'Spare embryos' pose ethical dilemma for pro-life camp

BY PAUL T. MENZEL

Campaigning for something as big as life is guaranteed to produce dilemmas. In the debate about embryonic stem cell research, one such dilemma has smacked up on "pro-life" groups, catching Senate Majority Leader Bill Prist, among others, in its jaws: If killing a human embryo is killing a human person, what treatment of the spare embryos produced by in vitro fertilization (IVF) is permissible?

To be sure, nothing in IVF per se is objectionable Menzel to an ardent defender of human-person status for embryos. In the procedure itself no embryo is killed, and many deeply deftired and loved children are born.

In practice, however, the widespread use of IVF depends on creating spare embryos. Egg withdrawal is expensive, and the odds of an implantation producing mature pregnancy are only modest, so additional eggs are simultaneously withdrawn and then fertilized, frozen and stored for later possible implantation.

Most of the resultant hundreds of thousands of frozen embryos end up at some point no longer needed, so each year around 100,000 simply get tossed. Any unfettered market for IVF will inevitably create this kind of situation.

Why no hue and cry about this practice from those who believe that an embryo is already the life of a sacred person? Why no demands to ban the creation of spare embryos?

The matter was far from the public spotlight until pro-life defenders objected to stem cell research on even the unneeded spares.

The only established method for removing stem cells from an embryo, after all, kills the embryo, so defenders of embryonic personhood understandably thought they must oppose the research. Even then, however, no apparent momentum has developed to bar IVF clinics from freezing and inevitably discarding embryos. Pleas for embryo adoption, yes, but no move to clamp down on clinics.

Isn't this hypocrisy and a deep flaw in the pro-life position?

Perhaps. Condoning what causes hundreds of thousands of embryo deaths while strenuously objecting to a few hundred embryos killed by stem cell removal doesn't look like integrity.

Would not the sensible compromise be to stick to one's tacit support of life-creating IVF clinics but relent on the research that kills already doomed embryos? No wonder, then, that many pro-life members of the House of Representatives voted to allow funding of research on stem cells from spare embryos. Now Prist, too, relents.

For a key moral reason, however, this will not likely become any bandwagon among pro-life groups. Even if tolerant of IVF clinics, they are not likely to soften their opposition to embryonic stem cell research. They think this tolerance and opposition, respectively, can be consistent, for not implanting the spare embryos, while it is failing to rescue, is arguably not killing. By contrast, removing stem cells directly kills the embryo.

The distinction between not rescuing and directly killing that is prominently at work in many of our laws and moral attitudes is undoubtedly also at work here. Pro-life advocates will think it saves them from hypocrisy.

No wonder, then, that many get angry at their comrades, such as Prist, who budge on stem cell research. Without the moral driver of a real inconsistency to demand correction, movement toward the center looks like pure political expediency.

But morally things aren't so easy for the hard-line pro-life position, either. When a clinic discards embryos, it can hardly claim it has not killed them. "Not rescuing" correctly describes what the clinic has done, but so also does "killing?" (Unless, of course, being frozen, these embryos are no longer alive. But then before being frozen, they presumably were alive, so the clinic would still be on the hook.)

We are thus back to the need for some sort of adjustment in the pro-life position: Either bar IVF clinics from creating banks of spares, or relent and agree that using spare embryos in stem cell research is permissible.

There's another conceptual possibility, too. Maybe the alleged wrong in abortion is not the killing of an embryo or fetus per se, but the interruption of a natural course of events that will likely bring the fetus to term.

Then IVF clinics would be clean: There would be no obligation to embryos not yet implanted, for they have no natural potential. Their potential life is totally contingent on a human decision to implant, perhaps, there is nothing terribly wrong with subjecting them to lethal research.

But that is probably just too far a stretch for many pro-life minds to make. Their focus is far from some relatively subtle "natural potential?" It is instead directly on the embryo as an individual. A fundamentalist gen-ticism is so deeply part of their view that few will revise it toward a naturalism more capable of handling current dilemmas.

Too bad, Bill; too bad, W. I doubt you've got an easy road ahead in your moral politics.

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