



# EMBRYONIC STEM CELL RESEARCH: BIOETHICAL DIMENSIONS

## 1. ABSTRACT

In this unit, students will explore the scientific, conceptual, and ethical implications of embryonic stem cell research. Why should they care? Well, for one thing, the decision on whether to allow or ban stem cell research may have a significant impact on the lives and welfare of thousands if not millions of people. The reason the debate between advocates and opponents of stem cell research is so fierce is that the arguments used are based on deep-seated beliefs about the nature and the status of human life and personhood.

One of the main goals of this unit is to provide students with a thorough understanding of several concepts surrounding stem cell research, so that they can develop an informed perspective on the topic. The three main components of the unit are: 1. Analysis of key concepts used in the debate about stem cell research; 2. Scientific facts of stem-cell research; 3. Tools for ethical reasoning and decision making. In the course of the unit, students will explore questions such as: What exactly are embryonic stem cells? Do embryos constitute human persons? What are current regulations and what ethical claims are they based on?

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## 3. INTRODUCTION

The current debate surrounding embryonic stem cell research dates back to 1998, the year Dr. James Thomson from the University of Wisconsin-Madison succeeded in isolating cells of early embryos (donated by individuals who were undergoing treatment at fertility clinics) and developed the first embryonic cell lines. A heated moral debate ensued about whether the use of embryonic cell lines in research should be allowed or banned. This very public debate culminated with President Bush limiting federal funding of embryonic stem cell research to cells that had already been derived at the time of his announcement, on August 9, 2001. Despite Bush’s decision, the debate has since continued among scientists, bioethicists, religious leaders, patient advocates, celebrities, and politicians. On one side of the debate are those who consider any kind of research on human stem cells morally reprehensible because it involves the destruction of human embryos. On the other side are those who believe such research to be crucial in the development of promising ways to combat otherwise untreatable diseases, such as Parkinson’s disease, or trauma such as spinal cord injury. Early in his term, on March 9, 2009, President Obama lifted the limited ban on embryonic stem cell research.

This unit consists of three main components: 1. Conceptual Analysis, 2. Scientific Facts, and 3. Ethical Reasoning.

1. Taking a closer look at key concepts used in the debate will give students an impression of how strongly people feel about the issue and introduce them to the overarching questions for this unit: Should stem cell research be allowed or disallowed on ethical grounds? The following analysis of key concepts will raise questions about concepts like ‘life,’ ‘personhood’ and ‘personal identity’. Key questions include: “What is the definition of ‘life?’” and “When did you become you?” Through an independent exploration of the key

concepts, students will become aware of the extent to which they are often used in an ambiguous and misleading way, and that an understanding of the meaning of these concepts is essential for decisions about the validity of the arguments that use them.

2. Next, a brief presentation of the scientific facts about stem cell research will provide students with an understanding of the technical terminology and distinctions between, e.g. “stem cells” and “embryonic stem cells”, etc. What exactly are stem cells? What are embryonic stem cells? What does embryonic stem cell research entail? What are the potential applications and benefits of embryonic stem cells?

3. Armed with both an understanding of the key concepts in the debate and an understanding of the scientific facts, students will be ready to consider the ethical implications of the issue. Students will be provided with the tools for ethical decision-making by being introduced to some of the major approaches to ethics, including deontological ethics, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics. Understanding the arguments used by these different ethical philosophies will allow students to consider the moral complexity of stem cell research.

### **Learning Outcomes and Enduring Understanding**

- To understand and assess the main arguments used in the stem cell debate
- To be familiar with the basic scientific facts about stem cells and stem cell research
- To understand the ethical and philosophical implications of stem cell research
- To develop and be able to defend a position on the issue of stem cell research

### **Pennsylvania State Standards (see also Appendix)**

- |  |                        |
|--|------------------------|
| 1. Reading, Writing, Speaking & Listening (Grade 11):      | 1.1., 1.2., 1.6., 1.8. |
| 2. Science & Technology, Environment & Ecology (Grade 12): | 3.2., 3.6., 3.8.       |
| 3. Civics and Government (Grade 12):                       | 5.2, 5.3.              |
| 4. History (Grade 12):                                     | 8.3.                   |
| 5. Health, Safety and Physical Education (Grade 12):       | 10.1.                  |

## **3. PROCEDURES & ACTIVITIES**

This unit uses a student-centered and interactive approach to teaching, in order to allow for a maximum degree of student participation. Each activity is marked as an individual, partner, or group activity, or as a teacher-directed class discussion.

**The following icons are used to designate the different types of activities:**



**- Individual Activity**



**- Partner Activity**



**- Group Activity**



**- Teacher-Directed Class Discussion**

## **4. PRE-EXISTING KNOWLEDGE**



**Individual Activity**

Students will complete a questionnaire meant to tap into any pre-existing knowledge on the subject students may have. Students should answer as many of the following questions as possible.

1. What are stem cells? Where do they come from? What do they do?
2. What does research on stem cells entail?
3. Why is stem cell research controversial?
4. What celebrity is/has been advocating for stem cell research, and why? (e.g. Christopher Reeve, Michael Fox, Nancy Reagan)
5. Why do you think people may be opposed to stem cell research?
6. Do you know anybody who is either involved in stem cell research, or could profit from the results of stem cell research?
7. Based on whatever information you may have about the topic: Are you a) more in favor, b) less in favor, or c) undecided on the question of whether stem cell research should be allowed.
8. What is a key question you would like to explore with regard to this topic?



**Teacher-Directed Class Discussion**

Collect and discuss students' answers. Organize answers to question #8 on the board.

Questions may include: What exactly are stem cells? Are there different kinds? What is the goal/ what are the (potential) benefits of research on stem cells? Why is it controversial? On what basis should we make a decision? Is it legal now? Point out that all these questions will be answered in the course of this unit. Give a brief overview of the overall structure of the unit.

## 5. THE DEBATE: ANALYSIS OF KEY CONCEPTS

In this segment, students will be introduced to the debate over stem cell research. By examining statements made by people from different walks of life (politicians, scientists, religious leaders, etc.), students should get a sense of the key concepts used in arguments on both sides of the debate.



### Teacher-Directed Class Discussion

Share the following cartoon with students. What does this cartoon say about the nature of the debate over stem cell research and the issue at the heart of the debate?



(Taken from: [http://sibin.blogspot.com/2007\\_02\\_01\\_archive.html](http://sibin.blogspot.com/2007_02_01_archive.html))



### Partner Activity

With a partner, students will read the quotes below and answer the following questions:

1. Which of the following statements supports and which of them opposes stem cell research?
2. What are key concepts used in the statements that may require further clarification in order to understand and evaluate the position represented by the respective statements?

#### Pope Benedict XVI

Sept. 18, 2006, in an address to an international congress sponsored by the Pontifical Academy for Life and the International Federation of Catholic Medical Associations:

*The destruction of human embryos to harvest stem cells is "not only devoid of the light of God but is also devoid of humanity" and "does not truly serve humanity."*

#### President George W. Bush

Aug. 9, 2001, in an address to the nation on stem cell research:  
*"An ethicist ... told me that [a] cluster of cells is the same way you and I, and all*

*the rest of us, started our lives. One goes with a heavy heart if we use these [embryonic stem cells], he said, because we are dealing with the seeds of the next generation."*

#### Chuck Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship Ministries

July 22, 2006, in an op-ed, "The Veto: Should We Cross the Great Moral Divide?"

*"The supporters of embryo-destructive research want to cross a great moral divide. They are seeking not only to destroy human life made in God's image but also to manufacture life made in man's image. Tragically, we are losing this fight, however, because too few people understand the issues."*

#### John Danforth, former U.S. senator and Episcopal priest

November 2005, in a TV ad sponsored by the Missouri Coalition for Lifesaving Cures, advocating a state ballot initiative to allow stem cell research in Missouri:

*"My entire political career, I voted pro-life, and that is exactly why I favor the stem cell initiative. I believe in saving human life. I want cures to be found."*

#### Bill Frist, former U.S. senator and Republican majority leader from Tennessee

July 29, 2005, in a speech on the Senate floor:

*"I am pro-life. I believe human life begins at conception. I also believe that embryonic stem cell research should be encouraged and supported. ... An embryo is nascent human life. This position is consistent with my faith. But, to me, it isn't just a matter of faith. It's a fact of science."*

#### U.S. Sen. Orrin Hatch of Utah

July 23, 2006, commenting on President Bush's veto of federal funding for stem cell research using human embryos, CBS News Sunday Morning with Charles Osgood:

*"I understand that many have ethical and moral reservations about stem cell research, but for the same reason I describe myself as pro-life, I embrace embryonic stem cell research because I believe being pro-life is not only caring for the unborn but also caring for the living." And on NBC's Meet the Press: "I just cannot equate a child living in the womb, with moving toes and fingers and a beating heart, with a frozen embryo sitting in a lab somewhere."*

#### Dr. Leon Kass, former chairman of the President's Council on Bioethics

Oct. 8, 2004, in his Washington Post op-ed piece, "Playing Politics With the Sick."

*"The moral issue does not disappear just because the embryos are very small or because they are no longer wanted for reproductive purposes; Because they are living human embryos, destroying them is not a morally neutral act. Just as no society can afford to be callous to the needs of suffering humanity, none can afford to be cavalier about how it treats nascent human life."*

#### Kurt Warner, Arizona Cardinals quarterback and founder of First Things First Foundation

Oct. 27, 2006, in a TV ad in response to advertisements advocating stem cell research in Missouri:

*"I am all for finding a cure for any and every disease known to man, but there are certain issues that outweigh just finding a cure and doing research and life is one of those. ... As much as I'm for research, nothing outweighs the pro-life issue. [With embryonic stem cell research] you're taking human life."*

#### J.C. Watts, former U.S. congressman from Oklahoma.

Aug. 12, 2001, in response to a question on whether he considers the president to be "pro-life," CNN Late Edition with Wolf Blitzer:

*"There's just too many areas that are inconclusive out there for us to get on a slippery slope to say we should take life in order to enhance life."*

#### Laurie Zoloth, Ph.D., professor of medical humanities & bioethics and religion, director of Center for Bioethics, Northwestern University

(Sept. 29, 2004, in a congressional testimony to the Senate Subcommittee on Science, Technology and Space):

*"While I respect that this is a difference in theology [regarding the moral status of a human child], and while I understand the passion and the conviction of those for whom the blastocyst is a person from the moment of fertilization, I do not believe this, and it is [a] matter of faith for me as well. My passion and my conviction are toward the suffering of the one I see in need, ill or wounded."*

**Colleen Parro, spokesperson for the Republican National Coalition for Life, 2001-JUN**

"We do not believe that human beings should ever be sacrificed for the benefit of another. We thought we left that at Nuremberg more than fifty years ago."

**Testimony of a disabled woman at a Congressional hearing**

"Do I want to see again? Dance again? Hear like I once did? I do not want those things at the cost of any living person and I consider live embryos to be people."

**Paul Berg, Cahill Professor of Biochemistry, Emeritus**

"I am acutely aware of the ethical sensitivities that have been expressed regarding the sources of stem cell lines. But, surely, obtaining cells from legally obtained abortants or from early stage embryos that are destined to be discarded in the course of IVF procedures and making them available for potentially life-saving purposes would be viewed as ethically permissible if not a moral imperative."

**Yvette Cooper, Junior health minister, British government, 2000-DEC.**

"In embryonic stem cells may lie the key to healing within the human body."

**Christopher Reeve, Chairman of the Christopher Reeve Paralysis Foundation. He suffered a spinal cord injury in 1995, and died in October 2004.**

"Stem cell research holds the promise of hope for 100 million people living with incurable diseases from diabetes to heart conditions to Alzheimer's to Parkinson's, ALS, MS, and spinal cord injury. It will affect the entire American family. I believe this is why we find in this new survey such strong support from people with such diverse religious and ethical beliefs."

(Quotes taken from: [http://www.religioustolerance.org/res\\_stem1.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/res_stem1.htm)  
<http://pewforum.org/Science-and-Bioethics/Quotes-on-Stem-Cell-Research-from-Political,-Religious-and-Other-Prominent-Figures.aspx>):

**Teacher-Directed Class Discussion**



Collect and discuss students' findings. (Answer to question #1: Support: Danforth, Frist, Hatch, Zoloth, Berg, Cooper, Reeve; Oppose: Pope, Bush, Colson, Kaas, Warner, Watts, Parro, disabled woman at hearing). With regard to the second question, concepts in need of further clarification identified by the students are likely to include: "life" and "human life." In the following activity, students will take a closer look at how these terms are used in the above quotes.

**Partner Activity**



With your partner, look at the following statements and replace the underlined words with a synonym or a word/phrase that paraphrases its meaning.

1. "I am pro-life."  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 (e.g. for the protection of all forms of life, human life)
2. "An embryo is nascent human life."  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 (e.g. human being, person)

3. "[Embryos] are living human embryos."  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 (e.g. not dead, emphasis on "living" and "human")
4. "[We should not] take life in order to enhance life."  
 \_\_\_\_\_/  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 (e.g. individual lives vs. life in general/other lives or forms of life)



**Teacher-Directed Class Discussion**

Collect and discuss students' findings. As should be clear from the previous activity, the way "life" or its derivatives are used in these statements is quite ambiguous. Its meaning ranges from "any kind of organic matter," to "a fully developed, living human being." In the following we will take a closer look at the meaning of the concept of life, in general, and human life, in particular.



**Individual Activity**

Ask students to complete the following sentence: "Life is \_\_\_\_\_."



**Teacher-Directed Class Discussion**

Collect and discuss students' answers. (Answers may include: breathing, moving, not being dead, beautiful, etc.). Answers are likely to reflect the broad range of meanings and uses of the word.



**Partner Activity**

In this activity, students should organize a number of items according to the categories: "alive," "not alive," or "not sure".

- VIRUS
- SESAME SEED
- ROCK
- INDIVIDUAL SPERM
- HUMAN EGG BEFORE FERTILIZATION
- HUMAN SKIN CELL
- RAINDROP
- HUMAN EGG AFTER FERTILIZATION
- FINGER NAIL
- TREE
- YEAST
- PERSON IN A PERMANENT VEGETATIVE STATE
- PIECE OF WOOD
- PERSON IN A COMA
- HUMAN EMBRYO
- YOUR COMPUTER

ALIVE	NOT ALIVE	NOT SURE



### Partner Activity

With a partner, students should compare their findings and discuss what criteria they used to make their decision. Ask students to come up with a definition of life that would cover all items listed in the “alive” category.



### Teacher-Directed Class Discussion

Collect and discuss students’ findings. Based on their findings, students should try to come up with a definition of life that they can all agree on. Students may refer here to one or all of the “seven signs of life” (movement, respiration, sensitivity, growth, reproduction, excretion, nutrition.) Based on this very broad definition of life, students should then come up with a definition of *human* life. What are the defining characteristics of *human* life that makes it different from not human life?



### Partner Activity

Based on our previous discussion: Which of the things that fall under our definition of life, in general, and human life, in particular should have special protection? In other words: What is or should be included in the term “life” in the statement: “All life should be protected?” Do human beings deserve more special protection from harm or destruction than other forms of life (e.g. plants, animals, etc.). Why?



### Teacher-Directed Class Discussion

Collect and discuss results. (Results may include: Non-human living things deserve protection, only in so far as they are important for us. Human beings, on the other hand, deserve protection because they are persons and as such have a special status. Therefore, any part of a human organism that is necessary for its existence as a person (heart, brain, etc.) is protected from destruction, whereas parts that are not essential (e.g. fingernails, hair, etc.) are not.)

Further questions for discussion:

1. How about limbs and other individual parts of the human body that are not essential to a person’s existence? Is it only a matter of life and death or should human life also be protected from impairment? What are possible exceptions?

2. Are there exceptions to the protection of persons? (death penalty, war, self-defense, euthanasia, etc.)
3. Who decides about exceptions to this rule? On what criteria are these exceptions based?
4. Is it possible for something to be a human being and not be a person? If so, does a human being that is not or no longer considered a person (e.g. a human being in a permanent vegetative state) still fall under the category: All life should be protected?
5. Could it be argued that all human beings (independent of their status as persons) and all parts of a human organism (independent of whether they are essential to the survival of the person) should be protected from destruction just because they constitute a form of life (in the broad sense)?



### Teacher-Directed Class Discussion

Let’s look at what we’ve come up with, so far: As we have seen the term “life” used in the debate over stem cell research to mean a broad range of things: In the broadest sense of the word it is used to refer to all living organisms, whereas a narrower definition of “life” refers to human life, and, more specifically, persons. While there may be cases where we may no longer grant a person special protection (persons that are seen as a threat to our society or country, or those who have committed heinous crimes) or cases in which a living human organism is no longer considered a person (people in a permanent vegetative state), we could probably agree that, in general, living human beings and all parts of the human organism that are indispensable and their existence should be protected from destruction.

Now, in order to understand the debate over stem cell research better, we need to understand what exactly stem cells are, and in what way the above stated principle, that life (qua human beings, persons) should be protected from destruction, may be violated in stem cell research.

## 6. THE FACTS: THE SCIENCE OF STEM CELLS AND STEM CELL RESEARCH



### Individual Activity

What is a cell?

Ask students to write down a definition.

A cell is \_\_\_\_\_.



### Teacher-Directed Class Discussion

Collect students' findings. Answers may include: A cell is the smallest unit of a living organism; basis of any living tissue; contains a nucleus etc.

#### Follow-up questions:

How do you think stem cells are different from ordinary cells? What does the word "stem" suggest? Think of other uses of the word "stem" (e.g. stem of a tree, to stem from, etc.).



### Partner Activity

Students will read the following text and answer the questions below.

What are stem cells?

Stem cells are undifferentiated or "blank slate" cells from which other types of cells can arise. The defining characteristic of human stem cells is their ability to self-renew (provide an exact copy of themselves) while maintaining the potential to develop into other types of cells, such as blood, brain or heart. Although all stem cells share these general characteristics, there are also significant differences among them. There are three major types of stem cells.

1. Pluripotent Stem Cells (PS cells). Pluripotent stem cells have the capacity to divide for long periods while retaining the ability to make all cell types within the organism. The best known type of pluripotent cell is the embryonic stem cell. As the name implies, embryonic stem cells (or ES cells) are derived from embryos at what is known as the blastocyst stage of development. The stem cells originate from the inner cell mass inside a hollow ball of cells that is smaller than the period at the end of this sentence. The unique characteristic of embryonic stem cells is the ability, in theory, to replicate indefinitely while retaining pluripotency. This makes them especially interesting to biomedical science as a potentially inexhaustible source of cells for both research applications and for potentially treating many different diseases.

2. Fetal stem cells. These are derived from specific tissues of a developing human fetus. Scientists can generate cells from different regions of the developing body and expand them in culture for long periods. These fetal stem

cells seem to retain characteristics of the tissue from which they were taken. For example, fetal stem cells derived from the brain have the capacity to make only nervous tissue, not blood or heart tissue. Sometimes these are called progenitor cells, indicating that they have the potential to make only a limited range of tissue types.

3. Adult stem cells. These can be isolated from some tissues of the adult body. Bone marrow, for example, is a rich source of stem cells that can be used to treat some blood diseases. Adult stem cells have been found in many different tissues, but they are sometimes limited in their ability to expand in large numbers or differentiate into a wide variety of cell types.

(Taken & adapted from: <http://stemcells.wisc.edu/patients/>)

1. How are stem cells different from regular cells?
2. What does "pluripotent" mean, and how are pluripotent stem cells such as embryonic stem cells different from fetal stem cells and adult stem cells?
3. What makes embryonic stem cells especially valuable for medical research and treatment?
4. What does the text say about how the different types of stem cells are generated?



### Teacher-Directed Class Discussion

Collect and discuss students' findings. Emphasize differences between adult and embryonic/fetal stem cells. Adult stem cells can be derived without harming or destroying a human being. But because adult stems are already specialized they can only become the cell type present in the tissue from which they were taken. Embryonic stem cells, on the other hand, can turn into all of the 220 mature cell types in the human body. However, in the process of harvesting embryonic stem cells, the embryos from which they are derived are destroyed. It is this fact that is at the center of the debate. One of the key questions is: What is the status of the embryos that are used to harvest embryonic stem cells?

Here are some more facts:

- Embryonic stem cells are typically derived from 3-6 days old human embryos
- These embryos are usually leftover in vitro fertilization embryos, created in a laboratory dish for the purpose of treating infertility

- Unused embryos are either donated to research, discarded, or indeterminately frozen
- The embryo at this stage is part of the blastocyst which consists of an inner cell mass (or embryoblast) and an outer cell layer (trophoblast) that later develops into the placenta.
- The inner cell mass contains about 50 cells that have not yet developed into specialized cells
- Cells derived from blastocysts are able to replicate themselves, i.e. they form 'cell lines' that can be kept and used in research for a long period of time
- Embryonic stem cells are used in research on the origins of many diseases (e.g. Parkinson's, Huntington's, Alzheimer's, spinal muscular atrophy, etc.), are used to develop new drugs, and are used to produce cells and tissues for transplants

(Based on information taken from:  
[http://stemcells.wisc.edu/pdf/Questions\\_about\\_ES\\_Cells.pdf](http://stemcells.wisc.edu/pdf/Questions_about_ES_Cells.pdf))

Based on these additional facts about embryonic stem cells:

- How are these facts relevant to our discussion about "life" and "human life" in the previous segment?
- What exactly is the status of an embryo that is used to derive embryonic stem cells?
- What kind of "life" is it? It's obviously life (according to the broadest definition of life being ...), but is it "human life?" And if so, does that make it a person?
- Where does the 3-6 day-old embryo fall on the line of development from the moment of conception to the death of a human being?
- In other words: When did you become you?



### Individual Activity

When did you become you? Students will be asked to answer this question in any way they choose.



### Teacher-Directed Class Discussion

Collect and discuss students' answers (e.g. the moment I was conceived, the moment I was

born; the moment of my first memory, etc.)  
 Discussion questions:

1. What do I mean, when I say "I became me"?
2. Does that mean that I was not me in one moment, and in the next moment I was?
3. If so, what are the criteria that would allow us to distinguish between the two states?
4. Does it make sense to say that the six -day-old embryo (that eventually turned into me) is as much me as I am now? If so, in what sense?
5. How is this related to our discussion of the difference between "human being" and "person"? (Does it make sense to ask: When did I become a person?)

Since I am, as a human being (and especially a young human being), constantly developing, maybe what I mean when I say the embryo is me is: That is the moment at which the development that made me who I am now, *began*. The embryo is *potentially* who I am now. So, while we would probably say that the embryo constitutes human life and the early stages of a human being and thus a potential human being qua person, does that mean that it should have the same protection as, or protection in the name of, the actual person that it may become?



### Partner Activity

Ask students to think of other instances in which two objects are the same thing at different stages of development (e.g. acorn-oak tree, egg-chicken, manuscript-book, tadpole-frog, caterpillar-butterfly, etc) and to decide whether the two should be considered the same thing, and in what sense.



### Teacher-Directed Class Discussion

Collect and discuss students' answers.  
 Discussion Questions:

1. If I destroyed the acorn, did I also destroy the tree?
2. Had I not destroyed the acorn, would it (necessarily) have turned into an oak tree?
3. Is the tree that is being prevented from coming into existence by destroying the acorn a *particular* oak tree?

4. How real is a potential oak tree?
5. Is this comparison valid, or is there something different about human beings? What?
6. Is there a difference between the acorn I destroyed and other acorns that are kept in storage, but are never used (and thus never allowed to develop into oak trees)?

All these questions lead us now to the question of whether it is ethical or not to destroy embryos to generate stem cells.

## 7. ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES



### Teacher-Directed Class Discussion

As we have seen, one of the key questions in this debate is that of the status of the embryos that are used to develop stem cell lines. Is it unethical to destroy embryos that have the potential to turn into human persons? Should human persons be protected from destruction at all costs? (What are cases in which we allow for the destruction of human persons—war, death penalty, lack of money available for safety and health care, etc.) And even if we grant embryos as potential persons special protection, to what extent does the prospect of helping actual persons outweigh the effect of stem cell research on potential future persons?



### Group Activity

Divide students into small groups. Each group will read one of the following texts, reflecting a particular philosophical approach to deciding ethical questions. Ask each group to consider whether a proponent of their approach would consider stem cell research ethical or unethical.

#### 1. DEONTOLOGICAL ETHICS

Advocates of Deontological Ethics believe that certain actions are right or wrong in *themselves*, regardless of what consequences they may have. For deontologists actions are forbidden or required by the dictates of reason. The most influential philosopher to espouse this view – and, arguably, the most important European philosopher of all time -- was Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).

Kant argued that the highest good – the only thing that is good without qualification -- is a good will. Kant uses the expression “good will” to signify the motivation to do the right thing simply because it is the right thing-- to act from a sense of duty. Right actions done by chance or for ulterior

motives deserve no moral approbation. For something to be good without qualification, its presence must improve any situation. This, Kant claims, is true of a good will alone.

But how can a person of good will know what is right? Kant gives us a rational method for determining the rightness or wrongness of potential actions – a way for us to rise above our desires and emotions and act on the dictates of reason. He calls his principle the Categorical Imperative (CI) because it is expressed in the form of a command that must be obeyed under all conditions. In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* he writes: “Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”

This principle is consistent with our natural inclination, when assessing the moral status of an action, to ask, “What if everyone did that?” The categorical imperative instructs us to test each rule or maxim we plan to follow by universalizing it and then checking to see if the universal version is logically consistent with the personal maxim. For example, suppose you take as your personal maxim: “I will make false promises whenever I can benefit from doing so.” Now, make this a universal law: “All people will make false promises whenever they will benefit from doing so.” A moment’s reflection makes it clear that it is logically impossible to adopt the personal maxim *and* will that it become a universal law. Any advantage you gain by making false promises depends on a tradition of promise keeping. If breaking promises were the rule, no one would expect you to keep your promise. In making your personal maxim, you must will that keeping promises is universal (except in your own case); in making the universal law you must will that not keeping promises is universal. The personal maxim fails the CI test because it leads to a logical contradiction. By following this procedure each of us can generate his or her moral duty not to make false promises.

In a second formulation of the CI Kant instructs us to “act so that you treat humanity...always as an end and never as a means only.” This formulation instructs us to be mindful of the infinite, intrinsic value of human beings. Because of this value, they cannot be used only as things to help us achieve an end; each human being is an end-in-herself. Kant thought that this formulation is equivalent to the first in the sense that it will generate the same set of rules. We cannot make false promises to achieve personal ends, for example, because we would be using another as a means only.

#### 2. CONSEQUENTIALISM/UTILITARIANISM

Consequentialist ethical theories determine the rightness or wrongness of an action by its consequences rather than by the type of action it is. They define the right in terms of the good. The right action is the one that produces the most good. This begs the question, “What is good?” The most widely supported version of consequentialism is called utilitarianism. Utilitarians consider happiness (pleasure or well-being) to be the only thing that is good in and of itself – the only thing that has *intrinsic* value. Utilitarians strive to follow the *greatest happiness principle*: act so as to produce the greatest overall happiness.

1. Identify the feasible courses of action.
2. Calculate the sum of “utility” (pleasure and pain) associated with each action for everyone affected.
3. Choose the action that will result in the greatest amount of utility - the greatest happiness, everyone considered.

An attempt has been made to devise a procedure that preserves the fundamental insight of utilitarianism—the importance of promoting the common good, without producing moral judgments that are inconsistent with our ideas about rights, duties, and justice. Rather than applying the utilitarian calculus to each action (*Act Utilitarianism*), *Rule Utilitarians* attempt to identify a set of rules, which if followed, would maximize happiness. Perhaps, “do not kill innocent persons,” is such a rule. But what if the common good would be better served if the rule were modified to say, “do not kill innocent persons except those in persistent vegetative states who have written advance directives indicating that they do not wish to be kept alive under such circumstances.” Rules with exceptions

may produce more overall happiness. But as exceptions multiply, rule utilitarianism can become indistinguishable from act utilitarianism.

### 3. RIGHTS

The idea that human beings have rights can be traced back to Roman law. Roman legislators established legal procedures for Roman citizens to make claims to the protection of their personal interests. This concept was later extended to moral rights using the theory of natural law. In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson declares that humans are “endowed, by their Creator, with certain unalienable Rights.” Jefferson doubtlessly borrowed this idea from John Locke’s masterpiece *Two Treatises of Government*. Writing in the natural law tradition, Locke argued that people are entitled to certain protections and benefits, not because their government grants them, but because God ordains them. Therefore, Locke concludes, natural rights cannot be taken away by a government; protest and even rebellion are justified when a government fails to respect the natural rights of its citizenry.

The idea of moral rights that transcend human legislatures follows from the Kantian, duty-based ethics. Kant makes a distinction between perfect and imperfect duties. An imperfect duty, such as the duty to help others, can be discharged in numerous ways. The duty is not to help all who need assistance – an impossible task – but simply to make an effort to offer some aid on some occasions. Therefore, no one can claim a right to your assistance on a particular occasion. Perfect duties, however, such as the duty to keep promises, require specific actions. Therefore, people can expect to be told the truth; they have a *right* to be told the truth.

### 4. VIRTUE ETHICS

The attempt to establish a system of ethics on the virtues began with the Greeks. The idea was to begin with character, in particular the *ethika aretai* (skills of character) that enable humans to flourish. Actions were to be judged based on whether or not they were characteristic of the men who exemplify these “skills.” Right action is defined in terms of the behavior of the virtuous.

For the ancient Greeks, what it means to flourish is determined by human nature. Man can experience *eudemonia* - happiness, fulfillment, success, satisfaction – only when his essence as the “rational animal” is fully developed. They felt that this development could be accomplished by practicing the intellectual virtue of wisdom and the moral virtues of courage, temperance, and justice. These admirable human qualities entail behavioral dispositions that represent a balance or “golden mean” that fosters the good life. Cowardice, for example, consists of an excess of fear while foolhardiness or rashness results from an insufficient measure of fear. Courage represents the balance point, neither too little nor too much fear.

For virtue ethicists, the proper foundation for ethics is the virtues, not right action. The purpose of morality, after all, is to foster the good life, and it is the virtues that lead to human flourishing. The virtues are fundamental. As such, virtue ethics is grounded in concrete facts about human nature, cultural traditions, and individual lives, rather than in abstract concepts. It strives to build underlying moral fiber – the dispositions, goals, and habits that enable people to behave in exemplary ways under extreme and novel situations. Virtue ethics strives to dig beneath the superficial decision-making process and create an enduring foundation of habits and character traits from which decisions can be made that will enable men to flourish in a complex world.



### Teacher-Directed Class Discussion

Each group will first give a summary of “their” ethical approach, and then say whether or not they found it helpful in deciding whether stem cell research should be considered ethical



### Teacher-Directed Class Discussion

Given all the aspects (conceptual, scientific, ethical) of the issue considered in this unit, if you had to make a policy recommendation: Would you suggest—on ethical grounds—that stem cell research should be allowed or not?

## 8. REFERENCES & ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

General information on stem cells and stem cell research:

- <http://stemcells.wisc.edu/patients/>
- <http://stemcells.nih.gov/info/basics/>
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stem\\_cell](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stem_cell)

History of stem cell research:

- <http://www.newsweek.com/2010/08/24/a-history-of-embryonic-stem-cell-research.html>
- <http://www.scienceprogress.org/2009/01/timeline-a-brief-history-of-stem-cell-research/>

Stem cell research debate:

- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stem\\_cell\\_controversy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stem_cell_controversy)
- [http://www.religioustolerance.org/res\\_stem.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/res_stem.htm)

## 9. APPENDIX:

### *Pennsylvania Academic State Standards Addressed in this Unit*

READING, WRITING; SPEAKING AND LISTENING (Grade 11)

#### 1.1. Learning to Read Independently

- D. Identify, describe, evaluate and synthesize the essential ideas in the text. Assess those reading strategies that were most effective in learning from a variety of texts.
- F. Understand the meaning of and apply key vocabulary across the various subject areas.
- G. Demonstrate after reading understanding and interpretation of both fiction and nonfiction text, including public documents.
  - Analyze the positions, arguments and evidence in public documents.
  - Critique public documents to identify strategies common in public discourse.

#### 1.2. Reading Critically in All Content Areas

- A. Read and understand essential content of informational texts and documents in all academic areas.
  - Differentiate fact from opinion across a variety of texts by using complete and accurate information, coherent arguments and points of view.
  - Distinguish between essential and nonessential information across a variety of sources, identifying the use of proper references or authorities and propaganda techniques where present.
  - Use teacher and student established criteria for making decisions and drawing conclusions.
  - Evaluate text organization and content to determine the author’s purpose and effectiveness according to the author’s theses, accuracy, thoroughness, logic & reasoning.

### 1.6. Speaking and Listening

- A. Listen to others.
- Ask clarifying questions.
  - Synthesize information, ideas and opinions to determine relevancy.
- D. Contribute to discussions.
- Ask relevant, clarifying questions.
  - Respond with relevant information or opinions to questions asked.
  - Listen to and acknowledge the contributions of others.
  - Facilitate total group participation.
  - Introduce relevant, facilitating information, ideas and opinions to enrich the discussion.
- E. Participate in small and large group discussions and presentations.
- Organize and participate in informal debate around a specific topic.

### 1.8. Research

- A. Select and refine a topic for research.
- B. Locate information using appropriate sources and strategies.
- C. Organize, summarize and present the main ideas from research.

## SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY, ENVIRONMENT AND ECOLOGY (Grade 12)

**3.2. Inquiry and Design:** The nature of science and technology is characterized by applying process knowledge that enables students to become independent learners. These skills include observing, classifying, inferring, predicting, measuring, ... communicating, using space/time relationships, ... raising questions, formulating hypotheses, ... interpreting data, formulating models, designing models, and producing solutions. Everyone can use them to solve real-life problems. ...

**3.6. Technology Education:** Technology is the application of tools, materials, processes and systems by humans to solve problems and provide benefits to humankind. We use technology in an attempt to improve our environment. These improvements may relate to survival needs (e.g., food, shelter, defense) or they may relate to human aspirations (e.g., knowledge, art, control). They can include unexpected benefits, unexpected costs and unexpected risks. Technology education involves a broad spectrum of knowledge and activities. Effective technology education combines knowledge of content, process and skills to provide students with a holistic approach to learning.

- Analyze biotechnologies that relate to propagating, growing, maintaining, adapting, treating & converting. ...
- Analyze specific examples where engineering has impacted society in protection, personal health application or physical enhancement.

**3.8. Science, Technology and Human Endeavors:** Science, Technology and Scientific knowledge and societal needs often create a demand for new technology. Conversely, Human Endeavors new technology advances scientific knowledge. Both influence society through the impact of their products and processes.

- A. Synthesize and evaluate the interactions and constraints of science and technology on society.
- Evaluate technological developments that have changed the way humans do work and discuss their impacts (e.g., genetically engineered crops).
  - Evaluate socially proposed limitations of scientific research and technological application. ...
- C. Evaluate the consequences and impacts of scientific and technological solutions. ...
- Analyze scientific and technological solutions through the use of risk/benefit analysis.
  - Analyze and communicate the positive or negative impacts that a recent technological invention had on society.
  - Evaluate and describe potential impacts from emerging technologies and the consequences of not keeping abreast of technological advancements (e.g., assessment alternatives, risks, benefits, costs, economic impacts, constraints).

## CIVICS AND GOVERNMENT (Grade 12)

### 5.2 Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship

- A. Evaluate an individual's civic rights, responsibilities and duties in various governments.
- F. Evaluate how individual rights may conflict with or support the common good.
- G. Evaluate what makes a competent and responsible citizen.

### 5.3 How Government Works

- D. Evaluate how independent government agencies create, amend and enforce regulations
- G. Evaluate how the government protects or curtails individual rights and analyze the impact of supporting or opposing those rights.

## HISTORY (Grade 12)

### 8.3 United States History

- C. Evaluate how continuity and change has influenced United States history from 1890 to present.
- Innovations
  - Social Organizations (e.g. technological impact)
- D. Identify and evaluate conflict and cooperation among social groups and organizations in United States history from 1890 to the present.

## HEALTH, SAFETY AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION (Grade 12)

### 10.1 Concepts of Health

- E. Identify and analyze factors that influence the prevention and control of health problems.
- Research
  - Medical advances
  - Technology
  - Government policies/regulations

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