

The Philosopher's Stone

The Newsletter of the Philosophical Debate Group



Philosophy and Fetal Tissue Research -pdg

Researchers have considered the use of fetal tissue to treat a variety of diseases for decades, but it has only been since 1986, with the advent of a number of technological breakthroughs, that this sort of experimentation has become a viable possibility. Not surprisingly, a hot debate arose at the time concerning the ethics of such procedures. After much debate, a ban on the federally-funded fetal tissue research was enacted in 1988. But in 1993, the ban was lifted and the research resumed at a quickened pace. Sometime this year, for example, the University of Florida College of Medicine and Brain Institute in Gainesville plans to introduce human fetal tissue into the cystic cavity of several human subjects in an attempt to prevent the expansion of pre-existing cysts from causing further damage. Other researchers, since the lifting of the ban, have performed similar experiments involving the

transplantation of fetal tissue to attempt to treat or cure such ailments as diabetes, Alzheimer's, Huntington's, Parkinson's, leukemia, and injuries involving the spinal cord.

The use of fetal tissue to treat such diseases has seemed particularly promising for two reasons: first, fetal tissue can be easily cryopreserved and reanimated; second, fetal tissue has no surface antigens to stimulate an antibody response, meaning that problems of tissue rejection, one of the primary obstacles to most tissue transplants, is greatly reduced. In addition, fetal tissue at this stage in its development is undifferentiated, adapting to the needs of the surrounding tissue of the host.

While many, if not most, researchers in the field believe these experiments have shown enough promise to warrant continued fetal tissue research, others (not to mention the general public) have questioned their value. Complicating the issue is the fact that the most useful fetal tissue seems to come from the more developed second trimester fetuses and that most spontaneous abortions produce unusable tissue because the fetuses have been dead for two or three weeks when aborted, and thus the tissue is deoxygenated.

Most who oppose fetal tissue research do so on ethical and moral grounds, especially those who oppose abortions under any circumstances. But even if we separate the question of fetal tissue research from the abortion issue by suggesting that, at

least for now and right or wrong, abortion is legal, many questions remain: Is the fetus a separate moral agent? Is it alive? Who has the right to determine whether or not to use fetal tissue? Will women be recruited and paid to have abortions?

And in addition to these ethical and practical concerns, what about the general philosophical questions that this issue suggests? Is John Stuart Mill correct when he argues for the greatest good for the greatest number? Is the Enlightenment belief in the perfectability of humankind through science and progress an idea that we should still embrace? Or are there limits to what we should attempt to know? Why does our society fear and fight illness and death with such ferocity, rather than accepting them as part of the natural cycle of life? Is our desire for new technologies merely a reflection of a Nietzschean desire for power and a narcissistic obsession with the self?

Come to Gamble Hall, Room 213 (Honors Room), on Tuesday, April 20th, at 8:00 p.m. and share your ideas.

Visit our website at
<http://thales1.armstrong.edu/pdg>

Notes from the Last Meeting

The discussion began with a discussion of PC-ism and the attempt to control and regulate the use of language for political purposes. A distinction was suggested between language and speech--speech referring to spoken words only and language being associated with the more abstract issues of signs, texts, writing, body language (an instance of non-verbal signs used as "language"). We then had some difficulty explaining or understanding how words get turned into "symbols" that somehow have a greater power to affect people since the symbol can stand for (stand as a sign) for so many different things simultaneously. It was observed that if words are arbitrarily connected to other words, meanings, and symbols, then there would be no Truth in any words, only arbitrary associations or collectively assigned arbitrary associations.

The discussion then turned to the issue of language's connection to knowledge and/or feeling. If language is not connected to truth, then it would seem it is more about feelings than knowledge. It was suggested that the distinction between feelings and knowledge might be inappropriate if feelings and knowledge are identical and indistinguishable. To support this, the case was made that one can't know that one is aware of a feeling without having a language to identify it. Thus, the claim was that there are no such things as feelings that cannot be articulated, since the ineffability of the feeling would prevent it from registering in any way on one's awareness and in one's world, remembering that if it were truly ineffable, one would not even be allowed to identify it by the word "feeling."

One participant made the claim that "Language is Being," in reference to the PDG article question regarding ontology. The existence of our world, and of what we take to be existing, depends on language, which explains the concern with language in the twentieth century, since the person or group who controls language controls being.

It began to be clear to everyone that an implication of this view is that collective feelings about objects are largely if not completely determined by "what is considered 'correct' usage of words/language by that collective." This in turn appears to suggest that power (sheer numbers of people) is what determines "correct" usage of language, which then led us into a discussion of the nature of POWER since it seems ultimately why everyone is interested in focusing on language. One member suggested it is the nature of power to always want more power. Power seeks always to "enlarge" itself. An individual wanting power can only want to "enlarge" the self, which is why there is a tendency in the most powerful individuals in history to want to become "god", the ultimate symbol of power. Several political tyrants in history were discussed as examples. But is there a limit to power? What is the nature of power? Is there something that power cannot overcome? Death was suggested as one possible limit. From which several questions arose: "Is death a non-linguistic experience?" Is it a case of something which we have a feeling about but cannot articulate? If it isn't, and language is being, then it might be possible to overcome death by "re-defining" it, by having the language of the collective re-engineer it in such a way as to allow them articulation and belief in only their symbols of their immortality. One suggested example might be their corporate participation in a corporation that lives for forever since institutions go on with a kind of "life" of their own.

Other questions that arose were: "What if Truth is a need and what was said about language is correct?" How are we to satisfy this need without language should it be somehow inadequate or irrelevant to the task? Is language a need? Is all language about persuasion and power or can it be used for non-persuasive/non-power oriented relations? At the end of our discussion, it was pointed out that silence, as the counterpart to language, needs to be further explored, though an exploration of silence with the use of language seems problematical, and an exploration of it without the use of language seems...silent.

Last Meeting of Spring Semester

Tuesday, April 20, at 8 p.m.
in Room 213 (the Honors Room) in Gamble Hall.

Contributions

The PDG is always open to new ideas. If you've got any submissions or suggestions, please e-mail us at one of the addresses below or drop a note in the thought box in the Writing Center in Gamble 109.

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