# THERAPEUTIC CLONING – CAN WE ALL AGREE?

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There is ongoing debate about whether it is ethically acceptable to allow the creation of cloned embryos in order to produce human stem cells. A cloned embryo is created through a process called somatic-cell nuclear transfer, often known as 'therapeutic' cloning. The value of stem cells lies in their capacity to become any sort of cell in the human body. This capacity is particularly useful for treating medical conditions where stem cells can be used to repair or replace damaged tissue. The value of a cloned embryo is that the DNA from a person who needs stem cell treatment can be used to create the clone and thereby minimise the likelihood that any inserted stem cells will be rejected. Research on the use of cloned stem cells is in its earliest stage.

Like most debates about ethical matters, each side in this debate bases its argument on an appeal to something 'higher' than the matter itself. One side might appeal to a higher being – god – while the other appeals, say, to a higher ethic of human wellbeing. The debate then degenerates into a stand-off. If my belief in god implies that I cannot agree to therapeutic cloning, that won't cut the mustard with somebody who does not believe in god. And your humanism, whether atheistic or otherwise, is barely worth consideration when compared to my bible-bashing certainty.

In so far as they are based on appeals to higher beings or values, such debates will remain unresolved – because the appeals themselves cannot be assessed. My belief in god does not somehow trump your humanism – even though I think it should – while your higher ethic is not higher than my appeal to divine revelation – even though you think I'm a deluded crank. A debate based on such

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appeals will not be won or lost through argument but simply on who has the numbers, or loudest voice or biggest stick, on the day.

How do we avoid this impasse? By not entering it in the first place. Instead of theorizing about the matter and appealing to higher authorities or ethics, let us first look carefully at what we are arguing about. Nobody can make a sound ethical judgment without knowing the facts of the matter, and sometimes a close look at the facts may suggest a resolution.

Let us start with the fact that surplus in vitro fertilisation (IVF) embryos are currently used for research. These are the fertilized eggs left over from an infertile couple's IVF program. With the couple's permission, these embryos can be used for research, during which they are destroyed. If the couple does not approve of their use for research, the embryos are eventually destroyed anyway. After all, they cannot be kept forever and they have no other use, so there is no alternative.

What does this show? Firstly, society does not think that an embryo has significant intrinsic value, let alone the same moral status as a child. If we thought otherwise we would not allow these embryos to be destroyed, within or without research. At the very least we would be agonizing over their destruction, which we don't.[1]

Secondly, society allows that using embryos for research is acceptable. The embryos are going to be destroyed anyway, so if using them might be of some benefit to humankind then that is acceptable. It is clear, then, that we regard a potential benefit to humankind as having higher moral status than an embryo.

Thirdly, we can agree to the use of IVF embryos without first resolving higher questions such as 'When does human life begin?' or 'At what stage does an embryo become morally significant?'. Whatever our individual thoughts on these questions, in practice we don't think that a week-old embryo is either human enough or morally significant enough for us to take to the barricades over its destruction.

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But wait a minute; what about those who *do* assert that an embryo has the same moral significance as a child and that therefore destruction of an embryo is akin to murdering a child? For example, I belong to a church which believes precisely that – that life, and therefore full moral significance, is established at conception. But do my fellow worshippers *really* believe this? If they did then they would do what any of us would do if, say, we suddenly found out that the local kindergarten was gassing children instead of caring for them. They would call the police, rally an assault and storm the kindergarten in an effort to save the children. Would they ever think of doing that to an IVF clinic or a research laboratory? Of course not, though they should if they were consistent in their belief that full moral worth begins at contraception. They don't storm the clinic – and if they did they would be committed to a mental asylum – because in practice people simply don't maintain that an embryo and a child have equal moral status, despite what they might assert.

So much for IVF embryos, but what about therapeutic cloning? How are embryos created through cloning different from IVF embryos? And what is morally significant about this difference?

Firstly, an IVF embryo is created from an egg and a sperm. A cloned embryo is created from an egg which has had its nucleus removed and replaced by the nucleus of a somatic cell – a skin cell, for example – from the person who requires treatment. Is this difference morally significant? Maybe, in that a cloned embryo is much less viable that an IVF embryo: if implanted in a womb, the clone is extremely unlikely to become a foetus. Moreover, the IVF embryo has two sets of genes, which is normal, whereas the clone has only one. For these reasons we might be inclined to say that the clone has less moral significance, less intrinsic worth, than the IVF embryo. Certainly nobody would suggest it has more. And if the clone has less moral significance then it follows that we should have even less concern about its destruction than we have about an IVF embryo.



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However, intrinsic worth is only one aspect; what about the purposes for which embryos are created? We don't have a problem with the creation of IVF embryos because they are produced so that childless couples can have children. What about clones? They are created with a view to producing stem cells that might ameliorate disease or other medical disorders. Of course, this is only a potential use; there is no guarantee that use of embryonic stem cells will achieve anything. In both cases, the intent is good: one to produce life and the other to improve or save it. Both goals are worth pursing; we can agree about that without having to decide which one has the greater moral significance.

Is it a moral problem that cloning is only a potential good? Not really; IVF is also 'only' a potential good. Many IVF programs do not succeed. Moreover, the couples and scientists involved know that almost every embryo created in a program is destined for destruction – except for the one or two that produce a successful pregnancy. Do we have a problem with this? No, because clearly we think that the mere possibility of producing a child has more moral significance that any number of embryos created to do it.

Does the possibility of producing a medical breakthrough have more significance than an embryo? As we noted above, society already holds that view. Moreover, if the cloned embryos created for this research are of even less intrinsic value than IVF embryos – certainly they are not more valuable – then we have even less reason to be concerned about their destruction.

What about the view that cloning is unnatural and therefore unethical? Cloning most certainly is unnatural, but so is creating an IVF embryo. Indeed, just about any medical intervention – like a heart bypass – is unnatural, so the mere fact in and of itself carries no moral significance. Even so, we might allow that cloning is more unnatural than IVF because at least the IVF embryo was created from a normal egg and sperm, but if that observation has any moral significance it is, as we noted, to reduce the intrinsic value of the clone.

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Let us sum up. In general, we agree that a potential medical benefit overrides the intrinsic value of an embryo. We agree it is acceptable to use IVF embryos for research. We agree that a cloned embryo has no more, and probably less, intrinsic value that an IVF embryo. We agree that the purpose for creating cloned embryos – for a potential medical benefit – is morally sound. I would say, then, we all agree that creating cloned embryos to produce stem cells is acceptable.

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## Note

[1] This is not to deny that some couples do indeed agonize over the destruction of their own embryos, though not over the destruction of somebody else's.



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