"Another View"

Op-Ed essays

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Science cannot provide us with a soul

December 26, 2001

published in The Morning Call newspaper (Lehigh Valley, PA)

CENTER VALLEY – Recently I went on a pilgrimage to Rome. While there, we learned of the amazing discovery that a biotechnology company in Massachusetts had created the first human embryo ever produced by cloning. Their intent, according to the company’s CEO, is merely scientific: to produce embryos from which to extract stem cells, which would then be useful in ongoing medical research.

After hearing the news, one of my fellow travelers asked me a poignant question: does the cloned embryo have a soul? With some trepidation, I replied “yes,” knowing that my response would generate more questioning. Amid the ensuing intellectual barrage, I wondered whether the scientists engaged in this type of research ever had to deal with such questions.

Back on American soil, I learned that public opinion tends toward differentiating between reproductive and therapeutic cloning. The former seeks to produce the replica of a person. Because of the potential for causing suffering, this prospect generates fear and, consequently, many regard it as a violation of ethical standards. Therapeutic cloning, instead, looks to the creation of a source for viable stem cells. Medical researchers hail this breakthrough as a significant step on the long path toward alleviating human suffering. Still, there is no mention of a soul.

But wondering about a “soul” is not merely a religious exercise occasioned by new scientific discoveries. To the contrary, it is the question that underscores the current debate, even though the interlocutors may never use the word. For the issue at hand is not merely laboratory technique or medical marvel. It is a question of what it means to be human, of how we understand who we are and, accordingly, how we treat ourselves and others. Posed in this way,
the aforementioned ethical distinction between reproductive and therapeutic cloning no longer holds.

Consider what the biotech company has produced. The embryo is alive, not artificial. The fact that it has life, biologically speaking, is both cause for amazement and reason for hope. Even if one were to mask it, as one of the ethical advisors to the company does, by calling it “cleaving eggs” rather than a living embryo, those eggs still have life. The astonishing vitality of this laboratory creation – its “aliveness” – is precisely what makes the discovery so intriguing.

And that life is human, genetically speaking. The embryo is derived not from a cow or chicken or pig; it is an exact genetic copy of an adult cell, a copy of what is human. This specific character of the cloned embryo is what makes the biotech marvel so promising, because it opens the door for medical research to be done directly with “human” matter.

Since this embryo is alive and is human, manufactured though it may be, there must be present, somehow, the “soul” that distinguishes human life from that of other living species. Here lies the mystery. How, when, or from where one “gets” a soul cannot be pinpointed empirically. However, that we have a soul – that is, that human beings are qualitatively different from other living organisms – is a truth that most people would acknowledge. With or without scientific knowledge, people of all walks of life cherish the fact that we humans have a distinct mode of existence in the world.

But when that humanness is devoid of mystery, when it is reduced to materiality in the production lines of biotech companies, then we suffer. A cloned embryo is intended to be, and has begun to be, specifically human. If it were not human, its potential for scientific research and promise for medical intervention would be significantly less. To destroy the embryo for experimental purposes may not cause pain, but it entails suffering nonetheless. Even if considered therapeutic, stem-cell research leads to “extracting” distinctively human life. Whether we speak in biological terms (referring to genetic make-up) or with religious vocabulary (the “soul”), something properly human dies in this process.

Natural science, by definition, does not consider the soul. Nor should it. But we who have one, we who are human beings, must do so if we are to comprehend who we are in our totality as persons. Scientific discoveries make possible important advances for our collective well being. But just because we are able to do something does not necessarily mean that we should. When it is a question of that very life for which science seeks an improved well being, then its destruction, in any form or for any purpose, should give us pause to consider what we are doing.

Calls for a ban on cloning, both reproductive and therapeutic, are voices crying out on behalf of the soul, in favor of that which makes us uniquely human. Without consideration of the soul, experimental science devolves into the manipulation of who we are and the utilization of persons for other ends. It minimizes our vision of ourselves. It reduces the world in which we dwell to the material of which we are made.

Without respect for our distinctively “human” being, our entire culture risks losing its soul. At this time of year, when we celebrate birth and life, sounds of silence will not suffice.
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