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Dead Embryos For Me And Not For Thee

Obviously, I'm glad to see a prominent Republican [bitching about other Republicans](#), but I don't think John Danforth's line on stem cells is tenable:

In my state, Missouri, Republicans in the General Assembly have advanced legislation to criminalize even stem cell research in which the cells are artificially produced in petri dishes and will never be transplanted into the human uterus. They argue that such cells are human life that must be protected, by threat of criminal prosecution, from promising research on diseases like Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and juvenile diabetes.

It is not evident to many of us that cells in a petri dish are equivalent to identifiable people suffering from terrible diseases. I am and have always been pro-life. But the only explanation for legislators comparing cells in a petri dish to babies in the womb is the extension of religious doctrine into statutory law.

Whether or not a fertilized egg and the resulting embryo should have the moral status of a person can't possibly depend on whether or not the egg is located "in the womb." The line that abortion is murder, but killing stem cells for research purposes is legitimate science is, of course, held by many besides John Danforth. Among current U.S. Senators, Orrin Hatch is the leading advocate of the view in question. It's hard for me to see the logic of this position as reflecting anything other than sexism on the part of its advocates. If you think that abortion is wrong because killing an embryo is really and truly like killing a human being then obviously women are going to need to bear a disproportionate share of the burden for implementing that view into legislation, but based on the premise it's hard to see any other choice. But if you think it's okay to kill embryos for research purposes, then you obviously don't think killing an embryo is just like killing a human being (nobody thinks it would be okay to round up homeless people and dissect them for research purposes). Instead, the view seems to be that the moral standing of embryonic life is somehow large enough to override a woman's interest in her autonomy, but small enough to be overridden by our interest in maybe developing a treatment for Parkinson's Disease. This seems like one of those things you sort of have to be a man to believe.

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"nobody thinks it would be okay to round up homeless people and dissect them for research purposes."

SHUT THE **** UP! Now in three years we'll see Jonah Goldberg and George Will asking how insane liberals must be NOT to think it would be okay! Let's hope the meme doesn't spread...

Posted by: Julian Elson | Mar 30, 2005 1:20:56 PM

"Whether or not a fertilized egg and the resulting embryo should have the moral status of a person can't possibly depend on whether or not the egg is located 'in the womb.'"

Oy. I didn't expect this from a philosophy major. To prevent an embryo inside a womb from developing into a person requires an action. To prevent an embryo outside a womb from developing into a person requires an inaction. Many moral distinctions hang on the distinction between action and inaction.

I know that the action-inaction distinction is a questionable one. (Which distinctions aren't?) And I also agree with you that the distinction is easier to draw if you are a man. But it is still a logically tenable distinction, upon which I suppose a rational person could draw a moral line. Not that I would choose to pick that particular one.

Posted by: Joe S. | Mar 30, 2005 1:25:21 PM

His position is mostly as coherent as others but less forthright. There is a line to be drawn in the continuum, and Danforth chooses to draw that line at implantation while doing his best to conflate his line drawing with uncovering some natural law. It sidesteps the truly relevant question of what makes human life worth protecting, but as far as drawing arbitrary lines, implantation is as coherent as birth, as long as the criterion worth saving is potential rather than capability.

Posted by: theCoach | Mar 30, 2005 1:26:04 PM

"The line that abortion is murder, but killing stem cells for research purposes is legitimate science"

I think you mean killing an embryo to make stem cells, as you say later. I don't think anyone is opposed to the killing of the cells, rather the creation and then destruction of embryos to create the stem cells.

Posted by: Dperi99 | Mar 30, 2005 1:26:42 PM

Matt -- Senator Hatch's position is that of the LDS Church. When you're following your theology, consistency isn't really a part of the discussion.

Posted by: Kimmitt | Mar 30, 2005 1:30:21 PM

And Judah said unto Onan, Go in unto thy brother's wife, and marry her, and raise up seed to thy brother.

And Onan knew that the seed should not be his; and it came to pass, when he went in unto his brother's wife, that he spilled it on the ground, lest that he should give seed to his brother.

And the thing which he did displeased the LORD: wherefore he slew him also.

--Genesis 38: 8-10

Posted by: Roxanne | Mar 30, 2005 1:37:29 PM

To expand on Kimmitt's point, Slate had a good article a few years back explaining why the Mormon stance on stem cell research is more flexible than the stance of the Catholic church. It may help you understand their reasoning.

Posted by: Rebecca | Mar 30, 2005 1:40:51 PM

First we protect all fertilized egg no matter where they are or what state their in. Then we protect the unfertilized eggs and sperm - they're half human, you know. It's the set up for the coming new world order. The Matrix is loading. It's not some computer program that taking over, that's just the front. The self-righteous right is gonna make all you faggy liberals right. People are so much easier to control when they're not awake and thinking. First we take sick people that need a machine to survive, and then the healthy ones, because they are easier to control when hooked to our dead-defying machine. There is a pod in you future.

Click the name below or choose the blue pill

Posted by: scou29c | Mar 30, 2005 1:51:58 PM

Maybe he's falling back on the old quickening distinction. It's not completely unreasonable. Though I am pro-choice, and I don't support much in the way of legal restrictions on abortion, as a moral matter I am much more comfortable with early chemical abortions than with late-term ones.

Posted by: Abby | [Mar 30, 2005 1:57:34 PM](#)

If humanity is determined by potential, then drawing a line at implantation may make sense. On the other hand, if humanity is determined by development, then implantation is not a good place to draw the line, as an unimplanted zygote may reach a greater level of development than that of most zygotes at the moment of implantation. Granted, with current technology they can't develop to full-term or even anywhere close, but if they can grow to be a 8-cell to 16-cell morula, that is presumably further than most zygotes get by the time they implant. To demonstrate what I mean, say that we are able to artificially grow an embryo through all nine months without ever implanting it in the womb. Would that not still be human?

Posted by: Glaivester | [Mar 30, 2005 2:00:41 PM](#)

Point of information- the EPA did, in fact, recently approve a study in which young children would continue to be exposed to environmental hazards in the home so adverse health effects could be recorded. Whether children under the age of three can really provide an "informed consent" to be subjects of such an experiment remains unclear. Being homeless is not the only risk factor.

This, I think, is sort of an own-goal for MattY. He is correct that Danforth is inconsistent, but mainly highlights the fact that a foolish consistency will be the hobgoblin of the petty mind.

Posted by: serial catowner | [Mar 30, 2005 2:02:17 PM](#)

This also harkens back to the question of why so many pro-lifers don't like birth control.

A lot of forms of birth control (IUDs) work by preventing implantation of a fertilized egg, or sometimes work that way even if it is not their primary method of action (hormonal methods sometimes prevent implantation even if they usually prevent ovulation or fertilization).

Actually, John Danforth may have decided that such embryos are not human beings because drawing the line at implantation is the only way to justify certain methods of birth control while remaining totally pro-life on abortion.

Posted by: Glaivester | [Mar 30, 2005 2:05:22 PM](#)

Having been through IVF treatment, I'll say a couple of things:

1) There *is* a difference between an embryo in a petri dish, and an embryo in a uterus: the difference is viability. For about the first week, you can take the fertilized egg/blastocyst, put it back into the uterus, and it has a chance of implanting and growing into a healthy baby. After that time, it's too late (with the current state of medical science) and the embryo is doomed, one way or another.

I'm not sure quite how far they grow the embryos before harvesting stem cells, but I suspect it involves crossing this line, i.e. starting with an embryo that's young enough to have a chance of implanting, and growing it past that point.

Of course this bright line of viability will move around as technology develops, so anyone looking for everlasting moral principles is going to have a hard time.

2) For people who worry about the creation and destruction of many embryos in IVF, you should know that unassisted reproduction probably involves the creation of just about the same number of fertilized eggs/early embryos. Many eggs don't fertilize, many embryos don't implant in the uterus, many implanted embryos fail to develop due to genetic defects. All of that is true whether you go at one egg per month inside the body, or at 10 or more eggs per cycle outside the body (a rough figure for IVF). You might be best to think of IVF as accelerated, rather than artificial, reproduction.

Personally, I'm pro-choice and pro-stem-cell-research. I do think there is a valid pro-life position, which is the Buddhist view that *all* life is sacred. But if you're worried about early embryos, and yet you're happy to clear-cut forests, swat flies, exterminate rats, support the death penalty, and drop 500lb bombs on urban areas, then your morality has to be very selective.

Posted by: Richard Cownie | Mar 30, 2005 2:06:26 PM

I'm with the coach on this one. Forthright pro-lifers would admit they are drawing a line, just drawing it at implantation rather than birth. Danforth is slight disingenuous about his reasoning, but his position is not incoherent.

What I've never understood about the stem cell debate is that even if you believe embryos are life, what's wrong with using discarded embryos from fertility clinics? Isn't that just like using organs from dying people? If there's a problem, isn't the problem with the fertility clinics that inevitably discard embryos, rather than the researchers who use them after they have been discarded?

Posted by: AF | Mar 30, 2005 2:10:31 PM

Danforth: "But the only explanation for legislators comparing cells in a petri dish to babies in the womb is the extension of religious doctrine into statutory law."

MY: "Whether or not a fertilized egg and the resulting embryo should have the moral status of a person can't possibly depend on whether or not the egg is located "in the womb." "

But Danforth is also making the distinction based on cells v. babies. Clearly, Danforth is mixing up his science (as Dper199 said, stem cell opponents don't care about the stem cells, but about the embryos that stem cells are derived from), but his position is tenable: you could say that embryos at the 100-cell pre-implantation blastocyst stage have no (or very little) moral worth, but once they have developed a certain amount of complexity ("babies"), they are enough of a person to ban abortion. To check his consistency, you'd have to check if he opposes morning-after contraception (which prevents implantation and thus could, in theory, "kill" a 100-cell blastocyst).

Posted by: Andrew | Mar 30, 2005 2:29:38 PM

Of course, it would be necessary to ban all in-vitro fertilization procedures if we were to strictly adhere to the arguments of the embryo rights advocates. A friend who is knowledgeable about the methodologies of in-vitro fertilization says that there are now hundreds of thousands of unused embryos left over from in-vitro fertilization - that will eventually be quietly discarded. Where are the good Christian host-mothers when you need them?!

Posted by: beowulf888 | Mar 30, 2005 2:32:06 PM

Do not some reason that until the fertilized egg no longer can develop into two or more people (twins, triplets, etc.), there does not yet exist a distinct individual who is deserving of protection?

Posted by: Will Allen | Mar 30, 2005 2:32:34 PM

I don't know if some people reason the way Will supposes above me, but if they do, it's among the more absurd things I've ever heard. "Hmm... we don't know if this grouping of cells will become two people, or three, but we're sure it will become at least one. It deserves no protection. This other group, which will certainly become exactly one deserves greater protection than the autonomy of a currently existing human being."

Posted by: washerdreyer | Mar 30, 2005 2:47:39 PM

This is a good example of what you get when you mix religious ideas with science: a mess.

Some people believe that what is crucial is the unique genetic identity inherent in a particular fertilized egg. In that case, where the clump of cells is located doesn't affect its moral status.

Some people believe that what is crucial is a soul. What they say about when and how the soul originates is not something that can be debated logically. In that case, the location of the embryo might easily make a difference.

Some people believe that what is crucial is consciousness, the ability to feel pain, or viability outside the womb. And in that case, the whole argument slides at least a few months down the line of development.

The thing that I find most interesting is the way that so many people who claim to be anti-abortion based on religious grounds make arguments about it that are based on the first idea (genetic uniqueness), as opposed to the second. What is their reasoning for buying all this heretical nonsense about ova and blastocysts and so forth? That's certainly not how the Bible says it works.

Posted by: janet | [Mar 30, 2005 2:59:28 PM](#)

"Having been through IVF treatment . . ."

Strange comment, coming from somebody named Richard . . .

:)

Posted by: rea | [Mar 30, 2005 3:16:17 PM](#)

>"Having been through IVF treatment . . ."

>

>Strange comment, coming from somebody named Richard . . .

Hey, I put in half the DNA! It still takes two ... though for sure my wife was on the sharp end of the needles and doing the heavy lifting :-)

Posted by: Richard Cownie | [Mar 30, 2005 3:36:32 PM](#)

Well, washer, if it can become more than one person, it is logically not an individual yet. If one holds that rights can only accrue to an individual, then rights cannot yet have accrued to what does not yet exist.

Posted by: Will Allison | [Mar 30, 2005 3:41:39 PM](#)

"Instead, the view seems to be that the moral standing of embryonic life is somehow large enough to override a woman's interest in her autonomy, but small enough to be overridden by our interest in maybe developing a treatment for Parkinson's Disease. This seems like one of those things you sort of have to be a man to believe."

Well said. The fact that the 'pro-life' movement is so active in trying to deny access to birth control is, in my opinion, the card that really reveals their hand. It's not about protecting life (if so, they'd have some different priorities, such as pre-natal care, mother health - I mean the statistics here in the U.S. are really shocking), it's about controlling women, in particular, making sure that they are punished for having sex. It's hard to be logically inconsistent when you're not be forthright about what it is that you're actually trying to achieve.

Posted by: Matilde | [Mar 30, 2005 3:59:55 PM](#)

Joe S.

Not being a believer it is understandable why you don't get the logic here. The claim of the anti-abortion movement is that the fertilized egg is ALREADY a person. Development is not needed.

Posted by: epistemology | [Mar 30, 2005 4:02:16 PM](#)

You're coming at this backward, Matt. People object to the destruction of embryos, not the destruction of human cells. Stem cell research is problematic only to the extent that one believes it or its success would introduce a pressure to destroy more embryos. As things currently stand, though, that really isn't a concern since IVF produces more waste embryos than research would demand.

Even realizing this, some people oppose stem cell research from a sort of vegan-ish perspective, unwilling to acknowledge the potential acceptability of a scenario that mkes them uneasy, and worried about slippery slopes. Others oppose stem cell research as a preemptive measure, anticipating that successful stem cell therapies would prompt the creation and destruction of embryos purely for therapeutic purposes. Both groups want to preserve embryos; the first group is just more stupidly idealistic about it.

But IVF produces babies, so pro-life stem cell proponents can assign different (ascending) values to curing Parkinson's, preserving embryos and producing babies, and thereby justify the use of IVF, research into stem cells, and a prohibition on abortion.

I suspect they don't take a logically rigorous approach to this question, but that's the basic calculus underlying their intuition about the situation. That and irrational brains flooded with oxytocin.

Posted by: [tom](#) | [Mar 30, 2005 4:37:15 PM](#)

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