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Review of Robert P. George and Christopher Tollefsen, *Embryo: A Defense of Human Life*

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Church's earliest history of concern for the suffering and dying. It is a challenge under a threefold heading: *diakonia*, exercising the ministry of charity; *kerygma-martyria*, proclaiming the word of God; and *leiturgia*, celebrating the sacraments:

These duties presuppose each other and are inseparable. Insofar as healthcare ministry is an expression of this broadly sacramental character of the Church, Catholic hospitals should be signs and instruments of union with God effected by service of the sick, witness given to Gospel truth, and worship offered in prayer and pastoral care. (286)

In the rest of the chapter he explores "what these three 'sacramental' aspects of healthcare might say about the distinctive role of the Catholic hospital in a pluralist society" (286).

Finally, in chapter 11, Fisher examines the duties of politicians with regard to protecting human life, looking in particular at principles based on *Evangelium vitae*, the *Catechism*, and other magisterial documents.

Using *Evangelium vitae* n. 73, he examines specifically how a Catholic politician can limit the evils of abortion law. When it is impossible to overturn a very evil law, legally limiting moral evil is a great good, because it potentially saves human lives. While many would prefer, as a matter of conscience, to vote wholly against amendments that limit the evils of abortion, this approach only strengthens the abortion mind-set of politicians. Chipping away at a bad law's consequences does not abandon moral principle in this regard.

This is a fine introduction to Catholic bioethics that will have a lasting effect throughout the universal Church.

REV. BASIL COLE, OP

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¹ Gilda Sedgh et al., "Induced Abortion: Incidence and Trends Worldwide from 1995 to 2008," *Lancet* 379:9816 (February 18, 2012): 625–632.

Embryo:
A Defense of Human Life, second edition
by Robert P. George and Christopher Tollefsen

Witherspoon Institute, 2011, paperback, \$17.95
300 pages, bibliography and index, ISBN 978-0-981-49114-1

Robert P. George and Christopher Tollefsen have issued a second edition of their wonderful book *Embryo: A Defense of Human Life*. The first and largest part of the book argues that every single human being through all stages of human development—embryonic, fetal, neonatal, and adult—should, to use Richard John Neuhaus's phrase, be protected by law and welcomed in life. George and Tollefsen make their case on purely rational grounds by appealing to scientific evidence and philosophical reasoning. They explicitly and successfully avoid any justification for their views that relies on religious dogma, papal teaching, revelation, or faith. This book also *argues*—rather than simply assumes—for

its positions and responds to copious objections from the most serious and well-known defenders of lethal embryonic research.

The book begins by establishing what is at stake in the embryo debates by telling the story of Noah, who was rescued following Hurricane Katrina. Only toward the end of the story do we learn that Noah was one of the youngest residents of Louisiana, a tiny embryo rescued from a damaged hospital and later welcomed by his gestational mother.

George and Tollefsen establish their case against lethal embryonic research by an extensive discussion of the facts of human reproduction and embryology, citing numerous textbooks and scientists specializing in

this area. Their conclusion, based on the best scientific evidence available, is that a human embryo is a living, whole, unique, and self-developing member of the human species.

Those who justify lethal embryonic research will sometimes acknowledge these empirical findings but then defend the killing of embryos by saying that human persons were never embryos. On this view, human persons are not identical with their animal bodies, which do indeed stretch back to an embryonic stage. Such defenders of the killing of embryos draw a distinction, then, between the personal self and the physical body and argue that our personal selves arise some months after the physical body that was the embryo. George and Tollefsen vigorously tackle this dualistic position, presenting a series of arguments whose conclusion is the same: we (human persons) are essential (rational) animals, living organisms, rather than just souls, minds, or inner experiences.

Next they critique rival moral philosophies—especially consequentialism of various varieties as well as Kantian deontology—and argue for the superiority of the (new) natural law approach. From the natural law perspective, every human being, from the very beginning of his or her life until its end, is due the respect, legal protection, and moral rights of every other human person regardless of location, age, size, dependence, or health condition. The basic human goods should be respected in each one of us, including those of us in the first stages of embryonic self-development toward full human maturity.

In chapter 5, the authors return to dualism, this time not body–self dualism but a dualism that posits that a “human being” is not a “person” with basic rights and dignity. They tackle the views of David Boonin, Ronald Green, and Michael Gazzaniga among others in this chapter, which argues for the conclusion that every single human being is a person.

In chapter 6, George and Tollefsen take up various objections to the conclusions that they have drawn thus far. They effectively respond to a series of critiques, including (1) that the embryo is not an *individual*

human being because an early embryo can split into twins; (2) that the embryo is not a human being because it is not really a unified, integrated *organism* but rather a collection of disorganized cells akin to a bag of bottles; (3) that the embryo does not *look* human in size, shape, and appearance and so is not a human person; (4) that human embryos are not different from stem cells, which everyone agrees may be destroyed; and (5) that human embryos have only “vegetative” life, not “sentient” life, and so may be killed. None of these objections survives the critical analysis offered by the authors.

Further challenges addressed by George and Tollefsen include the objection raised by Michael Sandel that just as an acorn is not an oak tree, so too the human embryo is not a human person. They also respond to Paul McHugh, who argues that while human embryos generated through natural conception or IVF have moral status, human embryos generated through cloning do not, and so constitute a separate class of beings, “clonates,” that may be killed for research purposes. Ronald Green and Gene Outka object that even if every human embryo is a person, lethal research is not ethically wrong because the embryos are “doomed for destruction” anyway, so nothing is really lost but something is gained when lethal research takes place. In responding to these challenges, George and Tollefsen show the rational deficiencies of the justifications for lethal embryonic research.

The new edition of *Embryo* adds significant clarifications, developments, and responses to the first edition. It clarifies the authors’ view about exactly when a new, whole, distinct, living member of our species comes into existence, namely, when the sperm has entered and united with the oocyte, earlier than syngamy. The new edition also notes important developments in the debate over stem cell research, including scientific breakthroughs that allow mature somatic cells to reprogram and dedifferentiate back to a stage of pluripotency. These have allowed scientists both to make stem cells without killing human embryos and to make stem cell lines that are compatible with

adults in need of treatment without cloning and killing embryos. George and Tollefsen also make note of political developments, such as President Obama's overturning of President Bush's ban on federal funding for embryo-killing research as well as Obama's rejection (for unknown reasons) of Bush's promotion of federal funding for research using sources of pluripotent cells that do not come from embryos.

The final section of the book, also new, reprints an exchange of views between the authors and William Saletan, beginning with Saletan's review of the first edition in the *New York Times Book Review*. Saletan, who defends embryo research, recognized the important achievement of George and Tollefsen, calling their book "essential and timely" (words reversed on the front cover of the second edition), yet he found fault in their argument. Oddly, Saletan rehearsed the objection from twinning as if George and Tollefsen had not treated this point at length in the first edition. Saletan offered other objections as well, to which George and Tollefsen responded, point by point, in an article first published in *National Review Online*. Saletan then offered a critique of this response in the pages of *Salon*, and George and Tollefsen responded again in *National Review Online*.

This is a wonderful book that offers a powerful, rational, and persuasive case against lethal embryo research. The new material added since 2008 is important and justifies the new edition. Part of what makes this book so helpful and important is its objective and measured tone. Opponents are treated as respected interlocutors and challenged not personally but only in terms of the arguments they have presented.

An exception to the measured and reserved tone of the book is the treatment Lee Silver, professor of molecular biology at Princeton University. As George and Tollefsen rightly

point out, Silver's defense of lethal embryo research often involves snide *ad hominem* attacks on his opponents, including George and Tollefsen themselves. "This confusion," write George and Tollefsen, "utterly invalidates Silver's argument. . . . Silver seems almost studiously to avoid the question that is really at issue" (166, 168). One can almost sense George and Tollefsen's frustration with Silver, a frustration that is easily understood. If there is a third edition of *Embryo* (and I hope there is), it will be improved if the authors take more care with the tone of their discussion of Silver's views.

Other suggestions for improvement are similarly minor. In various places, George and Tollefsen also speak about the "mentally retarded," but it would be more in keeping with their emphasis on the intrinsic dignity of each person to speak of the "mentally disabled." I also wish the book had taken up at greater length the views of Jeff McMahan, whom I regard as one of the most intellectually powerful defenders of lethal embryo research. Finally, I wonder whether the book might be even better organized.

Despite these minor demurrals, *Embryo: A Defense of Human Life* is an enormous achievement. George and Tollefsen present a strong philosophical case that does not rely on faith or revelation—the case that every single human being, including the smallest at the very beginning stages of life, should be morally protected from being intentionally killed or otherwise adversely experimented upon or made into research material. They respond to the most important opponents of this view with powerful rebuttals and reasoned retorts. *Embryo: A Defense of Human Life* deserves a wide readership.

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