

Stem cell research and utilitarianism



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What if there was an opportunity to develop a cure for diabetes, HIV, or cancer? However, in order to achieve such a task, research and manipulation of embryonic cells are required. One may question the viability of the cells and if the embryos or fetuses are regarded as human lives. Stem cell research advances the knowledge about how an organism develops from a single cell and how healthy cells replace damaged cells in adult organisms. This paper will focus on the support of stem cell research and its importance in the future of medicine. Stem cells are undifferentiated cells that and renew itself and differentiate to yield some or all major cell types of tissues or organs. The potential in regenerating or manipulating stem cells for future treatment of genetic conditions or chronic diseases is profound and is needed for treatment of medical conditions. Utilitarianism is the theory of justice that is supportive of stem cell research. The foundation of this theory is “ the greatest happiness” principle. The lives that can be saved are immeasurable. But what about the embryos and fetuses that are destroyed in the process? If embryos are considered lives, stem cell research can be essentially considered as murder. The primary objection that may apply is that utilitarianism makes no room for individual rights. Sacrificing the life of one to save millions may be worth it and this paper will state the major points of support for stem cell research.

Stem Cell Research Controversy

Stem cells are undifferentiated cells in tissue that serve as an internal repair system that divide to replenish other cells within the body. These cells are capable of renewing themselves through cell division and can divide and

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repair damaged or worn out tissue. Human embryonic stem cells are stem cells that are derived from human embryos. Stem cells are able to divide and renew themselves for a long period of time, unspecialized and can give rise to specialized cell types (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2009).

Current research of stem cells includes controlling cell proliferation and differentiation through identification of how undifferentiated stem cells convert to differentiated cells that form the tissues and organs. Then controversy in stem cell research involves the creation, usage, and destruction of embryos. Creation of human embryo stem cell line requires destruction of the human embryo. At Harvard University, researchers attempted to transfer the nucleus of a somatic cell into an existing embryonic stem cell to create a new stem cell line. The ethical issue of manipulation and destruction of the human embryo and its stem cells center the debate on stem cell research. The pro-life movement is stemmed from the concern of the rights and status of the embryo as human life. Until recent years, stem cell research included removing tissue from an aborted embryo to get material to evaluate and study. Researchers are now reverting to obtain and manipulate pluripotent stem cells without the use of embryos. In the past, ethical issues of scientific research on aborted fetuses did not justify medical benefits.

Researchers began evaluating embryonic stem cells because they represent the earliest stage of later cell lineages and provide information on how development of tissues arise and treatments to cure or prevent chronic diseases (Robertson, 2010). Those against embryonic stem cell research

believe that fertilized eggs used in the laboratory are human beings or individuals with rights, moral and legal statuses of fully born persons. These individuals view destruction of embryos as murder or a sacrifice of the weakest for the interest of others. Those that support stem cell research do not view embryos to have interests or rights and should not be protected at the cost of scientific research. They also do not believe that fetuses develop any neurological capacity to feel pain.

Support of Stem Cell Research

Stem cell research has the potential to save millions of lives and give a new start to those that may have been threatened by chronic and/or fatal conditions. The conditions considered for potential cures include spinal cord injuries, multiple sclerosis, diabetes, Parkinson's disease, cancer and Alzheimer's disease. The possibility of reversing the effects of aging and prolonging life is beneficial for those who are interested. It may also increase the quality of life among many individuals. It is difficult to determine if embryonic stem cells are considered human life. So why not research the early stages of human development to facilitate medical advances for mankind? If we can improve the quality of life for individuals with chronic conditions by exploring the use of embryonic stem cells, why not research them?

There can be a comparison of stem cell research of embryonic stem cells to that of individuals in the military. People are recruited, trained, and deployed to protect the country from harm or terror. In the end, it is all done for the greater good and to save lives. In stem cell research, embryonic stem cells

are researched by manipulation or destruction to develop a stem cell line or cure for many progressive and fatal chronic conditions. This research is done to provide a line of defense against diseases that are harmful to the human being. When we look at the two examples, although different approaches, the overall goal is to protect the human race. I look at stem cell research as a way to protect human life against many harmful invaders that decrease the overall quality of life and may cause death.

Utilitarianism

It is known as the “greatest happiness” principle and utilitarianism argues that justice is maximizing individuals’ happiness and minimizing pain. John Stuart Mill, an English philosopher, stated acts should be considered as morally right or wrong if the consequences are of significance that an individual would wish to act in a preferred manner (West, 2012). These actions support the greater good for the greatest number. Utilitarianism defines morality as the maximization of total net expectable utility for individuals affected by an action or decision. There were multiple philosophers of utilitarianism including John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham. Both philosophers proposed this theory as a form of consequentialism which states that consequences are the ultimate basis for judgment about right or wrong conduct. Bentham stated that every moral argument should draw on the idea of maximizing happiness (Sandel, 2009, pg 32). He notes that the highest principle of morality is to maximize happiness and the overall balance of pleasure over pain. Bentham argued that every moral argument should draw on maximizing happiness (Sandel, 2009, pg 32). It is the foundation of moral and political life. When there is a choice to be made

between actions, utilitarianism's theory states that the choice with the greatest utility is the right choice.

Utilitarianism can definitely be applied to the controversial issue of embryonic stem cell research. Research of embryonic stem cells is conducted to develop cures and treatments of chronic conditions for the greater good of the human race. When we look at the overall goal and purpose of stem cell research, we can determine it as a morally right consequence. This is determined because the research is conducted in search of a cure for diseases and a treatment course that will increase an individual's quality of life thus increasing their overall happiness. The definition of justice can be considered as granting each person what they are morally due. Is it not fair to grant each individual a maximization of life and the most quality of life available? Stem cell research seeks to uphold that goal by looking for answers to a growing issue. Many people succumb to chronic conditions for various reasons. If cures or treatment plans that prolong the lifespan are developed, many lives will be saved and healthcare expenditures can decline. The costs for maintenance of diseases such as diabetes, heart failure, Alzheimer's disease would decrease because if cured, there will be no need for maintenance.

The Objection

There is no room for individual rights when utilitarianism is in place. This theory explains justice as saving the most lives. If we look at stem cell research and utilitarianism, then this objection can apply. If embryos used in stem cell research are considered the beginning of human life, then we look

at individual rights. There are none. The rights of the embryos that are manipulated and destroyed are not taken into account when looking at the overall purpose of stem cell research. The supporter of this objection states that everyone is created equally and no one individual is better or is worth more than another.

There is question on how the individual is treated under the theory of utilitarianism. Non-supporters of utilitarianism state that each individual is counted as one on an equal basis; however, it fails to respect the integrity of each person (Seehy, 2002). The objection states that the overall function of the treatment of individuals contribute to the greater good which in turn reflects impartiality. How can the individual rights of embryos/fetuses be taken into account if they are manipulated and destroyed for the goal of researching a cure for a chronic condition? Is it fair to play God and pick and choose which embryo or fetus will be chosen for research purposes? Another example in comparison to stem cell research includes the controversial issue of abortion. If an embryo/fetus is considered the beginning of human life, could we not consider the destruction of them as murder? How are the individual rights of these embryos taken into account? With utilitarianism, they are not because the benefits of research outweigh the risks and harm of that individual cell. Is this a fair statement? Is the sacrifice of few worth the greater good of many?

Response to Objection

Rule – utilitarianism is a term that determines the right or wrongness by finding the best rule of conduct followed by the majority of society (Seehy,

2002). John Mill attempted to respond to the objection mentioned above by presenting a rule and stating that individual liberties should be respected. He mentions that there is room for personal commitments without having to give up everything to help others. Maximizing utility in the long run by respecting individual liberties will lead to the greatest human happiness (Sandel, 2009, pg 47). Is happiness the only thing that matters in response to the objection? In stem cell research, is the only thing that is important is the potential number of lives that will be saved? Happiness is not the only issue when evaluating utilitarianism and stem cell research. Healthcare costs of treatment plans for chronic conditions continue to increase. The potential for cures of chronic diseases from stem cell research can save millions. But why support stem cell research after stating the objection of individual rights?

There has not been any research scientifically verifying human life beginning at the embryonic stage. So this research cannot be harming human life.

Some individuals believe that morally stem cell research reflects the act of “playing God” and it is an act that destroys human life. To answer that statement, who is to judge that manipulation of cells is morally wrong? There is no evidence that human life is being harmed and individual rights are not being subjected to foul play. With this not only will happiness occur but the overall consequence reflects the stages it took to achieve an end. Basically, the ending is virtue. Supporters of stem cell research can see no wrongdoing in the act itself. The objection cannot really apply if human life has not been determined. Let’s look at rule-utilitarianism and apply it to stem cell research. Can we maximize utility over a longer period of time in stem cell

research to make the topic acceptable? This means, is it possible to do research on limited number of cells over a period of time rather than all at once for the same ending result? Does this make the issue better and can maximum utility be achieved?

Conclusion

Stem cell research has been a topic of controversy for quite some time. Those who object the idea believe that there is manipulation and destruction of human life and murder is being committed. They believe that human life begins at the embryonic stage. In support of stem cell research, utilitarianism can be applied. Stem cell research seeks to achieve the greatest happiness and maximize utility by saving lives. The primary objection to this issue was the neglect of individual rights. However, if human life has not been determined, individual rights have not been compromised. In support of the greater good, stem cell research is needed in healthcare for medical advancement.

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