

(Here is a brief, clear, and definitive essay on the stem cell debate by Leroy Garrett which you may want to save for reference. I thank Leroy for permission to send this to you. - CH)

Stem Cell Debate At Harvard

By Leroy Garrett

The use of embryonic stem cells for regenerative medicine has become a profoundly divisive issue in recent years, both here and abroad. There is evidence that the transplantation of such cells might cure or prevent such diseases as Parkinson's, diabetes, ALS (Lou Gehrig's) and heart disease. It is estimated that from 100 to 150 million Americans alone have diseases that might be cured in this way. There are nevertheless serious ethical questions that make the proposal highly controversial.

The issue has been on the front burner ever since President Bush agreed that stem cell research should go forward with government support, but only those cells that have already been harvested. He opposes any further invasion of human embryos on ethical grounds, which further fueled the controversy.

I viewed it with more than passing interest when this volatile issue was debated in the Harvard Magazine. I learned from personal experience as a graduate student at that university that "no holds are barred" when controversial issues are discussed. It may well be the freest university in the world when it comes to the marketplace of ideas. I learned firsthand that any position -- however conservative or traditional -- will be considered so long as it is reasonably and responsibly argued.

I will let you decide how reasonable and responsible the debaters were this time around, professors all. They were all on the Harvard faculty except one, who was from Princeton, and even he was Harvard educated. This may appear to be a one-sided "liberal" bashing of an ideology, but don't bet on it. What happens at Harvard can also be wholly unpredictable. If you hang around the place for long, you would do well to play your cards close to your chest.

While they had their differences, they agreed that stem cell research is an issue of monumental significance. The stakes are high. The issue deserves vigorous discussion. They also agreed that it is understandably controversial with all its ethical implications. And that it is as complex as it is controversial. They agreed that the embryo has life -- but therein lies the basic issue: What kind of life is the human embryo?

One professor insisted that since the embryo has neither a heart, lungs, brain or nervous system it is irrational to view it as a human being. Another added that it is but human tissue, and it is living and human only in the sense that other organs are living and human. If we can transplant hearts, lungs, and livers in order to save life, why can we not transplant embryonic cells -- not only to save life, but perhaps to destroy some diseases forever? It is all human organs and tissue that we are talking about, he argued.

Another claimed that an embryo is essentially part of the mother's body. It is only potentially a human being. It undergoes a process of growth and evolution that can eventually be identified as a human being -- perhaps when the heart starts beating at 22 days or at the time of implantation -- but no one can say for sure. But it is certainly not a person when it is merely a blastocyst, a tissue formation of sperm and ovum.

One professor suggested a test case for those who would ascribe personhood and "equal moral status" to a human embryo. There is a fire in an embryonic laboratory. There is a tray of six embryos on the table and a five-year old girl nearby. Which would you save from the fire?

Enter the Princeton professor -- who holds a doctor of jurisprudence from Harvard -- who had a different view of the matter. When his colleagues objected to his description of human embryos as human beings, he reminded them that no one can deny that they are "whole living members of the species *Homo sapiens* at an early stage of development."

He held that an embryo has "equal moral status" to a human being at any other level of existence -- whether fetal, infant, child, adolescent, or adult. Not equal social status, but equal moral status. As for saving the five-year old girl rather than a tray of embryos, this is because the little girl would suffer terror and horrible pain while the embryos would not, and she would have more social status. But that does not mean the embryos are not human beings with equal moral status.

Just as if the fire were at a nursing home, one would save the little girl rather than an aged comatose patient wadded up in bed in a fetal position. But again this does not mean that the aged comatose patient is not a human being of equal moral status. It only means that circumstances determine our decisions.

As for the claim that embryos are but human tissue analogous to human organs used in transplantation, he pointed out that hearts and livers are not "whole living members of the human species." Unlike transplantable organs, an embryo is a complete organism possessing the internal resources for self-directed development into and through all the stages of life --from fetal to adulthood -- with its unity, determinateness, and identity intact.

As for the assertion that the embryo is only potentially human and has life only in the sense that the sperm and ovum that created it have life, the Princeton professor called this sophistry. Each of us was once an embryo, he pointed out, but none of us was ever sperm or ovum. Sperm and ovum are parts of other organisms -- our parents -- and have no capacity toward being a separate organism except when united. This is when the life of a human being begins, when fertilization of sperm and ovum takes place and a new organism is created.

The Princeton professor, whose position is based on ethics more than religion, says that while religion teaches us that we are to reverence life, it does not tell us when life begins. Science does that, and he believes modern embryology has determined that a human life begins at a successful uniting of sperm and egg.

He could hardly believe that some scientists keep saying that the embryo is but part of the mother's body when there is no scientific support for such a view. Embryology has long

since exploded the myth that the developing embryo or fetus is a maternal body part. Yes, of course, the embryo is profoundly dependent on its environment – its mother -- for survival, but that is true of all levels of human existence. Even as adults we cease existing if our environment becomes hostile.

The professor posed an ethical thesis that warrants discussion in our churches as well as our universities: "All human beings are equal, and ought not to be harmed or considered to be less than human on the basis of age or size or stage of development or condition of dependency." Life is an ongoing process, he notes, and there is no single moment when life is to be regarded sacred and worthy of human rights. It is sacred and has rights from the outset -- in its embryonic stage -- and is not to be used as a means to an end, not even good ends such as curing diseases or saving other human life. Rights are inherent at all levels of life, he says, embryonic as well as adulthood.

If the Princeton professor is right -- and it appears that he gave his colleagues something to think about -- it is imperative that church and society alike take such issues as genetic engineering and abortion more seriously. We may rightly argue that a woman has the "right to choose" what she does with or to her body, but does she have the right to take another person's life? And what are we to say of a society that practices abortion even as a means of birth control?

The professor's thesis that the human embryo is a human being -- which has generally been the position of the church catholic – also better informs us as to the nature of our Lord's incarnation. It wasn't at Christmas that "*the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,*" but at the Annunciation -- or more precisely, when Mary virginally conceived of the Holy Spirit and became pregnant.

If you and I were once an embryo -- an embryonic human being – so was our Lord. The eternal Son of God "became flesh" in his mother's womb, just as any other person. He was among us unseen -- hidden within his mother -- during the first stage of his earthly sojourn.

So, the stages of our Lord's life on earth are not to be seen as infancy, childhood, adulthood, but as embryonic, fetal, infancy, childhood, adulthood. The science of embryology upgrades our theology of the incarnation of our Lord.

This conforms to some interesting biblical passages. Isaiah 49:1 refers to the Servant to come as "*called from the womb,*" and Jeremiah 1:4 has God saying to the prophet, "*Before I formed you in the womb I called you.*" The author of Psalms 139 says, "*You formed my inward parts; you covered me in my mother's womb.*" And Paul says God called him from his mother's womb (Gal. 1:15).

It is reassuring that our merciful heavenly Father was watching after us, not only while we were growing up, but even while we were embryos -- embryonic human beings! []

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