos. One argument runs like this:

"Well, your religious sentiments about embryos are different than mine, and we're all entitled to our own opinions."

This misguided argument has embedded itself in the modern American mind to a remarkable degree, and has been used quite effectively to justify embryonic sacrifice by many researchers. At its root, it takes a scientific question and turns it into a religious one. Once it falls into the category of religious mystagogy, it can be dismissed out-of-hand as irrelevant to public policy and discourse. Embryonic stem cell researcher Dr. Doug Melton at Harvard took just such a tack when he spoke with the New York Times a few years ago:

"This is all about differing religious beliefs. I don't believe I have the right to tell others when life begins. Science doesn't have the answer to that question; it's metaphysical."

With that sleight of hand, he sought to transform embryology into theology.

Of course, the statement: "a human embryo is a human kind of being" does not depend on religion any more than does the statement: "a cow embryo is a cow kind of being." Science, quite apart from any dogmatic religion, affirms dogmatically that human embryos are human beings, rather than zebra or cow beings. Science, quite apart from religious dogma, affirms dogmatically that every person walking around in the world was once an embryo. This absolute scientific dogma admits of no exceptions. So while science makes it clear that human embryos are *human* beings, religion steps in *after* that fact to speak to the question of whether it is correct that all human beings should be treated in the same way, or whether it is OK to discriminate against some in the interests of others. Yet even here, religion is not necessary to understand the real moral issue. For example, we don't need religion to understand that discriminating against some classes of humans based on their skin color is wrong. Similarly, we don't need religion to understand that

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discriminating against some classes of humans based on their size or young age is wrong. To grasp these truths, all we need is some honesty and a moment of clear thinking.

Embryos, of course, are remarkably unfamiliar to us. They lack hands and feet. They don't have faces or eyes for us to look into. They look nothing like what we expect when we imagine a human being. But they are as human as you and me. When we look at a scanning electron micrograph of a human embryo, a small cluster of cells, sitting on the point of a sewing pin, we need to ask ourselves a very simple question: "Isn't that exactly what a young human is supposed to look like?" The correct answer to that question doesn't depend on religion or theology, but on embryology. Embryos seem unfamiliar to us on first glance, and we have to make an explicit mental effort to avoid the critical mistake of disconnecting from who we once were ourselves as embryos.

I remember flying in an airplane one time, seated a couple of rows away from a mother who was holding her newborn baby as he was crying loudly. The pressure changes in the cabin seemed to be causing terrible pain in his ears, and despite his

mom's best efforts, he continued to cry uncontrollably. His little 4 year old sister was in the next seat, and she was also trying to help her mom to calm the boy down, but again, to no avail. After a few minutes, an agitated passenger across the aisle blurted out to the mother, "Isn't there something you can do to shut up that baby?" There was an awkward moment where the young mother started to blush, and didn't know what to say, when suddenly her daughter turned to the man and said, "Hey mister, you were once like him." The man seemed to be caught off guard by the little girl's rejoinder, and he calmed down for the rest of the flight. Her impeccable logic reminded him where he came from, and even managed to put him in his place. It demonstrated how all of us, even in our weakest moments, are deserving of respect. When the flight landed, I heard him offer a brief apology to the mother for his outburst against the helpless baby. In debates about embryos, when apparently learned men like Dr. Melton at Harvard begin discussing these tiny, helpless human creatures, they would likewise do well to ponder the little girl's rejoinder: "Hey mister, you were once like him."

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