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Let Them be Heroes

Christina J. Kinch

Editor's Note: Every year, each student in our bioethics classes must write at least one paper endorsing a position with which the student does not personally agree. This difficult assignment is a way to better understand a variety of viewpoints, and helps the student to develop a sense of respect for the moral integrity of others. The following paper is an excellent example: it represents a position that is actually contrary to the author's personal view and that of her professor.

Since 1978, there is now a population of unique human entities unlike the world has ever seen before. This group numbers at more than 500,000 individuals (Grabill, 2007). Some are brand new, created only days ago; others have been around for decades. Yet these entities, all comprised of human embryos, are all developmentally the same age. They are five to six days old, frozen in liquid nitrogen until their fate is decided.

And so a debate rages in our society. What should be done with all the frozen embryos? These are the excess or "left-over" embryos resulting from reproductive technologies, primarily *in-vitro* fertilization (IVF). There are five distinctly different potential fates: the embryos could be 1) implanted into the womb of their genetic parents, 2) implanted into the womb of an adoptive mother, 3) given up for research purposes, 4) thawed and thereby destroyed, or 5) simply left in a frozen state indefinitely. This will paper briefly discusses each possibility, and will give an ethical recommendation. Ultimately, this ethical dilemma is not one where we must choose the lesser of all evils; rather, it is an impasse where we must choose the greater of all goods.

IVF is a technique where eggs are harvested from a woman, then fertilized in a *Petri* dish. The resulting embryos are then implanted into a woman's uterus. The process of IVF involves the use of strong hormones to enable the woman to produce 10-20 mature ova at one time. Once fertilized, only a small number of these embryos are actually implanted. Most often, the excess embryos are frozen for possible implantation at a later time, should pregnancy not occur with the

first round, or if other children are desired. However, if pregnancy is successful and the couple does not wish to have more children, there is no need for the remaining embryos. They are left, frozen in limbo, until their destiny is decided (Roberts, 2007).

Ethically speaking, the question of personhood is the main factor in regard to human embryos. The scope of this paper does not permit a full discussion of personhood theory, but I shall assume the conception view of personhood. Stevens-Arroyo has said, “The Catholic theological teaching is unequivocal: The human soul is infused by God at the moment of conception” (Stevens-Arroyo, 2009). These embryos are human persons with souls. On this view, frozen embryos are not merely lumps of tissue; instead, cryogenic chambers may be viewed as arctic orphanages full of embryos, waiting for the key to their destiny.

Most agree that best fate for cryopreserved embryos is for them to fulfill their intended purpose. That is, they should be implanted in either the genetic or an adoptive mother’s womb. However, with an excess as large as 500,000, a number that is continuously growing as IVF becomes more common, this ideal is hardly feasible (Mundy, 2006).

As unsatisfactory as it is that only a small number will likely be implanted, the choice of limbo is likewise unacceptable. Keeping the embryos frozen is merely postponing the time when one of the other four fates must be chosen. This reasoning leaves merely two options: embryo-destructive research or destruction. Admittedly, this is often a difficult and emotional decision to make. One IVF mother explained her quandary, “I don’t have the heart to thaw them, but then again, I don’t have the will to do something with them” (Mundy, 2006).

Both remaining fates result in destruction of the embryo: one for the purpose of research, and the other simply as a means of disposal. This raises the important theological question: what happens to the souls of destroyed embryos? Many Christians would affirm: they all go to heaven

of course! Therefore, embryo destruction as a means of research or purely for embryo disposal is not such a bad thing at all.

Most Christians admit that people go to hell because they do not “accept Christ as their Savior.” As embryos are not given the chance to ever have the ability to make a choice, we must rest in the truth of God’s mercy. Jack Wellman’s book, *Do Babies Go to Heaven?* sheds light on this issue: “Adult men and women have no excuse, for they know better, but babies [or embryos] cannot accept what they do not know, and therefore cannot be held responsible” (p.15, 2010).

If this is true, then allowing the destruction of these embryos prevents 500,000 souls from ever going to hell! What a joyous relief for all those in the arctic orphanages! These souls will never go through the hardships of life; they will never be tempted to reject the Savior. By freeing their souls before they have the ability to choose wrongly, we ensure huge population growth within the kingdom of God!

Utilitarianism would demand that we use the embryos for research rather than disposing of them in a futile manner. However, some would argue that releasing the embryos for the purpose of research them to a painful death. This is not true, since these tiny collections of cells cannot yet feel physical pain. On the contrary, imagine the delight one of these heroes will experience when they “wake up” in heaven to the news that they are automatic receivers of God’s grace. Not only do they receive the “Advance to Go,” they have also impacted thousands of lives through the benefits of the research they enabled. Clearly that is the opposite of pain; these are the truest treasures in heaven.

In conclusion, it is clear that the five possible fates are not a matter of choosing the lesser of the evils. On the contrary, allowing them to be destroyed, or better yet donating the embryos for research, are the best of many good options. These embryos are not destroyed in vain. They

do not endure any pain. They are given the chance to save lives and in return receive many crowns in heaven. The decision is not a difficult one; we must simply take a step back, ponder the potential, and let them be heroes.

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