

Chapter 4

The Value of Life of the Embryo Observed from Two Different Lenses: From its Own Potential to Develop, and from the Context in which it is Embedded

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ABSTRACT

The chapter deals with moral deliberation over the status of the embryo, observed from two perspectives, namely the inner context of physical and biological composition including the argument of potentiality as a driving force of development, and the external context within lived and experienced practices in which an embryo is inevitably embedded. Both components are integral parts of what constitutes the life of the embryo, and therefore any separated observation is biased and does not fulfill the demands of the universal truth. Hence, the usual argument that focuses exclusively on the embryo itself, whether the embryo deserves moral right as a result of its potentiality for autonomy, is misguided.

INTRODUCTION

Ethical and legal discrepancies over the status of the embryo has always been full with different interpretations and applied practices based on the never ending story about the beginning of the human life. This eternally mystical question has been tackled by philosophers, ethicists and lawyers, but what urges for a precise resolution is the scientifically immense progress towards introduction of new ways of life creation.

The moral status of the human embryo, and therefore the definition of personhood represent a core issue for the ethical debate around the technosciences. By fixing a broader or narrower concept of the human person, the group of human beings that hold an ontological status can be enlarged or diminished.

Under these circumstances, respect for the embryonic life will vary according to the model we follow, in terms of belonging to the group of human persons worth respecting. An extreme position could imply full moral recognition of embryos as already being human persons, and

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61692-883-4.ch004

consequently, minor or nonexistent competence on the progenitors to decide over their parenthood regarding already created embryo, whereas on the other side, we may experience an excessive lack of respect towards embryonic human life, and primary respect for the progenitors and their autonomy in the process of decision making over the life of that very same embryo. Therefore, the determination of the status of the embryo does not affect only the future life of the embryo, but the future life of the progenitors, as being parents or not.

The concept of personhood is ambiguous for several reasons. As a key element that launches all the other consequential misinterpretations is the context in which a person developed. By investigating cultural attitudes, Vasil Prodanov distinguishes between individualists and collectivists, as related to Catholic, liberal and Western tradition on the one hand, and Orthodox, communitarian Eastern European tradition on the other (Prodanov, 1996). According to him, while “the former sees the person as a bundle of rights,” the latter perception of a person is identified with a “bundle of his social identities, affiliations and roles.” From this quotation, it is understandable why the actualization of personhood in Western countries begins with the moment when one is entitled to acquire her own rights, and in Eastern countries only when one coexists in the group, class or community and consequently becomes a recognized subject, not as a holder of rights, but primarily as a holder of obligations. Therefore, if for the individualists, the human essence originates from within, as inherited and self-sufficient element for individual development, for the communitarians, the same human essence is a substrate of social identities, affiliations and roles. Bearing in mind this historical background of development of the thought and science, it is easy to understand why some authors hold firmly on ontological properties, claiming individuality as a supreme value and promote observation over isolated oneself, while others always interrelate

the individual with society, as a mutual mirror in which both the individual and the society look upon and, therefore shape themselves.

This paper will try to settle both levels of perception by setting forward two perspectives: the rights oriented one that primarily concentrates on the debate on the progenitors as already established human persons, and the moral one that originates from the intrinsic capacity of the embryo itself to develop, from the argument on potentiality. Elaboration of that kind will attempt to explain that both perceptions are important and interconnected for creating overall picture, and even more, that any other restrictive observation will lead to biased conclusions.

ETHICAL INTRODUCTION: AN ARGUMENT OF POTENTIALITY

In a circumstance where the universe consists of you, the others, and myself, the task of sharing the same lenses of perception towards an object under observation is a difficult one.¹ Therefore, the process of articulating and balancing different moral values has to take into consideration all the parties, starting from their intrinsic capacities, and extending towards the contexts in which they appear to act.

To clarify what the concept of moral status means, I will use the definition that Mark T. Brown offers: “To ascribe moral status to a class of entities is to rank them on an internal scale of moral values that determines how the obligations owed to these entities can be reconciled with those owed to entities located at other points on the scale” (Brown, 2007). According to this definition, the paper will try to locate the moral position of the embryo in constellation with its peers group, gametes as antecedents, newborns and adult human persons as its descendants from their potential to develop from one to another².

In the ethical deliberation, the paper will focus on observing and analyzing two points of view:

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