



Reasoning with Ethics

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Ethics in action creates character.

Use this blog to:

1. Lead class discussions in social studies, civics, ethics, or advisory classes.
2. Teach students skills to analyze cases with core ethical values.
3. Recognize skills in support of SEE's Tri-Factor Model of ethical functioning.

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Sci-Fi to Reality: Human-Animal Hybrid Ethics

Sometimes events of great significance make little splash in the news. The story that a collaboration of American and Chinese scientists created and sustained for 19 days a combination of human and monkey cells in an embryo is lost in the major media. This story deserves the consideration of every ethically conscious human being.

Limited news outlets reported on a recent publication that recognized authors from the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in LaJolla, CA. The publication noted cell division continued in monkey embryos that had been injected with human stem cells. Three of the embryos survived for 19 days after fertilization. Multiple goals for the research were stated to include developing a strategy to grow and harvest organs for human transplant, basic research into dual-species embryo development, and cell communication. One bioethicist noted the research was appropriate as it, "aimed at lofty humanitarian goals."

A biomedical ethicist in England noted the research posed "significant ethical and legal challenges" with questions about limits to this research and when is the life created considered human? A bioethicist from Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, OH noted, "Some people may see that you're creating morally ambiguous entities..." Quoting from a BBC report, Prof Julian Savulescu, director of the Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics at Oxford said, "The research opens Pandora's box to human-nonhuman chimeras".

This type of research is complicated and ethically problematic. With or without the scientific issues of introducing cross-species disease susceptibility, it raises the philosophical questions of the value and unique place of the human species. What does it mean to be human? Is any combination of human and animal embryos ethical for "lofty humanitarian goals"?

Carrying the process out to its extreme sci-fi outcomes, an unregulated lab could fully grow chimeras to sacrifice for organ donations.

Space in this blog and time in classes is acknowledged to limit the ability of students to address this question without meaningful additional study. SEE does ask students to be aware of the issue and respond to the question, do you believe there is an ethical issue in dual-species embryo studies? Does the meaning of the ethical question change if the hybrid embryos contain human elements? And finally, what ethical responsibility does the public have to become knowledgeable about and active to voice their support or resistance to dual-species embryo research?

Supplemental Links

NPR, Scientists Create early embryos that are part human, part monkey, (3/15/21) (4 minutes) - <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2021/04/15/987164563/scientists-create-early-embryos-that-are-part-human-part-monkey>

BBC News, Human cells grown in monkey embryos spark ethical debate (3:05) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hzVp4mxqOJ4>

Nature, First monkey-human embryos reignite debate over hybrid animals (4/15/21) - <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-01001-2>

