

# Stem Cells and Moral Analogies

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# The Embryonic Stem Cell Issue

- Drive to procreate is very strong
- Psalm 127:3-5:  
*Behold, children are a gift of the LORD,  
The fruit of the womb is a reward.*
- Infertility affects 10%-15% of all couples.

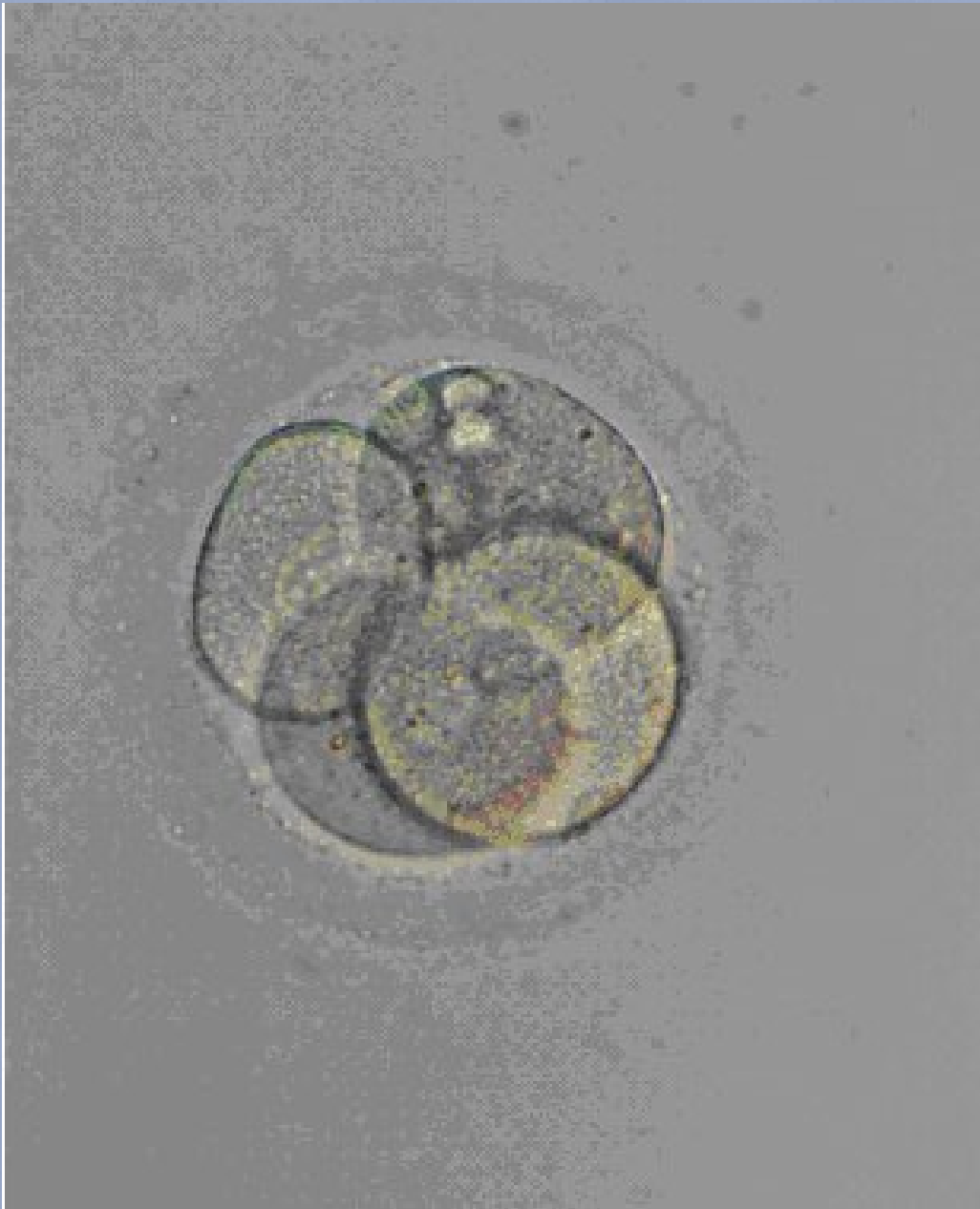
# Reproduction is not always a simple matter!

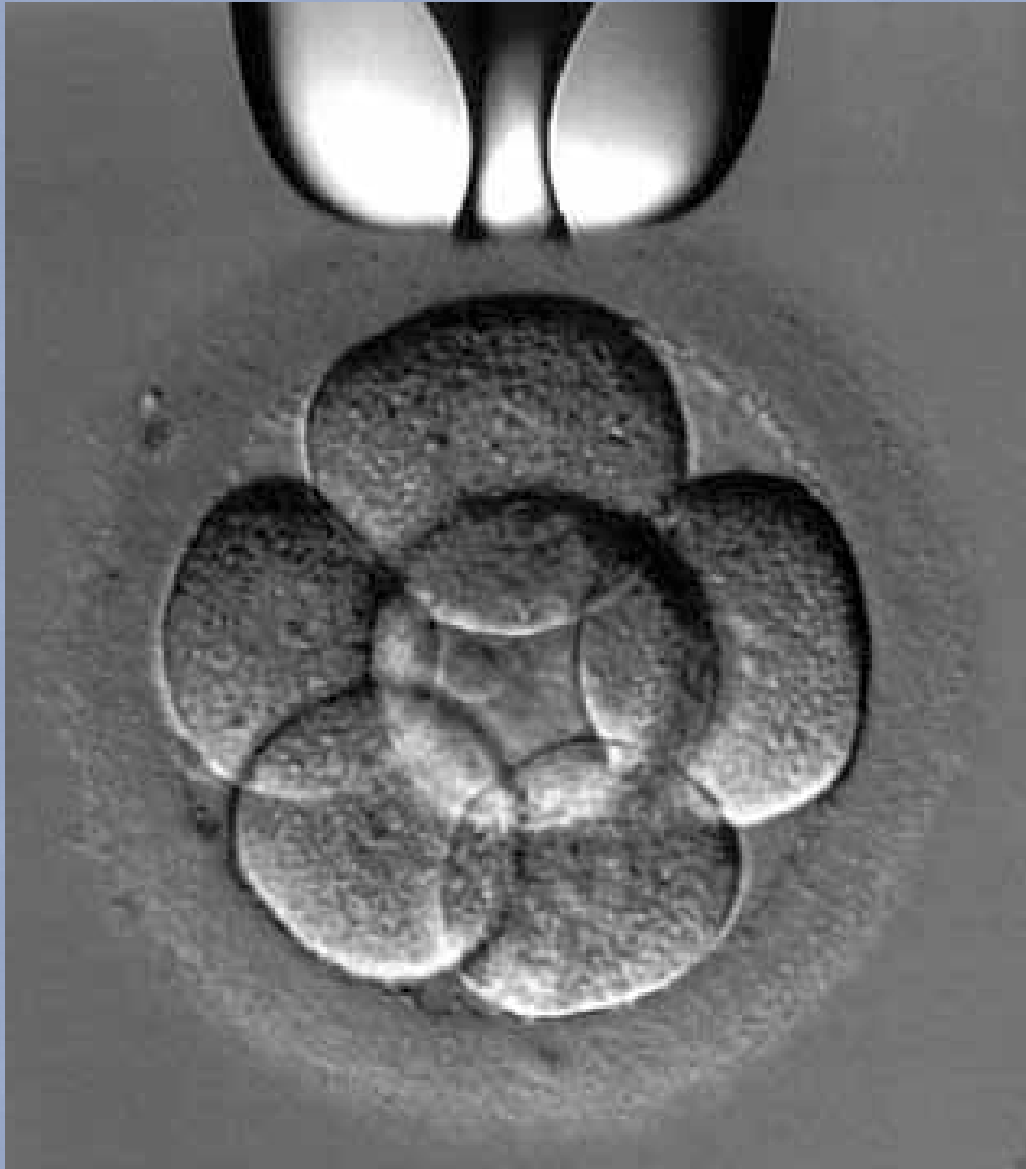


# Technique of IVF

- in vitro fertilization = “in glass”
  - hyperstimulation of ovaries
  - follow progress with U/S
  - harvest eggs, then fertilize some or all
  - 3 to 5 day development of embryos
  - implantation of embryos
  - (often) freezing of remaining embryos







# Ethical Issues:

- IVF itself – morally neutral (?)
- Extra-uterine conception
- Freezing embryos
- Discarding embryos
- Selective reduction
- Third-party gametes (sperm or egg donors)
- High fees
- Human embryonic stem cell question



# IVF for the Christian

- An “Ethical Consult” for Christian couples:
  - IVF only as last resource
  - No gametes outside of marriage bond
  - Only fertilize embryos that will be implanted
  - Only fertilize 3-4 embryos
    - Embryo loss may parallel natural order
    - No freezing of embryos
- After above, leave the rest to the Lord

# Frozen Embryos: What Do *YOU* See?

- Some of us:
  - What a tragedy
  - Here are 120,000 human beings whom no one will love
  - They will never have a name
- Others of us:
  - What a vast resource
  - Here are body parts that may be used to benefit others

# Human embryonic stem cells

- Pluripotent cells: not yet differentiated into mature cells
- Advantages of using stem cells:
  - Can be programmed along one developmental pathway
  - Not likely to be rejected immunologically (fewer surface markers)
  - May perhaps grow into new nerve or muscle cells

# The Medical Case

- Chronic diseases that might be helped:
  - Diabetes mellitus
  - Spinal cord injury
    - Replace neurons
    - Replace glial cells
  - Parkinson's disease
  - Heart disease (heart muscle does not regenerate)
- Frozen embryos are available (though no proven benefit of this research yet)

# Ethical Issues

- President George W. Bush (Crawford, Texas):
  - As I thought through this issue I kept returning to two fundamental questions. **First**, are these frozen embryos human life and therefore something precious to be protected? And **second**, if they're going to be destroyed anyway, shouldn't they be used for a greater good, for research that has the potential to save and improve other lives?  
(August 9, 2001)

# Ethical Issues

- Sanctity of Life
  - If frozen embryos are persons, then using them = abortion
  - Not life or death decision (most diseases that are candidates for procedure not immediately life-threatening)
- Moral Conflict:
  - Beneficence to the sick (relieving suffering)
  - Non-maleficence (destroying embryonic human life)
  - Justifying the taking of human life for a “greater good” is a high moral burden
  - No moral basis beyond simple utilitarianism.

# Moral Accountability

- Since the embryos are going to be “thrown away” anyway, might as well “do some good.”
  - Denies inherent dignity
  - If a person consents to the destruction of human embryos to meet a medical need of his own (or for someone he loves), he is morally accountable for that act, even if he personally does not perform the action himself

# Moral Accountability Analysis

- If *not* human persons: not much debate
  - Moral accountability is shared with lab tech who flushes them down the drain
  - Moral culpability:
    - “Disrespect for valuable property,”
    - “Negligent disregard for biological tissue,” etc.



# Moral Accountability Analysis (cont.)

- If embryos *ARE* human persons: serious moral dilemma
- Moral accountability
  - Shared with the lab tech or doctor
  - Involves the taking of innocent human life, which would
  - In a legal sense = a capital crime
- Remaining question:
  - Grant personhood for sake of argument
  - What if they are going to be destroyed anyway?

# Summary of Moral Issues in Stem Cell Research

- Sanctity of life
  - Destroying embryos is destroying a person
  - No “greater good” can justify this (strictly utilitarian)
- Moral complicity
  - BOTH person who destroys the embryo,
  - AND those who receive treatment from it
  - are morally culpable for taking a life
- Moral facilitation
  - Producing a market for a product by using it
  - Comparable to buying Nike sneakers
  - Admittedly indirect moral complicity

# A Moral Analogy

1) A six year-old girl is in a major car accident, and declared dead. Her loving parents anguish over the decision, but reluctantly agree to donate her liver. Your son, who has a rare liver disease, is the fortunate recipient. You are **morally justified** in accepting the donated liver for your son.

- 2) Let us change the **agent** of the little girl's death. The moral issues do not change if a drunk driver caused the accident, even if that driver was the girl's father. In other words, you are **not morally responsible** for the circumstances that led to the girl's death, and are **morally justified** in accepting the donated liver for your son.

(this of course ignores the thorny issues of informed consent on the part of the donor parents)

3) Let us change the **manner** of the girl's death. The moral issues cited earlier do not change if the father, instead of being a drunk driver, uses a handgun to shoot his daughter in the head. You are still **not morally responsible** for the circumstances that led to the girl's death, and could justify accepting the donated liver.

4) Let us change the **time frame and the agent** of the girl's death. You know that the girl's father is violently disposed towards his daughter, and that he plans to kill her. You reason, "He will kill her anyway, so my son may as well benefit from the girl's liver." You take a gun and kill the girl yourself. **No reasonable person would argue that you were morally justified in doing this**, even if, for some reason, the death of the little girl at the hands of her father was inevitable.

5) Let us change the **agent** of the girl's death once more. You decide not to kill the girl yourself, but you pay the father \$10,000 to pull the trigger, so that your son may benefit. **No reasonable person would argue that you are morally justified in doing this**, even though you did not commit the act yourself. You are just as **morally culpable**.



6) Let us change the **moral contract** between you and the father. No money changes hands, but you plead with the father to kill his daughter, saying “Your daughter’s liver is my son’s only hope.” Of course, you do nothing to prevent her death. **No reasonable person would argue that you are morally justified** in doing this (legally, this would be conspiracy to commit murder).

7) Let us change the **age** of the little girl who dies to provide your son with a liver. Now she is no longer six years old – in fact, she is an embryo. Her father is willing to destroy her to provide stem cells to treat your son's liver disease. You are just as **morally culpable** as the father if you accept his offer.

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