

Science and the Culture of Death

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ABSTRACT: A consideration of adult stem cell therapies in contrast to cloning and embryonic stem cell research, and the uncontrollable tumor formation and immune reactions of such research. Adult stem cell research is much more promising. This paper also treats the ethical implications of the wonderful order embedded in our cellular and genetic make-up.

THE DEATH AND FUNERAL of Pope John Paul II and the election of his “soulmate” Benedict XVI bring to mind an important historical fact. Both lived through earlier versions of what John Paul called a “culture of death.” Both saw the obvious parallels between the German version of the culture of death in the 1920s and 1930s, the Russian/Stalinist version in 1950s and 1960s Poland, and what has currently been going on in our American and Western culture these days.

In his book *Memoirs* Cardinal Ratzinger reflects on “mercy death” in the “roaring 20s” and the overall secularization of German culture in the 1930s. At one point he writes:

Nowadays when I hear how in many parts of the world, Christianity is criticized as destructive of individual freedom, and an imposition of religious values, I'm amazed at how familiar many a turn of phrase sounds. The Church was the alternative to the destructive ideology of the Brownshirts. She stood firm. The Gates of Hell did not prevail, and with the breakthroughs made by Max Planck, Werner Heisenberg, and Albert Einstein, the sciences were once again on their way to God. The anti-religious orientation that reached its climax with Haeckel, had now been broken.¹

¹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Milestones: Memoirs 1927-1977* (San Francisco CA: Ignatius Press, 1988), pp. 16, 42.

It is clear that all the great crimes of the twentieth century, which in the number of victims exceeded those of all previous centuries put together, were perpetrated in the name of atheism and secularism, wedded to a misuse of science and freedom. The German media, judges, lawyers, and doctors called it “applied biology,” “racial hygiene,” “Social Darwinism”—all ordered to the creation of an *Übermensch* for the sake of a healthier future for mankind. They never called it killing or murder. It became the “final solution” to the “Jewish problem.” And if Hitler was bad, Stalin and his academic and political allies were much worse: one hundred million innocent victims murdered in the name of “scientific socialism” in a little over seventy years.

Similarly, in *Memory and Identity*, John Paul traces the roots of the “modern ideologies of evil” to an abuse of freedom, a phoney philosophy, and the misuse of science:

Anti-evangelical currents are strong. They strike at the very foundations of human morality, influencing the family and promoting a morally permissive outlook: divorce, free love, abortion, contraception, and the fight against life in its initial phases and its final phase. Faced with all this, one may legitimately ask whether this is not another form of totalitarianism concealed under the appearances of democracy.²

The latest ideas being pushed by aggressive atheistic materialists and their allies in the media are cloning and embryonic stem cell research. The good news is that adult stem-cell therapies are already treating cartilage defects, lupus, and diabetes, and they offer considerable hope for the treatment of Parkinson’s disease (which afflicted our Holy Father), Lou Gehrig’s disease, multiple sclerosis, and other nerve and brain maladies. Exciting breakthroughs in adult stem-cell therapy and research are

² Pope John Paul II, *Memory and Identity* (New York NY: Rizzoli Publications, 2005), p. 48.

occurring on an almost daily basis. Human bone marrow stem cells have been transformed into heart muscle. Human fat appears to be a fecund source of stem cells, capable of becoming muscle, bone, or cartilage.

So far, however, there is no evidence that embryonic or fetal stem cells, which can only be obtained through the deliberate destruction of some human beings, can help in any of these treatments. In fact, the opposite is true. A study of tissue transplants from aborted fetuses into Parkinson's patients, done at the cost of \$5.7 million, reported disastrous results: "runaway dyslectia, uncontrollable muscle spasms, causing patients to twitch, writhe, and fling their limbs uncontrollably." Dr. Paul Greene of Columbia University, author of the study, wrote: "It was tragic, catastrophic. We are absolutely convinced that this should not be done."³ Each of his patients had received four injections of four eight-week-old aborted baby brains, but since only one in ten aborted babies renders useful tissue, each patient required forty aborted baby brains. A 52-year old patient, after having the aborted human stem cell tissue surgically implanted into his brain, suddenly died 23 months later. The autopsy revealed that the stem cell tissue had grown wildly into hair, skin, and bone within his brain.

Morally unproblematic alternatives in adult stem cell research not only exist and are readily available but also have the added advantage of virtually no prospect for tissue rejection since the tissues come from the very patient who is later going to receive them. The second major problem with embryonic stem cell

³ In 2001 report in the *New England Journal of Medicine* 344/10 (8 March 2001): 710-19. See also *National Catholic Register* (31 March 2001): 1, 6.

experiments are immune reactions in the patient recipient. Thus, there is no need, reason, or justification for creating human life solely for the purpose of research and subsequent destruction. The existence of morally acceptable alternatives do not in any way require this.⁴

We must respect the inalienable sacredness and dignity of every human life from conception to natural death. Embryonic and fetal stem cell research violates this ethical norm, which has been in place for centuries and has been reaffirmed in the 1946 Universal Declaration on Human Rights. The record of German medical atrocities during the Nazi regime gives further reason why “we must never inflict death or disabling injury on any unconsenting individual for the sake of benefit to others.” John Paul II reaffirmed this common moral tradition in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of Life) and in the 1987 Vatican Instruction *Donum Vitae* (On Respect for Human Life in its Origins).

Media promotion of embryonic and fetal stem-cell research, cloning, and similar aberrations have already undermined respect for the sanctity of human life and universal human rights, and thereby the self-evident truth that all are created equal, endowed by the Creator with certain inalienable human rights, the first and foremost of which is the right to life, which is the necessary foundation and condition for affirming and respecting all other rights, including a “right to choose” or a “right to privacy.” A few of the more bizarre violations of this principle have come to light with news of the Australian scientists who announced they had

⁴ Wesley Smith, *Consumer's Guide to a Brave New World* (San Francisco CA: Encounter Books, 2004) , pp. 76-85.

created a "pig man" through cloning techniques, a biotech company that took out a patent on embryos containing cells both from humans and mice, and Professor Joseph Fletcher's prospect of creating "para-humans," fashioned to do dangerous and demeaning jobs.

In addition those doctors and scientists who proceed with cloning for the sake of organ and tissue retrieval do so with callous disregard for the fact that there were some 260 grotesque and serious failures even in cloning Dolly the sheep. To impose such risk of defects on children represents grievous moral callousness. In addition, these matters must be considered in the larger social cultural context, and what some refer to as the "slippery slope." We have moved from allowing abortion for dying mothers and raped fifteen-year-olds, to the *Carhart vs. Stenberg* case on partial birth abortion so as to have the body parts and tissues of aborted babies available for use in experiments before throwing them out. In addition, Professor Peter Singer at Princeton University and others are arguing that we should be able to kill children up to three months old if we do not want them, and then beyond that if they suffer from any serious disabilities.⁵

From the moment of conception, we have a distinct individual human being with a full set of human chromosomes. By then, our sex, our height, our hair color, the shape of our nose, our facial features, our intelligence, and numerous other characteristics have all been determined. Nobel prize biologist Francis Crick

⁵ Peter Singer, *Rethinking Life and Death: The Collapse of Traditional Ethics* (New York NY: St. Martin's Press, 1994), pp. 118, 213-14, and 220.

estimates the amount of information embedded in the chromosomes of a single human conceptus as equivalent to a thousand printed volumes, each as large as a volume of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Such a being is not a “blob of tissue,” but the necessary beginning of each and everyone of us, and it is simply false to say that human embryos are not human beings. Whether a human being is a person should not depend on one’s size, age, or location. All human beings are persons, not just some of us. That was our common moral tradition, as articulated, among others, by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence.

Other scientific complexities that deserve respect include the fact that male bodies produce a thousand sperm per minute, and a father’s seminal fluid has an immune suppressant macromolecule that makes conception possible by overcoming the one hundred billion immune receptors in the mother’s body. The Human Genome project has decoded the physical structure of all of our 100,000 genes and the three billion DNA bases in every cell of our bodies from the moment of conception. Three weeks after a child’s conception, her brain is growing by 500,000 cells per minute, and the mother’s estrogen and progesterone go up by 2,000 percent to prepare her breasts for nursing. In addition, oxytocin levels go way up, the biochemical factor in a mother’s bonding with her child. Such order embedded in creation is awesome and would normally elicit an appropriate reverence

and respect.⁶

⁶ Michael Denton, *Nature's Destiny: How Biology Reveals Purpose in the Universe* (New York NY: Simon and Schuster, 1998), and William Dembski, *Intelligent Design* (Downer's Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999).

Even the tiniest known living organism in existence contains 480 genes. These genes contain six billion DNA letters. The mathematical probability that chance process could produce just one tiny protein molecule is virtually zero. As the great British scientist Bernard Lovell put it, "Assembling a small protein molecule of 100 amino acids would require 10 to the 130th power trial assemblies to obtain the correct sequence. The probability of achieving this within a billion years is effectively zero."⁷ Physicist Stanley Jaki put it this way in his book *Cosmos and Creator*:

Modern scientific cosmology possesses such a grasp of a singular coherent universe as to connect with astonishing skill and exactness its configurations billions of years apart, and to infer its large-scale features from the properties of its smallest constituents with breath-taking precision. Thus from the values of the charge of the electron, of the mass of the proton, of Planck's constant, and of the speed of light, one can infer why the sky is blue, what are the limits of the size of stars, what is the maximum height of a mountain and the like.⁸

Planck's constant is the definitive bottom line for scientific size: one billionth of one billionth of the radius of an electron. It should be self-evident that the awesome order and truth embedded in creation belongs to and binds all of us.⁹

Sidney Callahan put it this way: "As debates over stem-cell research and cloning roil on, proponents ask: how can you care about these clumps of cells, no bigger than the period at the end of this sentence? But why is size an issue," she asks, "when there is so much inherent developmental capacity? Surely size in a

⁷ Michael Behe, *Darwin's Black Box* (New York NY: The Free Press, 1996).

⁸ Stanley Jaki, *Cosmos and Creator* (Chicago IL: Regnery Gateway, 1980), p. 44.

⁹ Leon Kass, *Life Liberty and the Defense of Human Dignity: The Challenge of Bioethics* (San Francisco CA: Encounter Books, 2002), and *The Future is Now: America Confronts the New Eugenics*, ed. William Kristol and Eric Cohen (Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002).

world of quarks, quantum events, Plank's Constant, and neutrinos is relative. Scientists who describe the Big Bang claim that at its beginning the whole universe was many times smaller than a single human cell. The active genetic information in the microscopic initial stages of human life is as dynamically potent as a nuclear explosion. Each zygote's dynamic uniqueness makes it a natural wonder far surpassing Niagara Falls or the Grand Canyon."¹⁰

¹⁰ Sidney Callahan, "Zygotes and Blastocysts," *Human Life Review* 28/3 (Summer 2002): 81-82.