

FUNDING EMBRYO DESTRUCTION VERSUS ABORTION

Several prominent anti-abortion politicians, including Orrin Hatch and Bill Frist, joined the Senate majority in endorsing the public funding of embryonic stem cell research. To the casual observer it might appear that the arguments against abortion must be stronger than those against publicly funding the destruction of embryos. This conclusion, however, would be mistaken. The funding of destructive embryo research is actually worse than legal abortion.

Some might disagree, arguing that the continuing identity of a developing being means that embryo research cannot be better *or* worse than abortion. The politicians are wrong to say it is not as bad as abortion, but it is also wrong to say that it is worse. "All stages of life are stages of the same being. Each of us was once a human embryo. Each of us is just a human embryo that has grown up. And we have been alive the whole time we have been growing and developing—that is, since fertilization. If one of us had been killed at any time before we were born, a human life would have been lost. So abortion and lethal research on embryos are equally bad."

Others might argue that, if there is any difference, abortion is the worse of the two. For abortion involves not only killing but betrayal. In abortion, parents destroy an unborn child entrusted to them, who depends on them, a child whom they have a moral duty to nurture. By contrast, the scientist who dissects an embryo is not harming his own offspring. He wrongs life, but not necessarily the family. So how can one possibly contend that embryo research is worse?

Dehumanization

Let us take a closer look. Someone choosing abortion need not be completely set against life. She typically does not want abortion with all of her heart. Rather, she is filled with desperation and panic. She often has been, or fears she may be, abandoned or harmed by one or more persons whom she herself has trusted. Even if her fears are not so great that moral culpability is absent, she is not fully an enemy of her unborn child. She may profoundly regret what she feels compelled to do. If only the circumstances were better, if only she had enough support, she would let her child live.

The abortion provider, of course, is not under such duress. He is not pressured by circumstances to perform abortions. And yet, in a sense, he too is only contingently against new life. He performs abortions only because his clients ask him to do them. By contrast, for the sake of future cures, the scientist seeking funding for embryonic stem cell research is eager to destroy life—and convince the public to pay for it. His lethal aim is not even contingent in the sense that "if only there were another possible route to cures," no embryo killing would occur. There is, in fact, a shorter route, via adult stem cells. Would-be embryo researchers demand to be carried by the public down the longer and more uncertain path.

Moreover, almost all abortions aim to preclude an "unwanted child." Of course, this is profoundly contrary to the care owed by parents, as has been mentioned. But abortion paradoxically reaffirms the very parent-child bond that it betrays. The fetus is unwanted precisely as a child who must eventually be cared for by her parents. They fear and reject her *because* she is their own offspring. Because she is their child, they feel a duty to care for her if she

lives. Therefore, so that they may escape this duty, she must die. Both a parental relationship and a parental obligation are acknowledged by the act of abortion. Therein lies its tragedy.

Embryonic stem cell research, by contrast, is wholly dehumanizing. When parents turn the living human embryos they have begotten over to science, they not only forget them as children but also turn them into commodities, donate them for eventual body parts. The embryos become wholly instrumental, they become resources to be calculated and consumed. They are degraded before they are destroyed. Like human embryos created by cloning, they do not die as unwanted children, or even as human beings, but as things to be used and used up. No greater negation of human dignity is possible.

The End of Choice

Lastly, tax-funded embryonic stem cell research is worse than legal abortion for our public community. Legalizing abortion is not quite the same as desiring abortion. It is logically possible, even if unjust, for a legislature to be both anti-abortion and pro-choice, just as people could once be anti-apartheid and yet defer to the sovereignty of South Africa.

By contrast, no one in favor of funding embryonic stem cell research can say "I'm not for killing embryos. I'm just pro-choice." Such legislators want human embryos to be dissected. Stems cells must be extracted. In states like California and New Jersey, where embryonic stem cell extraction is funded by the public, the law can no longer be labeled even euphemistically "pro-choice."

Even where abortion is publicly funded, the government does not insist on death. No officials are angry if funds previously allocated to subsidize abortion are left unused because women have freely chosen life. The abortion-related equivalent of embryonic stem cell funding would involve using taxes to pay women to abort their children, as part of scientific experiments aimed at distant and uncertain cures.

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