

Are We Asking the Right Questions?

BY MARK J. CHERRY

We should evaluate medical interventions not only by the amelioration of physical suffering from age, injury, and disease, but also in the context of our relationships to others and to God. Do human reproductive cloning and stem cell research reach beyond such important personal goods and include God's intentions for us?

Human beings are created to worship God. If, in our moral analysis, we only inquire after temporal human goods and focus on equality, rights, justice, or fairness, we will fail to appreciate the depth of our humanity. Christian moral life, in other words, must understand human goods—including medical research—within the fuller context of this divine reality.

With rare exception, however, the essays in three challenging and important anthologies reviewed here fail to address this core concern. Instead, they spotlight how research on human embryos and cloning may result in medical developments, cure disease, and alleviate suffering. Yet, we cannot adequately judge medical interventions if we regard only the amelioration of our physical suffering brought on by age, injury, and disease removed from the context of our relationships to others and to God. Christian appreciation of human reproductive cloning and stem cell research must reach beyond such admittedly important personal goods and include God's intentions for us.

Let's begin with two preliminary questions: What is the moral status of the human embryo? and What is the moral status of nature? In each case, we must assess whether there are moral or spiritual constraints on permis-

sible research. These reflections will shed light on the role of medicine in a Christian life, and thereby provide insight into a Christian appreciation of human cloning and embryonic stem cell research.

EMBRYOS

As the authors in *God and the Embryo: Religious Voices on Stem Cells and Cloning* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2003, 228 pp., \$26.95) are aware, the stem cell research and human cloning debates are caught up with understanding the moral status of the embryo. Organized into three sections –“moral frameworks,” “the moral status of the embryo,” and “research questions” –together with a set of nine appendices, the volume balances analyses from a spectrum of Christian and Jewish religious perspectives.

The editors, Brent Waters and Ronald Cole-Turner, note that deliberation regarding the status of the embryo typically centers on the moment the child possesses a soul or becomes a person. Waters points out that much ink has been spilt on this topic from at least the work of Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century. James Patterson, in turn, considers insights from biblical texts (e.g., Psalm 139:13; Jeremiah 1:5; Exodus 21:22-23; and Job 10:10-11) and the western Christian tradition, finding both sources ambiguous regarding the moral status of embryonic life. These authors argue that biological development is so gradual that there is no clear moment between conception and birth when we can say the embryo has become a person. They believe it is impossible to determine when moral responsibility for killing embryonic life begins, and thus that it is implausible to conclude that it is always wrong to utilize embryos for experimentation. Given this purported moral ambiguity and the hoped for medical benefits, most of the authors in this volume argue in favor of at least limited research on embryos (see e.g., the articles by Ronald Cole-Turner, Brent Waters, and Ted Peters and Gaymon Bennet). There are a couple of notable exceptions who condemn such practices, including Robert Song in a lucidly titled essay, “To Be Willing to Kill What for All One Knows Is a Person Is to be Willing to Kill a Person.”

The useful appendices include statements on embryo research from the President’s Council on Bioethics and a number of Jewish and Christian denominations. Statements from the United Church of Christ and the Presbyterian Church (USA) support research on human embryos. In contrast, statements from the Pontifical Academy for Life, the Southern Baptist Convention, and the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America, stand over against the predominate conclusions of the volume and condemn the use of human embryos for research.

Readers who work carefully through the appendices will wonder whether the authors in this volume have muddled the moral understanding of the embryo with their frequently straightforward acceptance of

consequentialist reasoning—where the ends of research outweigh the necessary means of embryo manipulation and destruction. As the statement from the Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America affirms, the spiritual implication of destroying a human embryo was understood unambiguously in the Christian tradition as murder (pp. 172-176). Some representative voices in the tradition include the *Didache*, a manual of ethical instruction from the first century A.D.: “Do not murder a child by abortion, nor kill it at birth;” the *Epistle of Barnabas*, dated to the first or second century A.D.: “Do not murder a child by abortion, nor, again, destroy that which is born; and Canon 91 of the Quinisext Council (A.D. 691): “Those who give drugs for procuring abortion, and those who receive poisons to kill the fetus, are subjected to the penalty of murder.” Moreover, as St. Basil the Great (A.D. 329-379) made clear, the ensoulment, or state of ‘formation’ of the fetus, is not relevant to this Christian judgment: “The woman who purposely destroys her unborn child is guilty of murder. With us there is no nice enquiry as to its being formed or unformed” (*Letter 188*). St. Basil recognized that even early embryocide possesses the same spiritual effects as murder, without ever committing himself to understanding the embryo as already possessing a soul or as being a small person.

NATURE

How should we understand humanity’s relationship to nature, especially to human nature? Is it morally acceptable for humans to work to overcome and master natural limitations? Or, does nature itself delineate moral limits to human action and investigation? In Ronald Cole-Turner, ed., *Beyond Cloning: Religion and the Remaking of Humanity* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001, 152 pp., \$21.95), several authors consider the often-heard criticism that cloning is impermissible because it is “playing God.” Lisa Sowle Cahill frames the concern by citing Reinhold Niebuhr’s definition that “sin is man’s rebellion against God, his effort to usurp the place of God” (p. 103).

Kenneth Culver, a Presbyterian elder and a physician who helped perform the first human trials of gene therapy, sets the stage with an overview of genetic technologies and their implications for treating various diseases. While admitting that “Some people think that applying genetics to human health simply goes too far...,” he concludes, “I disagree, of course, and I continue to pursue genetics research to benefit human health” (p. 16). Dr. Culver remains confident that the goals of genetic therapies are consistent with the compassionate example of Jesus.

Still, what of human reproductive cloning? Here the authors—Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Christian scholars—offer a range of answers. Donald Bruce believes reproductive cloning is immoral because it departs from the overall course of sexual reproduction—by making human reproduction an asexual and potentially selfish endeavor. Audrey Chaman raises

the concern that such technology would result in treating children as artifacts, as products that parents genetically design and create (p. 73). Children, Gilbert Meilander argues, might thereby become commodities that we create, modify, and perhaps discard (p. 82). He reminds us that “it took the Scottish researchers who produced Dolly...277 transfers of adult nuclei into enucleated sheep eggs, to get 29 cloned embryos to implant in wombs” (p. 78). From these 29, they managed only one live birth. Cahill addresses similar concerns that cloning will only enhance an obsessive focus on biological parenthood, further degrading non-biological parenting, such as adoption (p. 105). Nancy Duff, however, rejects the standard arguments that cloning impermissibly “plays God.” Try as they might, she argues, “Human beings *cannot* take the place of God the Creator” (p. 93); regardless of the circumstances of the child’s conception and birth it will remain “a child of God” (p. 94). Her primary concern is that cloning technology will exploit the vulnerable and encourage eugenics (p. 96). Clearly, it is overly simplistic rhetorically to condemn cloning as “playing God.”

On the one hand, that something is artificial or otherwise manipulates nature does not necessarily make it immoral; otherwise, nearly all of health care would be blameworthy. Indeed the creation of humankind on the sixth day, along with a divine injunction for them “to subdue” the earth and “have dominion” over the other creatures (Genesis 1:26-29), suggests that nature presents challenges that we should face and perhaps overcome. We would be highly ungrateful to God if we, having been blessed with the wonders of creation including a rational mind, failed to utilize them.

On the other hand, the fact that we can manipulate ourselves and the environment does not automatically legitimate all such endeavors. Medicine and medical technology, as with all aspects of a Christian life, must be placed within the struggle towards salvation. Do such technologies aim us towards love of God and others? Here

Demetri Demopoulos reminds readers that children are ideally the fruit of the union of the love of husband and wife. Cloning and other types of third-party assisted reproduction frustrate that union. Children do not exist simply for our own personal satisfaction and fulfillment, but are part of a therapeutic reordering of our lives; children teach us to be unselfish and to love others more than we love ourselves. Instead of dwelling on our passionate desire to

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procreate, or selfishly to recreate ourselves, we should redirect our lives towards God.

MEDICINE

Modern medicine continually offers new and costly diagnostic and therapeutic advancements that are supportive of obvious human goods. For many, it appears that we are obligated to offer people every opportunity to postpone death and reduce suffering. Medicine, however, can become a temptation to hubris and to a consuming passion to place the goods of this life above all else. Here embryonic stem cell research and therapeutic cloning may teach us a larger lesson.

The Human Embryonic Stem Cell Debate: Science, Ethics, and Public Policy, edited by Suzanne Holland, Karen Lebacqz, and Laurie Zoloth (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001, 257 pp., \$25.00), begins by reminding us that embryonic stem cell research has been heralded as providing treatments for diabetes, Parkinson's disease, immunodeficiencies, cancer, metabolic and genetic disorders, and a variety of birth defects, as well as generating new tissues and organs (see, for example, the articles by Thomas Okama and James Thomson). Several authors who write from a Christian perspective believe this justifies the research. Margaret Farley argues that Roman Catholic tradition does not definitely rule out the willful destruction of embryos, because, she claims, before development of the primitive streak or implantation, human embryos do not have the inherent potential to become a human being (p. 115). Catholic theologian Michael Mendiola reaches a similar practical conclusion, because people of good will differ regarding the moral status of the embryo and its therapeutic potential seems great (p. 121). Ted Peters urges us to see stem cell research and cloning in terms of "the larger enterprise of dedicated scientific research serving the dignity of persons who will tomorrow benefit..." (p. 138), and Karen Lebacqz says researchers can simultaneously respect embryonic life and engage in embryo research, provided they respect the value of embryonic tissue and set moral limits on its use (p. 160). Unfortunately, little is said regarding the nature of those "moral limits." Much like *God and the Embryo*, a single message dominates this collection of essays: since the basic science of therapeutic cloning may save lives, reduce suffering, and cure disease, it would be immoral for us not to engage in this research.

Gilbert Mileander provides a welcome exception to this one-sided discussion. Raising the concern that embryos are the least advantaged of our fellow human beings, he argues that communities that fail to support them fail to be strong. "In honoring the dignity of even the weakest of living human beings—the embryo—we come to appreciate the mystery of the human person and the mystery of our own individuality" (p. 143).

We may return to Fr. Demopolos's insight that medical advances must be appreciated in terms of reorienting our lives toward God. What would

this look like? Like many of the church fathers, St. Basil believes that medicine is a good to be used to relieve sickness and suffering: “Each of the arts is God’s gift to us, remedying the deficiencies of nature...the medical art was given to us to relieve the sick, in some degree at least” (*The Long Rules*). Of course, we must not treat human beings materialistically, for we are essentially spiritual realities. Yet, properly appreciated and directed, medicine’s role can be both physically and spiritually therapeutic. Sickness and debilitation, if they are used as a means of communion with Christ, can lead to positive spiritual goods. This does not mean that we should seek suffering for its own sake; indeed, St. Basil affirms the appropriateness of analgesics for pain management: “with mandrake doctors give us sleep; with opium they lull violent pain” (*Homily V*). However, when suffering is properly addressed so that it does not lead to despair, it reminds us to seek forgiveness, to love others unselfishly, and to turn to God. We must not permit medicine and medical technology to tempt us into forgoing our struggle towards salvation by making an idol of this life.

CONCLUSION

These insightful anthologies signal a profound shift in moral commitments within the dominant intellectual culture of the West. Where the destruction of human embryos once was understood as the spiritual equivalent of murder, it has become more or less routine. The practices of abortion and in vitro fertilization with embryo wastage are legally protected as a part of a secular understanding of procreative liberty. As these volumes reflect, much of medical research and healthcare decision-making has been divorced from traditional Christian commitments.

We do have moral obligations to safeguard our bodies and preserve our lives. Our significant duties to ourselves as well as to others, such as to spouse and children, generally require that we seek proper medical treatment. Healthcare is a necessary for living a good life for these reasons. Still, medicine only postpones and cannot “cure” death. We must not permit medical procedures to disorder basic human goods, to distort our relationship with others or with God, and thereby lead to spiritual disorientation. When our pursuit of temporal life and the goods of this life becomes an all-absorbing project, medicine dangerously distracts us from the cardinal human goal, which is to seek the Kingdom of God.



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