

The Intricate Debate: Embryonic Stem Cell Research: Medical Ethics Versus Christian Ethics and the Political Role

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Introduction

The controversy over embryonic stem cell research has avid proponents and detractors on both the medical and religious fronts. There are various worldviews on this topic, coming from those within the medical world, whose ethics lead them in support of embryonic stem cell research, as well as those coming from the Christian religion, which lead them in opposition. At the heart of this controversy is the argument of when the embryo becomes a human. When it comes to science and medicine, there seems to be no exact and agreed definition for when this transformation into human life occurs, instead there are a few common theories. The medical viewpoint has presented “timelines” for this process involving the evolution of various physical features; whereas, the Christian belief is that of which an embryo becomes a human when he or she receives a soul. However, recently there has been controversy within Christian ethics, due to different views on the timing of ensoulment. Traditional Christians, valuing their sacred church and Bible teachings, believe that ensoulment occurs at conception; therefore they consider the embryo a human from the very beginning. The more liberal Christians, unlike the traditional, believe that the embryo receives its soul at a certain point during pregnancy, therefore claiming that there are ethical justifications for experimenting on embryos. Adding to this conflict is the political viewpoint. There are two views in particular that have had an impact on governmental policy in both the past and the future, those of George W. Bush and Barak Obama, respectively I will be exploring the reasons behind Bush’s opposition towards funding projects involving the study of embryonic stem cell research, along with the reasoning behind Obama’s support on the topic. Do their views rely on medical ethics or religious ethics? Bush, who objects to the research, based his decision on personal religious ethics; whereas, Obama based his decision to support the research on nothing other than scientific facts that might eventually lead to benefitting many Americans. Through my research, and mainly with the help of theoretical framework, I have broken down each viewpoint and have inferred that it is plausible to conclude that embryonic stem cell research will eventually be proved ethical.

Embryonic stem cell research, although according to some religious beliefs is deemed unethical, is in fact socially ethical. By socially ethical I mean that eventually majority of the society will support this research. This idea is supported by Pinker’s

theory, Law of Conservation of Morality. As mentioned previously, within Christianity there has been a replacement of moral beliefs, where Christians in the past have been seen as one of the major protesters against destructive research on embryos. This recent shift in beliefs, that newer Christians are not against embryonic stem cell research under certain circumstances, suggest that as time goes on the number of people who are against the research will slowly decrease and eventually begin to believe otherwise. If a group of the most passionate opponents against this research have adjusted their views, then why not the rest of society? Research in the medical field is very beneficial in that it can lead us to various understandings and cures of diseases, and if the majority of society can come to the conclusion when an embryo becomes a human, then embryonic stem cell research might not be so controversial. However, there will always be people who disagree with the majority of people. That is where another question comes into play, what should government's role be? When it comes to the political world, Obama's approach at making laws based on knowledge is more beneficial due to the sole reason that there are various views and opinions out there and not everyone will be pleased if based on one specific religious or moral belief. That is why Patrick Devlin's theory of Legal Moralism is significant. The law suggests that whoever is in charge at the time will determine the society's morality and therefore enforce society's collective morality. Bush based his decision off of his religious/moral belief that is not the best scenario for this specific situation because throughout American society there are various views on the topic. Obama's decision, based on knowledge in this case, is the necessary approach. CBS News polling helps support Obama's ideas by stating in the article, "Obama Ends Stem Cell Research Ban," that when asked in 2007, sixty five percent of people answered that they support embryonic stem cell research. Therefore he not only "determines the society's morality" by a knowledgeable approach, but by doing so was also able to please the majority of society and therefore is "determining the society's morality" by already using the majority of societies moral beliefs. With that being said, I claim that embryonic stem cell research, if not now, will eventually be socially ethical.

Theoretical Framework

Embryonic stem cell research is a very complex, multidimensional topic but it can be easily broken down with the help of a theoretical framework. When defining the reasoning for the split between traditional Christians and liberal Christians, The Law of Conservation of Morality will be useful. The law, introduced in Harvard psychologist, Steven Pinker's article, "Moral Instinct", which appeared in Times Magazine, is a brief

explanation of how what is morally accepted changes throughout time and how new behaviors are replacing old behaviors when it comes to moral acceptance, and that is exactly what happens within Christianity. “In fact there seems to be a law of conservation of moralization, so that as old behaviors are taken out of the moralized column, new ones are added to it” (Pinker). When it comes to the topic of embryonic stem cell research, the traditional Christian belief that the research is absolutely wrong because of ensoulment at conception is replaced, in the minds’ of some, by the newer idea that embryonic stem cell research can be justified under certain circumstances because ensoulment occurs later in the pregnancy. The traditional Christian belief is not seen as unethical now, but rather the fact that is important is that as society progressed there have been Christians who have replaced this moral belief with a new one.

When defining politics role in this research, Legal Moralism, coined by the famous legal moralist Patrick Devlin, is a theory that comes into play.

Legal moralism is the view that the law can legitimately be used to prohibit behaviors that conflict with society’s collective moral judgments even when those behaviors do not result in physical or psychological harm to others. According to this view, a person’s freedom can legitimately be restricted simply because it conflicts with society’s collective morality; thus, legal moralism implies that it is permissible for the state to use its coercive power to enforce society’s collective morality (Himma).

The theory, appearing in the “Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy,” suggests that whoever is in charge at the time will have the power to decide whether to ban funding of embryonic stem cell research and instead of determining this by using the majority of society’s belief they will determine this by using their own beliefs. Therefore, this implies that it is permissible for government to enforce society’s collective morality. Bush and Obama will be two important leaders when attempting to comprehend this role. As stated previously Bush bans the research and Obama lifts the ban on the research, both using their power to determine what is socially acceptable despite what society’s collective moral judgment leans towards.

Important Definition

To understand the debate over embryonic stem cell research, it is important to understand what exactly embryonic stem cells are, how they are obtained, and how they can benefit humans. James Bryant gives us insight on this topic in his book,

Fundamentals of the Stem Cell Debate: The Scientific, Religious, Ethical, and Political Issues:

Stem cells are undifferentiated cells found in the embryos and the later life stages of animals, including humans. They are recognized by their dualistic nature: they either can expand their numbers (self-renew) while remaining undifferentiated or can differentiate and contribute to the development on repair of tissues of the body. (Bryant 10)

For embryonic stem cell research, specifically in this paper, it is most important to understand that with these abilities the cells may be able to lead to the treatment or cure of various diseases Every individual started out as a one-celled animal which then developed into a multi-celled human embryo, also known as a blastocyst, which forms about five to six days after conception. However, the embryo has the ability to split for up to fourteen days after being conceived, which means for the first fourteen days of pregnancy it is unknown whether there will be a single embryo or multiple embryos (Bryant 8). Scientists think that these cells are believed to be able to heal various life threatening diseases. People suffering from cardiovascular disease, autoimmune disease, type 1 and type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis, certain cancers, Alzheimer's disease, and Parkinson's disease, may be cured from these stem cells. It is believed that about 100 million people in the United States might be able to benefit from the use of these particular stem cells (Goldstein 98).

The Controversy within Christian Ethics

The recent change in Christian ethics helps prove my conclusion that embryonic stem cell research will eventually be considered socially ethical. Christianity, traditionally is known to be a religion strongly against embryonic stem cell research because of their belief that the embryo becomes a human with ensoulment, and this ensoulment occurs at conception. Their sacred text, The Bible, defends this position by informing us of God's role in this process. In the Old Testament, verse five of the Call of Jeremiah reads, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations"(Jeremiah 1:5). Followers of Christianity interpret this verse to mean that the embryo is a human from the very beginning. The verse suggests that God intends for every embryo/fetus/child to be in their mother's womb, he not only creates each embryo but he has a different plan for each as well. Therefore, to kill an embryo, whether it be for research purposes or not, whom God has given a soul to with the intentions of giving them a life and a purpose, would be

considered homicide. This idea is supported by David Albert Jones in his article, “The Appeal to the Christian Tradition in the Debate about Embryonic Stem Cell Research,” when characterizing destroying the embryo, “not only as a sin, but as ‘murder’ (phoneuseis) that is, as the deliberate and unjustified killing of a human being (cf. Matthew 19.18, Mark 10.19)” (Jones 5).

However, there are Christians who do not necessarily believe that embryonic stem cell research is completely unethical, I call these people liberal Christians. According to Dave Albert Jones in his article, he believes that these liberal Christians have evolved in the nineteenth century (Jones 3). As previously stated, the Law of Conservation of Morality helps explain this shift in Christian beliefs; the law suggests that as society advances, old morals are thrown out the window and replaced with new ones (Pinker). This is relevant because the liberal Christians believe in certain justifications when it comes to embryonic stem cell research, in some cases deeming it ethical. Like traditional Christians, they believe the embryo becomes a human when it receives its soul, however they believe that this ensoulment is delayed. According to Mark Johnson’s article, “Delayed Hominization,” Liberal Christians are following the views of Christian theologians. They claim that ensoulment does not occur until around fourteen days after conception because of the cell’s ability of twinning or cleavage, which is basically a separation. So at the early zygote stage, it is not definite that it will become a single organism. Johnson then goes on to explain how this is religious and not just biology by stating, “God’s infusion of the rational soul requires it to be the form of a single, determined body” (Johnson 745). Therefore meaning that ensoulment cannot occur until the single body is formed, which is again about fourteen days following conception. This belief system, adopted by the liberal Christians, emphasizes how morals are being replaced even in a religion as extreme as Christianity and therefore implies that society will follow in their footsteps and eventually support embryonic stem cell research, if not fully, then with certain justifications.

The Various Opinions of Medical Ethics

On the opposite end of the spectrum lies medical ethics, which leave embryologists and scientists in favor of embryonic stem cell research. Where the Christian view on an embryo’s shift into humanity relies on ensoulment, the medical view bases its argument on a physical “timeline.” However there are various opinions when it comes to this “timeline.” Norman M. Ford, author of *When Did I Begin*, notes that when it comes down to it, it is a known fact in science that the human life begins at conception, when

the sperm and the egg meet a human life begins to develop (Ford 104). If this is scientifically proven, then why is the medical world in favor of embryonic stem cell research? Ford goes on to explain how although the human life does begin at conception, the life is not necessarily considered a valuable human life. This theory is supported by Lawrence S.B. Goldstein and Oyvind Baune in their works. Goldstein is a biomedical scientist who is interested on curing diseases. He believes, like many other scientists, that embryonic stem cell research is necessary to find the cures for various diseases, and therefore favors the research. In his article, "Political Issues in the Stem Cell Debate: The View from California" in the book *Fundamentals of the Stem Cell Debate: The Scientific, Religious, Ethical and Political Issues*, Goldstein portrays his thoughts on the medical timeline, "The blastocyst is a hollow ball of cells that develops a few days after fertilization and has no organs such as a heart or nervous system" (Goldstein 99). Goldstein then goes on to explain how something with this make up of no organs, which are necessary for life, cannot be considered a valuable human life just yet. In Oyvind Baune's, "The Moral Status of Human Embryos with Special Regards to Stem Cell Research and Therapy," he outlines the various medical beliefs to the question when the embryo is considered a valued human life. One view mentions that the implantation of the embryo in the uterus is not complete until day twelve, leaving it no moral status until then (Baune 4). Another view would be that the embryo is not a human until the first visual signs of organ formation, which occurs at about day fourteen and continues until approximately day fifty, which is when the main organs and structures of the embryo are present. Some scientist argue that an embryo does not hold moral status until the fourteenth day when there are signs of organs, and there are others who believe that it gains status when organ development is complete (Baune 3). Another conflict is the debate that a human must be an individual and that the cells, until day fourteen, have the ability to divide or split and therefore generate twins (Baune 8). That being said, there are scientists who believe that embryos have no moral status until they can be considered an "individual." The first signs of brain activity are measured after that fifty day period of when the organs are fully developed. "By definition the embryo period ends eight weeks/two months (56-60 days) after fertilization, at which time the embryo is 23-26mm in size" (Baune 3). Baune mentions that this is the belief of majority of scientists, after the point in which brain activity starts, the embryo has complete moral status, and therefore deserves the rights to be protected. Although there are many different medical views on when an embryo can be considered a valuable human being with moral status

according to features, clearly this view greatly differs from the Christian view of ensoulment. However, because their view is based on fact, fortunately for the medical world, as long as they continue to experiment and improve health with the use embryonic stem cells, their work is expected to gain support.

The Political Role

When it comes to the political role in embryonic stem cell research, the big question is: “Do government laws and/or funding depend on religious and moral beliefs or on scientific knowledge? And if it does depend on religious and moral beliefs, then whose?” Legal Moralism is an important concept when explaining the role of political ethics in embryonic stem cell research. This theory, proposed by Devlin, proves that political ethics basically control what goes on in society. Legal Moralism is the theory implying that laws may be used to either require or prohibit certain behaviors based on whether or not society’s collective moral belief is that the behavior is moral or immoral (Devlin). However, the theory states that it is permissible for the government to enforce society’s morality, meaning that whoever is in charge will determine, based on their own beliefs, whether embryonic stem cell research is ethical or not and should be funded or not.

President Bush was opposed to embryonic stem cell research, based on personal beliefs, and therefore banned all federal funding for the research under his presidency. When it comes to Bush, Carter O. Snead supports the concept of Legal Moralism in his article, “Public Bioethics and the Bush Presidency.” This article explores the large impact that former U.S. President George W. Bush had on bioethics. During his administration, Bush was opposed to the idea of embryonic stem cell research and banned all federal funding after 2001. He justified his bioethics policy by stating, “One particular grounding good [is]: respect for the intrinsic and fundamental equality of all human beings” (Snead 869). He also often repeated that the purpose of government is to protect the weak from the strong; in this case the embryo would clearly be the weak. Bush believed in the equality of all human beings, despite the age, size, strength, etc. He supported biomedical research, but he strived to find the line between “profound respect for the fundamental equality of every human being and vigorous support for biomedical research and the healing arts” (Snead 874). Whether embryonic stem cell research is morally permissible depends on the status of the embryo, when it is destroyed. Bush holds a high respect for the embryo, and believes others should as well, despite its lack of “capacity or characteristics.” Making these decisions based on his own moral and religious beliefs was a large mistake. Bush held back America’s opportunity of advancement in the field.

Although he banned all funding, however he did allow research to continue on the twenty-one stem cell lines that had been created before his ban on the issue, since technically they were able to renew forever. Unfortunately for these scientists, it was difficult to make any sort of progress with these preexisting stem cell lines. Dr. Lorenz Studer, a stem cell biologist, states in CBS article, Debrief: The Embryonic Stem Cell Debate:

The problem, says Studer, is that every time cell divides, ‘there is a chance it accumulates defects – it's not always a perfect copy of itself.’ So the 21 lines are eventually of less and less use. In addition, the lines made before 2001 were not created with the benefit of the advances of the last few years, and are not as well designed for laboratory use as more recent lines. (Montopoll)

This article goes on to show us that Bush did want the research to benefit Americans but his limits had a major effect on the future of our country when it comes to embryonic stem cell research and the benefits that could come out of it. Although he has strong beliefs on the subject, Bush is basing his decision to ban research on his beliefs, which will not work in America.

Barack Obama, unlike Bush, relied on knowledge to make his decision rather than moral or religious beliefs. The CBS news article called “Obama Ends Stem Cell Research Ban,” is a record of President Obama’s lifting of the Bush administration’s limits on human embryonic stem cell research before a large audience in support. Obama states that he will “‘make scientific decisions based on facts, not ideology’” (CBS). He understands that embryonic stem cell research is strongly opposed by some because of the destruction of the human embryo in the process, but that is not the point of view of most Americans. Obama states that majority of Americans want to pursue this research because of the major health benefits that can come out of it. According to a CBS News Polling, “In 2007, the last time CBS News asked the question, sixty-five percent said they approved compared to twenty-five percent who disapproved. The number of those who approved had gone up steadily since the 2004 when fifty percent approved” (CBS). This is where again, Legal Moralism comes in. Obama in charge is able to determine society’s collective morality. Using knowledge, which is less controversial than religion, he agrees with the majority of Americans and therefore lifts the ban on embryonic stem cell research. Not only does his choice reflect the majority of Americans, but it is a great relief to scientists, who believe that only good can come out of this. CBS article, “Obama

Ends Stem Cell Research Ban,” quotes Early Show medical contributor, Dr. Holly

Phillips:

‘Many scientists for the last eight years have been complaining that they're spending more time trying to find funding for their research than actually doing their research. So for them this will really have a profound effect,’ Phillips said. ‘Certainly on an international level in medicine we're so excited about this research and the potential for healing that it has. So I think less red tape will have a profound effect’ (CBS).

Phillips, along with many other scientists owes a big thanks to Barack Obama and his lift of the ban on embryonic stem cell research. With this support, scientist are making up for lost time and attempting to make progress in this field, in hopes to save the lives of many Americans. If scientists continue to make advancements and now that political ethics support this research, it is more likely that embryonic stem cell research will become socially ethical.

Conclusion

After much research and analysis, I conclude that embryonic stem cell research, if not now, will eventually be considered socially ethical. Stem cell research, possibly being able to cure multiple diseases and ultimately saving lives, is supported by many Americans. As mentioned, Pinker’s, Law of Conservation of Morality explains the shift of belief in Christian ethics, and therefore foreshadows the possibility of a larger population of people trading in their opposing beliefs for supporting roles when it comes to embryonic stem cell research. Devlin’s, Legal Moralism, with much analysis, suggests that when a controversial ethical issue such as embryonic stem cell research is tackled by government, it is in the government’s best interest to approach the situation with knowledge rather than morals. When passing or rejecting funding on such a debatable issue, it is more likely that the majority of Americans share support on universal knowledge based ideas rather than morals because of the various views in the world today. Therefore, if approached correctly, embryonic stem cell research is very likely to become socially acceptable in America.

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