

A MATTER OF VIABILITY

BY BOB ZASLAVSKY

It is difficult to wade into the disagreement concerning embryonic stem cell research for three reasons. First, the issue is too complex to be discussed without considerable scientific education of the populace. Second, the discussants typically come with intransigent opinions (based on the unbridled adulation of scientific progress or on the visceral aversion to the taking of human life), and such opinions are notoriously immune to reasoning. Third, there has been a concerted effort of many of our elected leaders to exploit the emotions generated by the issue for political self-aggrandizement.

The issue is further complicated by theological opinions, especially of the Catholic Church, represented at their nuanced best by Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (March 1995) and at their caricaturish worst by the popular spokespersons of the Christian right.

I cannot do justice to all this in the space allotted me here.

Let me begin by defining stem cells: They "are unspecialized cells that renew themselves for long periods through cell division [and] under certain physiologic or experimental conditions, they can be induced to become cells with special functions" (National Institute of Health primer on stem cell basics, I.A). These undifferentiated cells can develop, either spontaneously or directedly, into differentiated cells that can replace defective cells in an organ to heal it.

Now, no one objects absolutely and completely to stem cell research.

However, there are—classified as to source—two types of stem cells: adult and embryonic. Adult stem cells were discovered 40 years ago, and they have been researched (with federal funding) ever since, so that they are now routine parts of many medical treatments. *Embryonic* stem cells were first isolated in mice 20 years ago but were not isolated in humans until 1998 as a product of more frequent and sophisticated *in vitro* fertilization (IVF) procedures.

Here is the rub. As John Paul II saw in his prescient encyclical condemning the experimental use of embryonic stem cells, such use is "carried out for purposes legitimate in themselves" (*EV* III. 63). Pope John Paul's condemnation seems to be based on the assumption—although he does not say this explicitly—that an unattached blastocyst (a four- to five-day old clump of cells extracted from an ovum artificially inseminated in a laboratory) is equivalent to a viable fetus.

Since IVF requires that more blastocysts be generated than are actually used (both because an attached blastocyst is not automatically viable and as insurance), those that are not used are subsequently—with the informed consent of the prospective parents—destroyed. It is these unused blastocysts from which scientists could extract the embryonic stem cells whose use could lead to cures for a multitude of debilitating diseases (such as Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, Fragile X syndrome).

President Bush's response to this issue has been cowardly and muddled: while allowing, even encouraging, privately funded embryonic stem cell research, he has withheld federal funds. The research will proceed because other nations have governmentally funded it and because our private sector knows how valuable it could be. Much more could be accomplished, and much more quickly, if it were federally funded.

In addition, even opponents will undoubtedly accept the fruits of research, especially if one of their nearest and dearest should succumb to, say, Alzheimer's. I doubt that they would sign a legally binding declaration that they and their descendants refuse any therapies or treatments derived from such research.

In particular, the anti-choice movement (erroneously called the pro-life movement, as if anyone is anti-life) must not fallaciously assume that the right to life is identical to the right to a lifetime.

I do not mean to minimize the stakes, but until I meet someone with a definitive and demonstrable definition of life, I will stand with those who strive to preserve those lives already established as viable.

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