

The Essayist

Lance Morrow

**“It is good to
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but it is not
paramount.”**

Most people approach the moral dimension of embryonic stem cell research by using a metaphor of “weighing” and “balancing.” What could be more civilized, more moderate, than “balance?” President Bush said he wanted his policy on government funding of such work to reflect the “need to balance value and respect

for life with the promise of science, and the hope of saving life.” Even Bush’s critics would not object to that formulation.

A more militant approach waves the uncompromising banners of “rights”—whether that means, on one side, the right of free scientific inquiry, unimpeded by government or by ideological zealotry, or, on the other side, the rights of nascent life, as represented by embryos in laboratory freezers. Rights are non-negotiable; this line of argument hardens almost immediately into a stalemate of absolutes—which is where the abortion rights dispute in America has ended up.

Neither the moderate “weigh-and-balance” strategy nor the categorical “rights” approach is morally satisfactory. They are Potemkin villages. They both collapse, or become irrelevant, in the face of the essential question: Should the embryo be considered a human life? Potential human life? What are the rights, if any, of a human who is merely “potential?”

Either/or: If the embryo is human life, then no amount of weighing-and-balancing will make it all right to destroy that human life in hope of scientific gain; otherwise our science has turned into the workshop of Dr. Mengele. If the embryo is NOT human life, then you need not balance anything: Go after the Alzheimer’s, and sleep easy.

As for the “rights” front: If the embryo is human life, then it has rights. Stop the work now. If the embryo is not human life, then it is mere stuff, and does not have rights.

But if, as we say, it is to be regarded as “potential” human life, then we enter into that feckless, undignified dialogue of legalistic scholasticism that prevails now, a branch of metaphysics in which we hold up mirrors to the mouth and nose of the poor miniscule hypothetical tyke—how many embryos can fit on the head of a pin?—and fashion an opinion about embryonic stem cell research that is not so much reasoned (since the matter of when we become human, of when we achieve “ensoulment,” is mysterious) as it is retrofitted to our existing prejudices.

I suspect that wisdom on this subject may lie elsewhere.

A few months ago at Caltech, I talked to a physicist, now in his nineties, who, as a young man, worked with J. Robert Oppenheimer at Los Alamos. The physicist told me that one day in the spring of 1945, Oppenheimer asked, in effect, How are we going to set off this thing? And the young physicist got out his pad and pencil and designed the trigger mechanism for the Nagasaki bomb. (Someone else handled Hiroshima.)

I asked this distinguished, deeply intelligent man about both the scientific and the moral dimensions of his work on the Manhattan project, how he felt about what the team was doing, and how it turned out. I asked, of course, about the death toll, and he astonished me.

He said: “Well, we were focusing on knocking down the buildings.” He meant that it had not quite occurred to him and his colleagues that such horrible carnage would result. It was the buildings that they were concentrating on, and they did not quite see, um, the people.

Though I am a layman, I allow myself to generalize that even the most brilliant scientists do not always grasp the implications of their work.

Fairly or unfairly, my mind keeps projecting these two subjects beside one another, to see if the juxtaposition has anything to say. Hiroshima was an ultimate act of war, intended to destroy, to obliterate. Shock and awe to the hundredth power. Embryonic stem cell research is meant to cure diseases and save lives. Harry Truman and those who defended use of the atom bomb argued—and they had no other argument—that it was dropped in order to stop the war immediately and to save lives (Japanese as well as American). Which it did.

Embryonic stem cell research has about it (to my imagination, anyway) a touch of the disquieting metaphysics of the hidden and tiny and immensely potential world of the atom and the sperm and the egg (death from diddlings of the atom, life from unions of sperm and egg—the cosmic potency of the potential), a troubling hallucinatory glimpse of “half-lives” in the stem cell refrigerators, all those millions of frozen embryos, those microscopic hypotheses of discarded human beings.

After the bombs were dropped on Japan, Oppenheimer, a difficult, mystic, and possibly unknowable man, had the humility to describe this ultimate flowering of the Enlightenment in atavistic theological terms. He said that the scientists “have known sin.”

I find similarly atavistic thoughts creeping into my reflections on embryonic stem cell research. Extraordinary promises are made for this kind of research—the medical equivalent of a healer’s tent meeting, proffering cures for Parkinson’s, Alzheimer’s, diabetes, spinal cord injuries, and much more. (As far as I know, there is no reason yet to believe that these cures will actually materialize.) The drama of Nancy Reagan testifying—witnessing—for such research brings to the tent the spectacle of a conservative convert whose mind presumably has passed from medieval dark to Enlightenment. *Newsweek’s* Jonathan

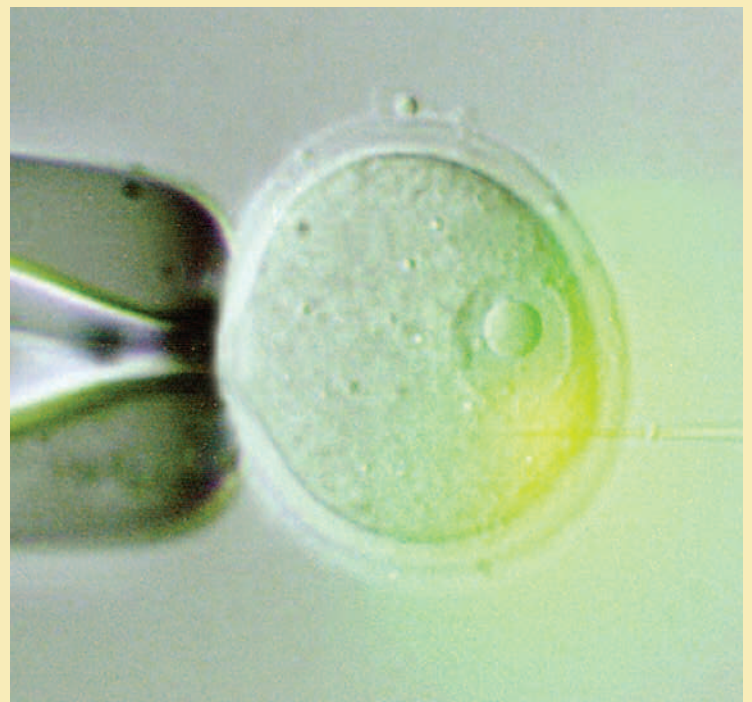


Image of an unfertilized oocyte, or egg, magnified 400 times.

Alter writes, with the condescension of the *bien-pensant*, that “these days, a liberal on health issues is a conservative who’s been mugged by an illness in the family.”

Well, in May of 1947, *Collier’s* magazine promised that a new “golden age of atomic medicine” would cure cancer and practically everything else. Robert Hutchins at the University of Chicago rhapsodized that in the new atomic age, “the atomic city will have a central diagnostic center, but only a small hospital, if any at all, for most human ailments will be cured as rapidly as they are diagnosed.” *Coronet* magazine in 1948 promised that atomic energy would abolish diabetes, heart disease, and cancer. The Nobel Prize in medicine that year, 1948, went to the man who invented DDT.

So I repeat that I am not dead certain that scientists always understand, as they should, the implications of their work; sometimes, they see even less than laymen do, because, like the people at Los Alamos, they may be narrowly if passionately focused on their work, and by definition they have a partisan’s perspective. In any case, they can get as carried away as the rest of us.

It seems to me that embryonic stem cell research should be viewed in a longer-range and wider perspective than it is now; that the discussion should not in any case degenerate into pettifogging about how much medical progress would justify how much of an ugly moral trade-off, or about whether there occurs an instant of human ignition when paternally and maternally contributed haploid pro-nuclei combine to form a unique diploid nucleus of a developing zygote.

The problem concerns the dangers of introducing a principle of research that, while seemingly tolerable or acceptable or even admirable in its present application (saving lives, finding the cure for diabetes or Parkinson’s), may become the gateway to irreversible evils farther down the line.

I think from time to time of the example of Franz Stangl, an apparently decent Catholic family man and Viennese policeman who was recruited by the Nazis in the late 1930s to take over as head of security at an Austrian mental hospital. In due course, the hospital proposed gassing a few of its most hopeless cases—virtual vegetables who had no lives at all, immobile, imbecilic; it would be a mercy to put them gently to sleep. Stangl reluctantly agreed to preside over the procedure...and in the fullness of time, one procedure leading to another, the decent family man became the *kommandant* of Treblinka, the Nazi extermination camp in which hundreds of thousands died under Stangl’s (and his predecessor’s) supervision.

It is not far-fetched, I think, to worry that some biotech manipulations will have very bad consequences. We should be careful and patient, and cultivate the most neglected virtue, humility, the one that came to Oppenheimer when he talked of “sin.” Human beings are not garbage, no matter how relentlessly they treat one another as such, and any process, such as industrial *in vitro* fertilization, that inevitably generates hundreds of thousands of unused embryos that will be frozen and eventually discarded is, I fear, leading the human race down the corridor toward the last room in Bluebeard’s Castle.

Aha! the argument flies back: You have just argued in favor of embryonic stem cell research. Those hundreds of thousands of unused embryos, which otherwise would go out with the garbage, should be salvaged and used for embryonic stem cell research: Medical good might thus come out of what might be otherwise—let us admit it—an unfortunate business.

No, sorry, that is just a transient and morally dubious side question. The real issue, the larger one, concerns the decency and self-respect of

the human race over the long range. It really is not all right to treat human life as garbage, no matter how ambitious your scientific and medical reasons for doing so. If using adult stem cells for research proves unsatisfactory, then scientists in their ingenuity must find other ways. It is good to relieve suffering, but it is not paramount. The human race will continue to suffer in any case. It was sad that Ronald Reagan spent his last decade with Alzheimer’s, and it was an ordeal for his wife; but the man had 83 good and rich and prosperous years. Let us not be greedy.



Researcher examines stem cells in a culture dish.

Lance Morrow is an essayist at *Time* magazine and University Professor at Boston University. He is a two-time winner of the National Magazine Award. His latest book, *Evil, An Investigation*, was published last fall by Basic Books. His next, *The Best Year of Their Lives: Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon in 1948*, will be published this spring.