

Book Review

Embryo: A Defense of Human Life

By Robert P. George and Christopher Tollefsen

Doubleday, New York, 2008. 242pp.

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Playing Defence for the Unborn

“Embryo: A Defense of Human Life” (2008), by Robert P. George and Christopher Tollefsen, boldly defends the proposition that it is morally impermissible to create and destroy human embryos as research tools and in reproductive technology. The focal question of the book, which the authors endeavour to answer in the affirmative, is this: “is the human embryo a human person worthy of full moral respect?”

The authors recognise that the embryo has a shared humanity with other members of the human species. By considering the distinctions between the embryo and those humans awarded human rights, particularly the right to life, the authors recognise the place of the embryo in the continuum of life as deserving of the same moral status as more developed humans. The authors argue that the embryo shares the essential properties inherent to all members of the human species and defends the embryo’s inherent human dignity, which goes hand in hand with the right not to be killed.

The beauty of this book is its earnest focus on the issues at stake – the embryo, what it is and the moral respect it deserves. Laid out in an evolving series of arguments, based entirely in embryo science and moral philosophy, the chapters are commonsensical and concise and provide a clear path to follow as the authors progress toward their conclusions. Though the comprehensible writing style and Socratic logic used by the authors is appreciated by many, there are those who doubt that such a complex topic as this can be discussed in the authors’ absolutist manner.¹

The authors introduce the book by telling Noah Benton Markham’s story. Noah was rescued from a New Orleans hospital following damage caused by Hurricane Katrina. Noah was an embryo. Sixteen months later he was born. His story is used to reflect his humanity throughout the continuum of his early life. The authors then seek evidence from science to establish what we know about embryonic Noah and whether his seemingly shared identity with the infant - and later child and adult - is actual.

It is the basics of embryology from which the authors draw the essential elements of their argument: that the embryo comes into being no later than the final moment of fertilisation. Furthermore, the authors distinguish the embryo from gametes and somatic cells by explaining that both gametes and somatic cells are functional parts of another human organism unlike the function of the embryo which is self-directed. At the end of fertilisation, the embryo is recognised as a complete, genetically unique and self-directed human organism, distinct from its mother and father. Though the special exception – twinning – often confuses this conclusion, the authors argue that this nevertheless

¹ *New York Times* reviewer and *Slate* magazine columnist William Saletan reviewed this book, entitled “Little Children”, February 10, 2008:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/10/books/review/Saletan-t.html>

To this review, Robert P. George and Christopher Tollefsen published an interesting online response:

<http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=Y2lxM2QzNDc4OTJhNmJjODEzMDBiYjRiZjQyOTg3YWw=>

To which William Saletan published a final response to comments made by George and Tollefsen:

<http://www.slate.com/id/2184360/>

remains true, even though part of the embryo later buds off to form another genetically identical individual.

The authors did not touch upon the topic of the mother's physical and hormonal role in the establishment of the environment for implantation and growth of the developing embryo. The synchronicity of the mother-embryo/foetal system is essential for the survival of the embryo and so excluding this detail could appear to be a limitation. However, covering this point would more likely distract from the author's central thesis and so their omission is understandable.

Much of the moral philosophical opposition to the book depends on dualism. This stimulates the book's detailed discussion about mind/soul-body dualism and moral dualism, which the authors repudiate by pointing out logical fallacies and hidden assumptions. A reasoned competing view to dualism is then suggested, one that is dependent on the essential biological nature experienced by humans. The authors find that all humans have a naturally rooted capacity to develop all human faculties during life. They then present a reasoned argument that this capacity exists from the moment a human individual comes into being. The authors discuss personhood as understood by utilitarian ethicists and what it actually is to be a person and to live a personal existence as humans do. Their reasoning reveals that all humans live personal lives regardless of their developmental stage. The authors also discuss absolute and inviolable human rights and human dignity as relating to the protection of the basic human goods – life and health – and show why destructive embryonic experimentation is morally wrong, because it is a violation of respect for the person and the embryo's human right not to be killed.

It cannot be denied that "Embryo: A Defense of Human Life" focuses on presenting one side of the embryo debate – the side which argues for the protection of human embryos. Their position identifies with that of other rights based and natural law theorists. However, the authors establish their moral philosophical position after much discussion about key opposing arguments given by prominent moral philosophers including Peter Singer, Michael Sandel, Lee Silver and Ronald Green. The authors refute arguments that find embryos themselves do not deserve full moral respect, pointing out flaws in the arguments and the analogies used. Yet, in proposing their competing view, they recognise where their own arguments might fail and invite their readers to find their faults.

It is daunting how comprehensively George and Tollefsen detail the points they make. They include plenty of summarising statements, concluding chapters and good introductions to help their reader understand their reasons for addressing subsequent points. The authors are clearly gifted in their ability to explain complex issues. Perhaps this is not surprising, after all this is a topic they have had much opportunity to discuss in their field of work. George is a Professor of Jurisprudence at Princeton University and a member of the President's Council on Bioethics and Tollefsen is an Associate Professor in Practical Ethics at the University of South Carolina.

All readers interested in the embryo debate, regardless of their views, will benefit from recognising the quality of the arguments George and Tollefsen put forward. The book is deeply informative, not only about what we know from embryological science, but also about the current issues relating to the moral status of embryos. This book ought to stimulate readers to examine their reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with the authors and help them to better understand the debate at hand, and what they do or do not know.