

## A humanist discussion of... embryo research

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Humanists seek to live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs. They use reason, experience and respect for others when thinking about moral issues, not obedience to dogmatic rules. Humanists promote happiness and fulfilment in this life because they believe it's the only one we have. When deciding whether something is right or wrong, humanists consider the evidence and the probable effects of choices.

Embryo research is a subject that demonstrates the difficulties of rigid unchanging rules in moral decision making. Medical science has advanced to the point where we have options that were unthinkable even a few years ago and where old rules cannot cope with new facts.

21st century medicine could be transformed by research into using human embryos as a source of tissue-repairing cells, often called "therapeutic cloning". This is different from "reproductive cloning", where cloned embryos would be grown from a cell taken from one individual and then implanted in a womb where they would develop into near replicas of their one parent.

### Therapeutic cloning

Using "stem cells" from very early embryos (under 14 days of age), which are capable of developing into any of the specialised cells of the body, replacement tissue could be grown in the laboratory and used to cure many currently incurable conditions, avoiding the problem of immune rejection. But the use of human embryos raises ethical questions and provokes much opposition, particularly from religious and anti-abortion groups, who use similar arguments to those used to oppose contraception and abortion to object to the exploitation of a living human embryo. Opponents also fear that embryo research for therapeutic purposes is a "slippery slope" that will lead to the cloning of human beings. Some religious groups accuse medical researchers of "playing God".

Humanists respect life, but are not religious and so do not worry about "playing God" or believe in "the sanctity of life". (Human beings have been "playing God" for a long time, intervening beneficially in reproductive and medical processes.) For humanists the most important consideration in ethical questions on life and death is the quality of life of the individual person. In the case of embryo research, humanists would focus on two issues: whether an embryo is indeed a person, and whether the research on and subsequent use of embryo cells would do more good than harm.

### Is an embryo a person?

At the early stage where research is focused, an embryo has few of the characteristics we associate with a person. It is a fertilised human egg,

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with the capacity to develop into a person, but its cells have not yet begun to form into specialist cells that would form particular parts of the body (which is why they are potentially so useful). There is no brain, no self-awareness (or consciousness), no way of feeling pain or emotion, so an early stage embryo cannot suffer.

### **Should we consider embryo donors?**

Fertility treatments produce many of the "spare embryos" that would be used, and parents might feel some attachment to these or concern or guilt about what happens to them. It would seem right to inform them fully about what might happen to their embryos, and to take their feelings into account. If they do not consent to donating their embryos for medical research, they should not be used. On the other hand, spare embryos are routinely disposed of at the moment, so already they are not treated as human beings, and parents do not seem unduly concerned. Donors may even prefer their embryos to be used to help someone, rather than wasted, just as many people consent to organ donation.

### **So, should we allow therapeutic cloning?**

If an embryo's cells can be used to alleviate human suffering, the good consequences seem to outweigh the harmful ones, as long as the legal cut off point for research is sufficiently early. Do embryos being produced specially for research and therapeutic purposes by IVF in the laboratory raise any new moral issues? The consequences seem to be much the same, so a humanist would probably think not. So most humanists would support therapeutic cloning, because they do not consider very early embryos to be people, unlike some religious people.

Is this a slippery slope? Will we be cloning human beings next? It is often argued that therapeutic cloning will inevitably lead to reproductive cloning - a classic "slippery slope" argument. Many scientists (over half a small sample polled by *The Independent* in August 2000) think that therapeutic cloning will develop research techniques and skills that will inevitably be used for human reproductive cloning. There does indeed appear to be a technical slippery slope between therapeutic cloning and reproductive cloning, which has already proved possible in animals (in the case of Dolly the sheep). However, there are also very clear differences between the two, which make it possible to distinguish between them morally - it is not a moral slippery slope. New cures for disease are needed and the consequences of producing new treatments seem, on balance, to be good. But in an over-populated world new ways of creating human beings are not needed, and the consequences of producing human beings by cloning might not be good at all.

Cloned human beings might suffer from unintended physical side-effects of the process, such as premature ageing or infertility, or other

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abnormalities, and we might decide that it would be unethical to grow human beings experimentally to the point where this could be detected. It is possible that cloned children could suffer psychologically - as do some adopted children or those born as a result of IVF. In many ways cloning seems like a vanity project: a parent would have to be very confident of his own qualities to want to produce a near identical child, and the expectations the parent would have of the child might hinder its healthy emotional development. For these reasons, humanists would probably oppose reproductive cloning.

Some of the fears raised by cloning do seem exaggerated - it would be a costly, slow and unlikely way to raise an super-fit army or Olympic athletes or scientific geniuses - selection from the existing population, training, and education would be much more cost effective. Fears that children would be absolutely identical to their parent, a younger twin, in effect, seem unfounded when we take into account the vital role of environment and upbringing in making us who we are: the child's experience of life would be very different from its parent's.

But even if some fears are irrational, we would need very good reasons to embark on an experiment that we might not fully know the results of for several decades. Knowing how to do something does not mean that we necessarily have to do it. Human beings have all kinds of knowledge and capabilities that we have decided it would be better not to use, for example, the USA and the former USSR have stockpiles of nuclear weapons that could wipe out life on Earth, but have chosen not to deploy them. Reproductive cloning might be another example. It is worth remembering that it not for scientists alone to decide how to use their research - it is a decision for society, and that means all of us.

### **Questions think about**

- Do you think an early stage embryo is a human being with human rights?
  - How big is a 14-day old embryo? What does it look like? (Ask your Biology teacher)
  - Find out what use(s) might be made of cloned embryo cells.
  - Find out what the law on embryo research is now, and if there are any plans to change it. Do you support change? Give reasons for your viewpoint.
  - Find out who supports embryo research and who opposes it, and why.
  - Do we need more people?
  - Do we need more of specific kinds of people?
  - Do we need them so much that we are prepared to take risks in order to produce them?
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- Do we need more of specific kinds of people? How are you deciding your answers to these questions? What principles and arguments influence your answers?

How is the humanist view on this issue similar to that of other worldviews you have come across? How is it different?

**Further reading:**

*Issues* - "Cloning" (Independence)

*Ethical Odyssey*, Kenan Malik on "the moral labyrinth presented by scientific developments" [in the RSA journal, Feb 2007](#)