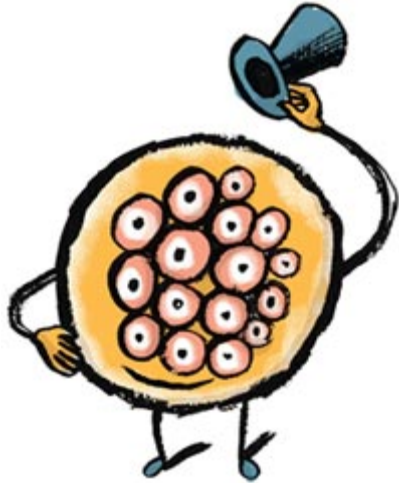


Science Fiction

WHAT PRO-LIFERS ARE MISSING IN THE STEM-CELL DEBATE.

By Michael Kinsley

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The issue of stem-cell research—which is back before the Senate—is often described as a moral dilemma, but it simply is not. Or at least it is not the moral dilemma often used in media shorthand: the rights of the unborn versus the needs of people suffering from diseases that embryonic stem cells might cure. As one of those people myself (I have Parkinson's), I am not an objective analyst of what the U.S. government's continuing near-ban on stem-cell research is costing our society and the world. Naturally, I think it's costing too much. No other potential therapy—including adult stem cells—is nearly as promising for my ailment and others. Evaluate that as you wish.

Against this, you have the fact that embryonic stem cells are extracted from human embryos, killing them in the process. If you believe that embryos a few days after conception have the same human rights as you or me, killing innocent embryos is obviously intolerable. But do opponents of stem-cell research really believe that? Stem cells test that belief, and sharpen the basic right-to-life question, in a way abortion never has.

Here's why: Stem cells used in medical research generally come from fertility clinics, which produce more embryos than they can use. This isn't an accident—it is essential to their mission of helping people to have babies. Often these are "test tube babies": the product of an egg fertilized in the lab and then implanted in a womb to develop until birth. Controversy about test-tube babies has all but disappeared. Vague science-fiction alarms have been crushed by the practical evidence, and potential political backlash, of grateful, happy parents.

[The Vatican and Magisterium oppose IVF on the grounds that life begins at conception and all life is a sacred gift by God that can be taken away only by God (they oppose capital punishment as well).]

In any particular case, fertility clinics try to produce more embryos than they intend to implant. Then—like the Yale admissions office (only more accurately)—they pick and choose among the candidates, looking for qualities that make for a better human being. If you don't get into Yale, you have to attend a different college. If the fertility clinic

rejects you, you get flushed away—or maybe frozen until the day you can be discarded without controversy.

And fate isn't much kinder to the embryos that make this first cut. Usually several of them are implanted in the hope that one will survive. Or, to put it another way, in the hope that all but one will not survive. And fertility doctors do their ruthless best to make these hopes come true. In short, if embryos are human beings with full human rights, fertility clinics are death camps—with a side order of cold-blooded eugenics. No one who truly believes in the humanity of embryos could possibly think otherwise.

And, by the way, when it comes to respecting the human dignity of microscopic embryos, nature—or God—is as cavalier as the most godless fertility clinic. The casual creation and destruction of embryos in normal human reproduction is one reason some people, like me, find it hard to make the necessary leap of faith to believe that an embryo and, say, Nelson Mandela, are equal in the eyes of God.

Proponents of stem-cell research like to emphasize that it doesn't cost the life of a single embryo. The embryos killed to extract their stem cells were doomed already. But this argument gives too much ground, and it misses the point. If embryos are human beings, it's not OK to kill them for their stem cells just because you were going to kill them, or knowingly let them die, anyway. The better point—the killer point, if you'll pardon the expression—is that if embryos are human beings, the routine practices of fertility clinics are far worse—both in numbers and in criminal intent—than stem-cell research. And yet no one objects, or objects very loudly. President Bush actually praised the work of fertility clinics in his first speech announcing restrictions on stem cells.

Even strong believers in abortion rights (I'm one) ought to acknowledge and respect the moral sincerity of many right-to-lifers. I cannot share—or even fathom—their conviction that a microscopic dot—as oblivious as a rock, more primitive than a worm—has the same human rights as anyone reading this article. I don't have their problem with the question of when human life begins. (When did "human" life begin during evolution? Obviously, there is no magic point. But that doesn't prevent us from claiming humanity for ourselves and denying it to the embryo-like entities we evolved from.) Nevertheless, abortion opponents deserve respect for more than just their right to hold and express an opinion we disagree with. Excluding, of course, the small minority who believe that their righteousness puts them above the law, sincere right-to-lifers deserve respect as that rarity in modern American politics: a strong interest group defending the interest of someone other than themselves.

Or so I always thought—until the arrival of stem cells. Moral sincerity is not impressive if it depends on willful ignorance and indifference to logic. Not every stem-cell opponent deserves to have his or her debater's license taken away. There are a few, no doubt, who actually are as horrified by fertility clinics as they are by stem-cell research, and a subset of this subset may even be doing something about it. But these people, if they exist, are not a political force strong enough to stop a juggernaut of medical progress that so many other people are desperate to encourage. The vast majority of people who oppose stem-cell research either haven't thought it through, or have thought it through and don't care.

I wish they would think again.