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Embryonic Stem Cell Research According to Islamic Texts and Beliefs

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Numerous religions push back against medical science when it conflicts with their religious beliefs. Human embryonic stem cell research is one such issue that regularly experiences push-back as it introduces an ethical challenge to many religious communities. However, according to Muslim beliefs, the research should be considered ethical and permissible by most followers, as the embryo is destroyed long before it has developed into what is considered an individual with rights. Still, many struggle with the practice's permissibility and the ethics surrounding it. For those who do, it is important to consider a respect for life, referring to individuals who are vulnerable, but have proven themselves as viable and pious Muslims. Together, these matters of when life begins and a respect for life suggest that human embryonic stem cell research should be ethical and permissible according to Islamic texts and beliefs.

Stem cells are being extensively researched all over the world today to treat countless diseases and injuries, because they have the unique ability to differentiate into any specialized cell or become many more stem cells. This research stirs ethical disagreements, because one of the most frequently used types of stem cells are human embryonic stem cells (HESC). HESCs are removed from an embryo "around the fifth day of the embryo's development" and because the process "eliminates the potential for further development", it raises the question of whether the process kills a human life.¹ To determine whether HESC research should be considered permissible in Muslims communities, researchers can study the traditions of when life begins and the respect for life according to Islamic texts and beliefs. By exploring these factors, one can deduce whether HESC research is ethical and therefore, permissible from the perspective of Muslim communities.

Most Muslims disapprove of harming or destroying a fetus once ensoulment occurs, because an individual earns their rights at that moment according to most understandings of

Islamic texts.² There are three general opinions of when ensoulment occurs in Islam. Most Muslim groups agree with a report from Ibn Mas‘ud, one of the first converts to Islam and a loyal companion to the Prophet Muhammad, that states: “Each of you is gathered in his mother’s womb for forty days; then [he is] a clot of blood for the same period; then he is a clump of flesh for the same period”.² Following these 120 days “the spirit is breathed into it”.² The individual is then ensouled with “[his occupation], his livelihood, his span of life, and his felicity or damnation”.² A number of Hanbali, a traditional school of Muslim thought, and Maliki, a school of Muslim thought based on the Prophet Muhammad, argue an individual “gains the status of protected human life” much earlier than 120 days after conception.² For them, only in the first forty days is abortion permissible, because at that stage the embryo or fetus “is not definitely known to be anything at all”, but afterwards is unacceptable as it becomes clearer the woman is with a child.² Lastly, some Shafi‘i, those who attempted to resolve the conflicts in Islamic practices, and more conservative Maliki claim that “it is forbidden to take steps to expel the semen at any time after it has been implanted in the womb”.²

Although various schools of Muslim thought have conflicting beliefs of when ensoulment occurs, none of them overtly disagree with the process that is undergone in HESC research. Those who believe in the first two arguments, that ensoulment and the receipt of rights occur long after the fifth day of development, should view the act as far from a crime even though it destroys a potential life. However, like many Christians, the Muslim Shafi‘i and conservative Maliki might be more hesitant as they believe in the beginning of life at fertilization. One of the crucial differences, however, is that they reference fertilization and implantation in the womb, while HESC research involves *in vitro* fertilization. Numerous modern scholars also reference how if a fertilized ovum does not attach to a uterine wall, its exit and death are indeed

permissible since these events occurred “before a pregnancy [was] determined”.³ By these means, an embryo fertilized *in vitro* and destroyed for the purpose of HESC research should not be viewed sinfully, because it was neither created in the womb nor an act of eliminating a determined pregnancy. Still, some conservative Muslims might simply disagree with the fact of using egg and sperm cells for purposes other than reproduction.

While some religions often cite sex for reasons other than reproduction or the use of contraception as that which is sinful, Islamic traditions generally do not. Although bearing children and raising them to be pious is important to grow the Muslim community, scholars reference the fact that if the pregnancy is prevented before “the womb takes hold of the semen” it is indeed permissible, because this is “a state preceding existence”.² In other words, the egg and semen are not yet an extant being at this stage, but rather simple cells as mentioned before. So long as the egg and sperm are simply seen as cells preceding a being’s existence, their use for something other than reproduction is indeed ethical and permissible.

Al-Ghazali and other Muslim scholars often return to the idea that cases should also be evaluated individually rather than applying a blanket statement to all.² Katz writes that “the flexibility and openness of classical Islamic legal discussions” is possible due to a commitment to “the examination of specific cases rather than the generation of abstract rules”.² By these means, even those who still wonder about the morality of the embryo’s destruction should keep their minds open, as this case may be permissible when weighing its effects. With respecting life being prominent in Islam, the potential to better viable, pious, and vulnerable Muslims’ lives can have considerable weight on this issue.

Respect for life takes two forms in Islamic discourse, the importance of the individual and the welfare of the community.³ While the importance of the individual is not to be

disregarded, the weight of the community's welfare is significant in this relationship. Bowen writes, "Muslims treat respect for life as basic to the religion, but not as the supreme ethical principal to which all others give way" instead the respect for life should be "relative to other considerations".³ The Qur'an repeatedly highlights "the duty to take particular care of those who are vulnerable," and while some might argue that this includes those who have the potential to life, it is also crucial to consider the elderly and sick, who would benefit from future HESC treatments and who have also already proven themselves as devout and pious followers.³ Bowen's reference to relativism suggests that one should at least consider weighing these two, a potential life and an already viable, pious and vulnerable Muslim, against each other. Those who argue that egg cells, sperm cells, and embryos have the same rights as an individual, must consider whether an individual whose character is unknown is of greater value than the individuals who have already proven themselves viable and pious, but unfortunately are suffering due to a disease or condition.

While Al-Ghazali suggests, "the development of potential life should be accorded respect and protection," nearly all Muslims agree that the welfare of the mother "precedes any concern for the fetus".³ This same concept, that a pious and extant being's welfare precedes an unborn child's welfare, may suggest that a sickly member of the Muslim community might also have greater value over a clump of cells' potential life, especially when that clump is far from proving itself viable and pious as an individual. When one considers that a single embryo or its preceding egg and sperm cells can develop into millions of stem cells and that those countless HESCs can help further research for the benefit of the community, it becomes increasingly likely that from a Muslim perspective HESC research would be ethical.

While various religions oppose human embryonic stem cell research for a variety of reasons, Islam should not generally oppose it. According to Islamic texts and beliefs, embryos created outside of the womb and destroyed long before their ensoulment or before they begin to take a human form, are not individuals protected by the law or with any other rights. While embryos do have the potential to life, they are generally viewed as only clumps of cells preceding an individual's existence when stem cells are extracted at the five-day mark. Not only that, but HESC research has the potential to better the lives of countless community members if cures, or at least procedures to better living standards, are found through this research. As such, it should be ethical and permissible to weigh viable, pious, and vulnerable Muslims more heavily than something that is not yet a viable or pious being and whose character is entirely unknown. By these means, human embryonic stem cell research should be considered ethical and permissible according to Islamic texts and beliefs.

Endnotes

1. Siegel, Andrew. "Ethics of Stem Cell Research." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. December 19, 2018. Accessed February 28, 2019. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/stem-cells/>.
2. Katz, Marion Holmes. "The Problem of Abortion in Classical Sunni Fiqh." In *Islamic Ethics of Life*, 25-50. University of South Carolina Press, 2003.
3. Bowen, Donna Lee. "Contemporary Muslim Ethics of Abortion." In *Islamic Ethics of Life*, 51-80. University of South Carolina Press, 2003.