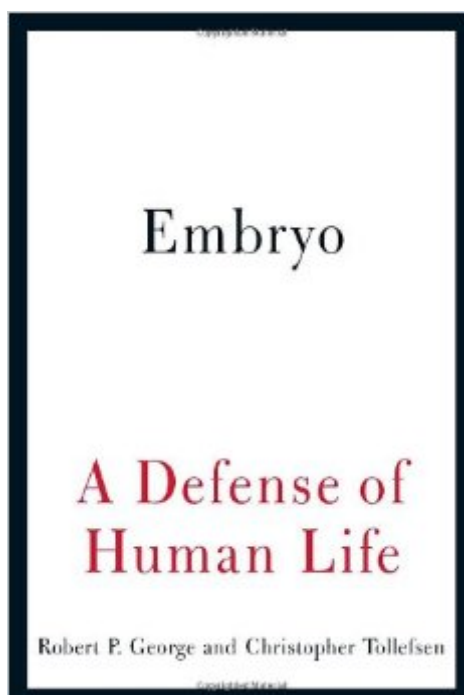


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Embryo: A Defense Of Human Life



Synopsis

The bitter national debates over abortion, euthanasia, and stem cell research have created an unbridgeable gap between religious groups and those who insist that faith-based views have no place in public policy. Religious conservatives are so adamantly opposed to stem cell research in particular that President Bush issued the first veto of his presidency over a bill that would have provided federal funding for such research. Now, in this timely consideration of the nature and rights of human embryos, Robert P. George and Christopher Tollefsen make a persuasive case that we as a society should neither condone nor publicly fund embryonic stem cell research of any kind. Typically, right-to-life arguments have been based explicitly on moral and religious grounds. In *Embryo*, the authors eschew religious arguments and make a purely scientific and philosophical case that the fetus, from the instant of conception, is a human being, with all the moral and political rights inherent in that status. As such, stem cell research that destroys a viable embryo represents the unacceptable taking of a human life. There is also no room in their view for a "moral dualism" that regards being a "person" as merely a stage in a human life span. An embryo does not exist in a "prepersonal" stage that does not merit the inviolable rights otherwise ascribed to persons. Instead, the authors argue, the right not to be intentionally killed is inherent in the fact of being a human being, and that status begins at the moment of conception. Moreover, just as none should be excluded from moral and legal protections based on race, sex, religion, or ethnicity, none should be excluded on the basis of age, size, or stage of biological development. George and Tollefsen fearlessly grapple with the political, scientific, and cultural consequences arising from their position and offer a summary of scientific alternatives to embryonic stem cell research. They conclude that the state has an ethical and moral obligation to protect embryonic human beings in just the same manner that it protects every other human being, and they advocate for embryo adoption "the only ethical solution to the problem of spare embryos resulting from in-vitro fertilization."

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Customer Reviews

This book, authored by two of my favorite philosophers, is perhaps the most sophisticated and clearly written defense of embryonic personhood that has come out since the onset of the biotech revolution. George and Tollefsen are conversant with the scientific issues as well as the deep philosophical questions of nature and personhood that percolate beneath the surface. They are also well-versed in the arguments of those with whom they disagree. One of their adversaries, Lee Silver, a colleague of George's, is singled out for special treatment. What makes this analysis particularly enlightening is how it exposes how little care Silver takes in crafting his moral and metaphysical arguments. But Silver is not alone. This sort of philosophical negligence is symptomatic of an academic culture that churns out wonderfully smart technicians, like Silver, who have floated through their professional lives blissfully unaware of the cluster of moral and metaphysical beliefs they take for granted and make their projects possible, but for which their scientism can provide no grounding. George and Tollefsen also critique Cartesian dualism as well as philosophical materialism, arguing for a Thomistichylomorphism as the best account of the human person. This is a wonderful book that should be in the library of any one who is serious about bioethics and the future of what it means to be human.---Francis J. Beckwith, Associate Professor of Philosophy and Church-State Studies, Baylor University. author of Defending Life: A Moral and Legal Case Against Abortion Choice (Cambridge University Press, 2007)

In this important volume two philosophers with interests in bioethics and law make the case for the moral worth of the human embryo from non-religious grounds. The case instead is made with a combination of science (biology, embryology, genetics) and moral philosophy. Thus this book covers a wide range of topics, and deals with the various technologies that threaten the human embryo, from abortion to cloning and embryonic stem cell research. Much of the discussion focuses on the scientific questions: what is an embryo, how is it formed and developed, and so on. The authors show that at fertilisation a new and distinct human organism comes into existence. The newly

formed zygote is genetically unique, and its sex is established. This newly formed zygote is genetically distinct from either of its two parents. When sperm and oocyte unite, there is a new human individual which comes into existence. It is a "single, unified, and self-integrated biological system", argue the authors, which is on a "developmental trajectory" toward a mature stage of human being. The authors remind us that the zygote is no longer some functional part of either parent, but a "unique organism, distinct and whole, albeit at the very beginning of a long process of development to adulthood". All the mother does from now on is provide nutrition and a safe environment for the embryo to grow. And this growth is internally directed. It contains within itself all the "genetic programming and epigenetic characteristics necessary to direct its own biological growth". It is a complete or whole organism, in the very early stages of development. And the changes from embryo to fetus to child to adult, etc., are simply changes in degree, not changes in kind. Thus the scientific question is easily answered. This is a wholly new and distinct genetic individual. And it of course is fully human. But questions arise as to whether this new human embryo is in fact a person. Here the authors move from science to philosophy. For science cannot answer these sorts of questions. Thus the need for moral philosophy. And here the authors take on all the leading critics of the personhood of the human embryo. Peter Singer, Lee Silver, Judith Jarvis Thompson, Michael Tooley and others are all interacted with. Drawing on a rich history of philosophical discussion, going back at least to Plato, the authors seek to establish the substance or essence of an entity, in distinction to its various characteristics or properties. Distinction, in other words, must be made between the kind of thing an entity is, and its accidental or contingent properties. For example, being left-handed or red-haired is not an essential feature of personhood, but is simply an accidental property. Utilitarian and consequentialist definitions of personhood fail to make this important distinction. Thus personhood is tied up with functionality and activity, instead of one's innate nature or essence. So persons are described as those with sentience, or self-consciousness, or various other functions. But the authors argue that the utilisation of these accidental properties is not the same as our fundamental nature or substance. The various abilities to reason, communicate, make free choices, and perform other functions of course are not fully formed in the embryo, or even in a young child. They take time to mature and properly develop. But the capacity to perform such functions is with us from the very beginning. Each new human being "comes into existence possessing the internal resources to develop such capacities". Thus human beings live personal lives, argue the authors. These lives are "characterised by a certain range of potentialities, which need not be fully instantiated or realized all at once or to the same degree in all cases". The bulk of this book then takes on the various arguments made against the personhood of

the embryo, and these functionalist definitions of personhood. Various philosophical and moral challenges and objections are carefully dealt with. Specific issues such as brain death, twinning, natural embryo loss, lifeboat ethics, surplus embryos, and other problems are discussed in detail. Challenges from cloning and other new reproductive technologies are also addressed. Finally, political, technological and cultural recommendations are made, based on this understanding of the complete humanity and personhood of the human embryo. This is a very fine book that covers most of the bases in what is often a highly emotive and controversial debate. The scientific, moral and philosophical case for the worth of the embryo is here clearly and dispassionately made. The authors have produced a welcome addition to the growing body of pro-life literature.

Finally, a book that confronts the dishonesty directly--by challenging those who continue to deny the humanity of the early human embryo. Drawing from science, philosophy, and the law--but not religion, George and Tollefsen make a compelling case that the early human embryo is not a "potential" human being, or a "pre human being" or a clump of unformed cells, but rather an individual member of the human species--deserving of respect and protection. The arguments are complex but readers will surely appreciate the ability of the authors to make the information accessible. I was especially grateful for the careful attention given to presenting the problems of dualism--it is the best articulation I have ever read on the "irrationality" of the dualist assumption. The fact that Doubleday was willing to publish this wonderful book should give those who support life a reason to be optimistic for the future!

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