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Human embryonic stem cell research and the moral status of the human embryo

The current debate on human embryonic stem cell research is centered on the question of the moral status of human embryos. In my presentation I will try to answer the question whether or not the status of human embryos does morally allow any research on human embryonic stem cells. I will try to clarify how we can determine the moral status of a human embryo.

In particular I will elaborate on the question whether or not we have to attribute dignity or full moral status to the embryo. The normative concept of dignity stands for an absolute value. If a living being possesses dignity it cannot “be replaced by something else as its equivalent” (I. Kant) and ultimately must not become an object of calculated or balanced interests of others. If the embryo possesses dignity any research harming the embryo will be categorically forbidden.

I will try to show that human embryos do not possess dignity or full moral status, but only a “significant moral status”. But even if the embryo possesses dignity, the isolation of stem cells from human blastocysts would not be categorically forbidden. This is due to the circumstance that a blastocyst is not yet an “embryo” in the relevant sense.

Finally, I pursue the question whether human embryonic stem cell research can be morally permitted if human blastocysts do not possess dignity. I will point out that beside the question of the status of human blastocysts, other considerations are important as well.