

EMBRYONIC STEM CELLS AND THE SACRIFICIAL MODE

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In a recent issue of "New Scientist" there was a discussion of the use of the active voice rather than the passive voice in writing up scientific experiments. In my educational vintage it was *de rigueur* in scientific writing to pretend that science took place in the purely objective domain; the experimenter seemingly had no part to play in the process. Thus 'one' could read expressions like: "A test tube was taken and thoroughly purified of all contamination"; "the compound produced was tested for astringency"; "equal numbers of laboratory rats were taken from both the control and experimental groups and then sacrificed to obtain their livers", and so on. In this way individual experimenters could be absolved of all complicity in the outcome of their work. And their responsibility! Thus we may be about to read of scientific research in Australia with statements like: "Twenty human embryos were sacrificed in the course of the present stem cell research".

Well, in the passive voice it doesn't sound so bad, particularly if the work was done by a computer controlled apparatus. Not touched by human hands!

However, it has now been conclusively demonstrated that experimenter effects do occur in science. The experimenter is complicit. The experimenter cannot avoid taking his or her worldview, desires, expectations into the laboratory and, quite unconsciously, this can effect the outcome. Double blind experiments can correct for the effect somewhat but at the expense of the enthusiasm in the search for truth that an ego-centred experimenter can bring to the quest. In any case, double blind experiments are rarely used in the so-called hard sciences.

A survey in England found that most scientists preferred the passive voice and the question arose as to "How to teach the children?". No less a person than Lord Robert May, the president of the Royal Society, Senior Advisor to the British government on science matters and erstwhile Sydney physicist, said he was "horrified" at those who favoured the passive voice. He says: "I would put my own view so strongly as to say that, these days, the use of the passive voice in a research paper is the hallmark of second-rate work. In the long run, more authority is conferred by the direct approach than by the pedantic pretence that some impersonal force is performing the research". "Primary and secondary teachers should, without reservation, be encouraging all their students to be writing in the active voice". Lord May has the concurrence of many eminent scientists. Science is a human activity and, as such, gets its credibility by observing the ethical norms written in the human heart. Unfortunately there were many nineteenth century scientific gurus who seemingly wanted to separate science from the human condition. But human common sense has a habit of kicking back, eventually, when the common human goods are violated. There are some basic human goods which are apparently generative or collaborative of all the others, ie. love of life, love of the beautiful, love of friendship, love of play, love of knowledge, love of reasonableness and responsibility in one's actions and love of God. Yes, love of God! For, as Dostoyevsky has observed, if man is king on earth anything is permissible. The human condition is such that ethics hangs in there, notwithstanding the efforts of some so-called philosophers to demolish ethical arguments. Any of these human goods can be replaced by their opposites, at least some of the time, since man is the only wild animal. If all were replaced simultaneously we would have the condition which, in common language, we call hell. Well, if that word has too many theological overtones, try "utter chaos". In any case, this is the domain of Satan, the personification of that anthropological genius who runs the world by putting

stumbling blocks in the paths of human beings to bring them down and then restores a bit of order before utter chaos sets in. If you don't believe me just look around you; refer to the common experience of mankind.

So I hope my fellow scientists will try with me a little use of the active voice:

"I put the test tube in the autoclave".

"I tasted the compound and found it to be acid".

So far so good!

"I sacrificed the laboratory rats".

Well this one might upset a few animal liberationists and we certainly have to respect their views. It is a moot point. The ethical position of animals in the human scheme of things is of very much concern to environmentalists and general respectors of all life. There is certainly an ethical case to be made. But try this one:

"I sacrificed twenty human embryos to obtain their stem cells".

I suggest that if you don't feel a little queasy about this one there is something radically wrong. Just repeat it to yourself a few times! Surely an invisible "equatorial" line has been crossed; you are now in a different hemisphere where anything goes. Where can the line be now drawn? Nowhere of course! But perhaps you will find it liberating! I know that the Dr. Mendeles among you will not give a tinker's cuss. Human life is expendable! The end justifies the means! Evil can be done if the end result is good! Some human lives are more important than other human lives! The way is open to experiment on the poor, the dying, the insane, the handicapped as the scientists did in Germany after 1933. Why ban cloning? Surely we should try for human-animal combinations and if we produce a monster we will kill it, (sacrifice it), before anyone finds out. If anyone does find out, of course, human kind will bring science to an end. But if Scientism rules, that is clearly permissible; for the god of Scientism is Ego and subservient to Ego, Mammon. To vote for such a world is surely not something a politician would boast about to his or her grandchildren!

Come to think of it, what does the scientific world have to offer on the problem of evil? Can it explain why violence occurs, wars and rumours of wars? Why do we have the word "sacrifice" and why has human sacrifice been a feature of the human world right from pagan times onward. Why did it end in the Christian world with the sacrifice of Christ? Why indeed was it replaced by animal sacrifice in Judaic times? Can science tell us why? How can science explain the concern for victims, without discrimination, which emerged in human consciousness through the Judeo-Christian scriptures, especially the gospels, and which has been a constant theme wherever Christianity has spread.? Viable science has emerged in the Christian West from the same concern for victims; from the same concern of 'good news for the poor'; 'liberty to captives'; 'to the blind new sight'; 'to set the downtrodden free'. Good beginnings were made in every major civilisation only to be eventually drowned by the contextual ideologies, usually pagan fatalism and the myths of sacred violence.

The same concern for victims sees the strong potential towards human personal fulfilment beginning at the moment of conception of a new human being. This potential carries through from embryo to fetus, to newborn, to youth, to adulthood, to death. The same potential exists at every stage of human existence; all are in need of the total *being* of Personhood. It should be noted that arguments from natural law are not the exclusive domain of the Catholic Church; they belong to all mankind. The Church has a grave obligation to preserve everything which is properly human.

All attempts to turn aside this concern on philosophical grounds have always seemed to me to be spurious, irrelevant, even based on accidental criteria (like the embryo can't feel or have ambition etc.). I have even seen one attempt to knock the thesis down by the claim that all philosophical arguments are circular and have their conclusions in the premises. The postmodern program claims that there are no preferred texts; that there are as many philosophers as there are writers or speakers; all of which brings us back to 'anything goes'.

It is indeed true that everyone is a believer in something; that any approach to scholarship is tainted by the worldview of the scholar. Thus the claim that all discourse in the natural order is relative. There can be no such thing as truth!. This is the royal road to despair. This thesis is circular and self destructive, but I want to suggest that there is a path back to sanity. The first bastion is an ethical choice of worldview. A worldview ought to be chosen (in as much as it is a question of choice) which allows for the full development of the human Person, the realisation of every human potential. As St. Augustine has seen: "Thou hast made us for thyself O Lord and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee". There clearly exists in the human person a potential for rich symbolic life, to which poets and artists attest, a passage from the mundane to the mystical, from the natural to the transcendent. There exist phenomenologies for such occurrences.

The most significant and satisfying phenomenology which I (in the active voice) have discovered is the phenomenology of redemption, the phenomenology of the Cross. Thus we shall see that there is a uniquely Christian contribution to the current debate about stem cell research and, indeed, of all issues relating to our present cultural predicaments.

Since all the natural disciplines have been singularly unsuccessful in solving the world's pressing problems, isn't it now appropriate to take as the starting point for all disciplines the one "still point of the turning world" (Eliot) , the only Archimedian fulcrum and lever. One author has written that: "We have had a hundred years of psychotherapy and things are getting worse". Philosophy, in particular, is in desperate need of an anchor, a firm foundation. Theology was once "Queen of the Sciences" and it is time it was again so, according to the most recent developments in human anthropology. Or rather, it is time we saw the Judeo-Christian scriptures as the **only** anthropological text which can give us an understanding of our current cultural upheaval.

The Judeo-Christian scriptures, particularly the gospels, uniquely make explicit the hidden structures of violence in the human psyche and society which have been hidden since the "foundation of the world". There you will see, in a rapidly growing movement began by the French-American anthropologist Rene Girard, the startling thesis that violence in the form of human sacrifice is at the core of the development of human cultures in the worldly sense. In their quest for full *being* , hominids are aquisitively imitational creatures, miming the desires of others who are perceived to possess such *being*. Under commonplace conditions, this mimetic desire produces violence or potential violence and the time honoured method of release from this violence is the non-conscious convergence on a scapegoat. Persons are "interdividual". When mimesis and rivalry begin to take hold of a group, a society, or a civilisation, the onset of violence is presaged by the gradual breakdown of the system of differences, of hierarchies, prohibitions and taboos etc. which are essential for the functioning of the social entity. There is a confusion, not only of the sexes, but a confusion of voices. Mobs assemble, both pro and con, until there is a growing realisation that chaos will ensue.

In archaic societies , when this occurred, a clearly described mechanism, resulting in the sacrifice of the scapegoat, was enacted, followed by the restoration of peace and unity in

the lynch mob ranks. The sacrificed scapegoat is then seen as the harbinger of peace, and, being thus deified, he becomes the source of restored civilisation. Civilisation is built on murder; otherwise mimetic desire would make it impossible for humans to exist together without being overcome by chaos and random violence. The ritual re-enactments of such foundational events is the source of the concept of the *Sacred*. This is clearly discernible in the myths of pagan religions which have been elaborated over time by the victors in the lynch mob events. The Sacred is based on the placation of the angry deities, the divinised scapegoats, who will return with the chaos which caused their scapegoating in the first place, unless they are obeyed.

Notions like this have taken a long time to die, particularly in Judaic circles and even in some Christian circles which emphasise atonement and the placation of a violent God. In early Old Testament writing, Yahweh was barely distinguishable from the Canaanite deity El, the head of the pantheon. El Shaddai, the mountain god was probably a transition. The Hebrew prophets, however, slowly unfolded this pathetic mechanism which was exposed for all time by the events of Jesus' crucifixion. Since that event there have been no new myths and no new claims to the problematic "sacred", at least where the Cross is recognised. The scapegoating Satanic mechanism is still operative in everyday events, but wherever the Cross has travelled the mechanism has failed, as has the sense of the sacred which was based on it. There have been failures aplenty, of course, since our existential situation is still between myth and the Cross.

To go back to myth under the guise of placating the god who causes Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disease, with just a teeny-weeny human sacrifice, such as would be entailed with embryonic stem cell research, and lots of taxpayers' money, is exposing the human race with a vastly renewed threat of mimetic violence, as if there was not enough of that already, everywhere.

The Cross exists in the meta-ethical, meta-biological and meta-cultural domain. In fact, like the natural law, it belongs to all mankind, at all times and all places.

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