

The Stones Cry Out

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During my first pregnancy at the “old” age of 35, my husband and I, both physicians, stubbornly refused repetitive requests to perform an amniocentesis despite some insinuation that refusal was not wise. As we were unwilling to terminate the pregnancy for any reason, we did not want a procedure involving risk to the baby. It made me wonder how many medically unsophisticated patients who would never consent to abortion feel pressured into undergoing this test.

A maternal-fetal medicine specialist related that in her practice a majority of unborn children diagnosed with some disorder are aborted. The disorders may be relatively benign; cleft palate was the reason for a late termination in England.¹ A few years ago, a woman who had become pregnant during chemotherapy contacted me for help finding a pro-life obstetrician because her physician was adamant that she abort. In fact, wrongful life suits have now been brought against physicians for allowing a disabled child to enter the world.² Physicians who dislike performing abortions may do so anyway because of societal and/or legal pressure.

The battle that began a few decades ago between a woman’s “choice” and a fetus’ right to life has steadily spread to new frontiers. The fetus was the first casualty. Now, human embryos, the elderly, those with terminal illnesses, and severely disabled children have been captured and placed in the category of “not worthy of personhood—may be terminated.” The eugenics movement has emerged and the disabled and diseased are prime targets. Like slave trade, profits can be made at the expense of those defrauded of their basic human rights. Some examples:

- Routine abortions spawned the fetal parts research industry. The United States has a law prohibiting the sale of such parts, but reimbursement for “processing” is allowed. This loophole allows companies to publish catalogs advertising various fetal organs at a particular gestational age for a specific price.^{3, 4} Abortion providers, researchers, and various biotechnology and “processing” companies may profit from the destruction of human fetuses and the sale of their parts.
- In parts of the world, physician-assisted suicide and/or involuntary euthanasia of the elderly and children have become legal. It is cheaper to end a life than care for disability.
- Human embryos may be destroyed for use of their stem cells in research. Because of the inefficiency of producing embryonic stem cell (ESC) lines, only about one out of 40 donated embryos could end up as a cell line.⁵ Each ESC line represents a unique genetic individual, and can be patented in some countries (e.g. the United States), as can methodology in working with ESCs. Test tubes have replaced slave auction platforms, and physicians and biotech companies have become the slave masters in a grisly business where human lives can be sacrificed under cover of a white coat.

Our world has returned to the ethical landscape confronted by Hippocrates in which patients were unsure if a “physician” would heal or kill. The doctor might kill if someone paid him more than the patient. No trust was at the foundation of the doctor-patient relationship. To restore trust, Hippocrates and other doctors realized that physicians could only be healers and never killers. The Hippocratic Oath was formulated, which states that doctors will keep confidences and not take the lives of the unborn or their patients.⁶ Today, patients may ask whether physicians who are willing to kill an unborn child or assist an elderly person in committing suicide will protect them from harm. That line has been crossed that preserves the intrinsic value and sanctity of human life. There is no logical stopping point in devaluing an ever-expanding group of humans.

How and why has this happened? All of these life-dishonoring practices are rooted in a way of thinking about truth that has pervaded our culture: scientific truth is universal, but moral truth is personal opinion which cannot be imposed on others. It is less popular but more valid to state that scientific truth is limited to the population to which it applies, but moral truth is universal.

Let us first consider how scientific truth is derived and the relationship between scientific and moral truth before looking at the origin of morality. Then we may better understand the controversy over the beginning of human personhood. Books could be written about the following discussion; what follows is a simplified overview of the issues.

Scientific truth

Scientific conclusions must be based on logical derivation of facts without infusion of opinion. All researchers probably have some degree of bias. For example, some scientists believe that any findings that are not consistent with a naturalistic origin must be excluded as outside of science. Biologist Richard Dawkins states, "Even if there were no actual evidence in favor of the Darwinian theory...we should still be justified in preferring it over all rival theories."⁷ Scott C. Todd from the Biology Department at Kansas State University states "Even if all the data point to an intelligent designer, such an hypothesis is excluded from science because it is not naturalistic."⁸ As Nancy Pearcey points out, these statements constitute a prior philosophical commitment, not an unbiased interpretation of evidence.⁹

There are different gradations of scientific truth. Scientific studies have produced laws, consensus conclusions, and equivocal findings. Laws, such as Newton’s laws of motion and the laws of thermodynamics, are consistently true for all inhabitants of Earth. Consensus conclusions may not have identical results for everyone every time like a law, but findings are consistent enough to produce nearly universal agreement on a policy. Not every pregnant woman who takes thalidomide has a child with limb defects; yet this devastating complication precludes its prescription. Scientific data is equivocal when studies produce different and even opposing findings. Should post-menopausal women receive hormone replacement? The jury is still out.

Science cannot quantify, dissect, and define concepts like love, character, and morality. These concepts, which we know to be true, but cannot be proven by science, have been labeled “tacit

knowledge.”¹⁰ Even people with quite different philosophies can generally agree, for example, that murder and stealing are bad and loving one’s spouse is good.

Critical relationship between scientific and moral truth

Ethical integrity is essential for both the discovery and application of scientific truth. Objectivity can be tarnished by selfish desires, and unscrupulous principles may harm those to whom the scientific principles are being applied. If a researcher would like a certain outcome of a study for personal or professional benefits, data can be manipulated so that desired outcomes are more likely.

Scientific conclusions apply only to the population under study. Even scientific laws are limited in scope of time and space. Such laws did not exist before the universe was formed. Beyond Earth’s atmosphere, these laws may have different effects compared to that on Earth. For example, one would not feel the same gravitational pull in outer space that one feels on this planet. Newton’s laws may not apply for very small or very large masses. Moral absolutes are universal; they are timeless and do not vary with location. It is wrong to kill a person whether on Earth or in outer space; it was wrong when humans first came into existence, and it will be wrong in the future. Science must be governed by moral restraint. The Nuremburg Code and other worldwide medical research codes place ethical limits on scientific practices. They affirm that medical and scientific research must “do no harm” to human subjects, treating them with dignity and respect. Rights and welfare of the patient always trump scientific advancement.

Moral truth

The origin of moral truth is a crucial intellectual debate. Is there absolute moral truth, or does each person decide his/her own truth? The Christian holds the former position; the naturalist believes the latter.

Those who believe that the universe and all its inhabitants are the result of random forces of nature conclude that morals are relative. Richard Dawkins states, “There is at the bottom of it all, no good, no evil, no purpose, nothing but blind pitiless indifference... DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is, and we dance to its music.”¹¹ Murder of the disabled and weak should flourish in such an environment.

Yet, naturalists tacitly know that love is good and murder and stealing are bad. A competitive natural selection environment driven by random mutations provides no explanation for self-sacrificial love or the power to choose. Naturalists tend to make a leap of faith to conclusions unwarranted by their own philosophy: Dawkins, for example, suggests that we have the power to defy the selfish genes of our birth.⁹ Such thinking is a dishonest and schizophrenic departure from their core theory. It requires a division of truth, where naturalism governs ideas about the physical universe and self-gratification governs a personal morality. The choice to control one’s own destiny becomes the highest value, and there is no acknowledgement of an external anchor to keep one from drifting into dangerous moral practices.

For the Christian, morality and truth are rooted in the eternal God, made flesh in the person of Jesus. In His words, “I am the way and the truth and the life.” (John 14:6) It is out of God’s inherent love that the universe and the rules for its inhabitants came to be. Universal prohibitions against such actions as murder and stealing are derived from the equal value of each human life generated by our creation in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). Scripture relates that tacit knowledge about morality resides within each person: “Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves...since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts...” (Rom. 2:14-15). In contrast to secular personal morality that does not have external boundaries, Christianity has a clear framework recorded and preserved in Scripture that supersedes one’s own ideas. Unlike the divided mind of naturalists, a Christian professes one truth that encompasses every aspect of society—infusing the character of Jesus into science, work, relationships, government, law, etc. A researcher who holds to Christian principles of honesty and integrity, and operates within a framework of external truth is an optimal candidate to conduct scientific studies. Scientific and moral truths are not opposing forces; one supports the other.

Application: When is human life valuable?

These two viewpoints clash in defining when human life is worthy of protection. From a naturalistic perspective, the opportunity to benefit from the “science” of abortion, human embryonic stem cell research, and fetal parts research must be universally available, but the pertinent ethical principles are severed from such research or procedures and relegated to “personal morality.” The point at which human life begins becomes moral opinion. Consider the political candidate who states that while he is not personally in favor of abortion, he supports legal abortion because it is not right to impose his moral “opinion” into the scientific arena and on the population at large.

In contrast, Christian reasoning starts with universal moral truth that represents the lifeblood of their entire faith—the sanctity of human life created in God’s image—and consults science about when life begins. The intrinsic value of human life is not an “opinion” but a truth that forms the bedrock of the entire legal system and the framework within which science operates. When cracks appear in that bedrock, the entire foundation of society begins to crumble and sets the stage for anarchy and eugenics.

Science itself affirms that human life begins with one cell. Biology and embryology textbooks unequivocally state: “A zygote is the beginning of a new human being;”¹² and, “Life began for each of us with the fusion of...a sperm and an ovum.”¹³ Biologists have defined characteristics by which we recognize living organisms from the simplest one-celled amoeba to complex animals: composed of cell(s), molecular and cellular organization, energy use, response to environment, growth, reproduction, and adaptation.¹⁴ Human embryos carry out the same life functions as humans at later developmental stages, only they may do so differently. One cannot classify a human embryo as “not living” without refuting basic principles of cell biology. Scientific logic forces one to admit that a unique human life exists on a continuum from the moment of conception until a natural death. An embryo is a unique life complete in itself, unlike a clump of cells of one tissue type in culture that may be living, but is not a complete organism.

A physician's mandate to "do not harm" dictates that each human life must be protected from beginning to end. Some would admit that an embryo or fetus is intrinsically human and alive, but deny that it has full value of personhood. Such a judgment substitutes personal opinion for logical scientific deductions. Differences in abilities (capability of twinning, way of communicating, etc.), location (inside or outside a uterus), size, appearance, or status of being wanted or not by someone else do not change the intrinsic nature of each human individual along this continuum.

Throughout history, people have been discriminated against because of race, religion, nationality, etc. Less than 200 years ago in the United States, a group of people were assessed to be three-fifths of a person based on skin color. Is the fact that embryos and fetuses carry out their life functions in a developmentally appropriate way that is different than a human at a later stage of development a reason to classify them as having less than full personhood? If it is, then infants, children, and the disabled are not fully persons. Most people admit that a human embryo deserves some measure of respect, if not full entitlement to personhood. Even in vitro fertilization clinics, embryos are sometimes given a semblance of a funeral prior to being destroyed.¹⁵ If an embryo or fetus is not recognized as a full person, then how much of a person is he or she—one quarter or one half? When is full personhood achieved? If one is assessed to be half a person, does he or she then receive half of a right to life? Classifying human embryos and fetuses as having less than full personhood is pure discrimination based on developmental differences.

I used to sit at the bedside of critically ill children and neonates for hours, adjusting drips and ventilator settings, hoping that one day they would be able to walk out of the hospital either on their own or in the arms of their parents. The diseased and disabled are a blessing, not a burden. Sometimes they are forced to face difficult circumstances that teach lessons that could not be learned any other way. When patients learn from their difficulties, their wisdom is beneficial to those who take the time to get to know them. The many disabled children and their families that I have cared for over the years have not seen their lives as "not worth living." Certainly society should aim to eradicate or lessen disease, but not by eliminating people. Yet society is now targeting for elimination an ever-expanding group of people who do not function "adequately." The developmentally immature (fetuses and embryos), the elderly, and the diseased and disabled are falling prey to abortion, medical research, and euthanasia.

If we teach children in our society that it is okay to use any means to solve health or other problems in pursuit of happiness, even taking another person's life, what will that do to their character? What will this do to the character of any nation founded by people who sacrificed their physical bodies so that all humans could have, first and foremost, the right to life? It will have traded Scripture's highest ideal—self-sacrificial love—for selfishness, and the souls of children will perish as they pursue self-gratification as the highest good.

When one examines the science surrounding the beginning of human life, it is the Christian viewpoint that upholds both science and universal morality. It is a "personal morality" that discriminates against the youngest and weakest humans that defies science.

Challenge

In Luke 19, the Pharisees ask Jesus to rebuke the disciples for praising Him. Jesus says, “If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.” In our culture we see a lack of true submission to God in which lives are often lived to the praise and glory of self rather than God. Let our mission as Christian physicians be to show patients and colleagues how stones (representative of nature) are crying out in praise of God. Good science—the study of God’s creation—supports God’s truth.

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