

Patrick Cusworth

1 The status of the human embryo

Whilst many – particularly those wishing to perform destructive experiments – have attempted to deny the status of the human embryo as the beginning point of human life, this position is not bound up solely in religious belief, but in scientific fact. As one editorial in a leading scientific journal explains: 'Your world was shaped in the first 24 hours after conception. Where your head and feet would sprout, and which side would form your back and your belly, were being defined in the minutes and hours after sperm and egg united.'¹ These are not the only criteria decided at this point. In fact, everything about the developing human being is decided at the point of fertilisation: sex, colour of eyes and hair, colour and tone of skin, even down to the diseases that the person will be susceptible to in later life.

2 A brief history of embryo experimentation

One person who appears in little doubt as to the status of the embryonic human being is Baroness Warnock, chairwoman of the infamous 1984 Warnock Committee. As she argued in the preamble to the final Committee Report, 'Only a fool would deny that human life begins at the point of conception... the human embryo ought therefore to have a special status, protected in English law.'² Unfortunately, the undisputed humanity of the embryo appeared to matter little to Lady Warnock and her colleagues, whose recommendations went on to form the basis of the 1990 Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act, which provided statutory legitimisation for destructive experiments upon human embryos for the purposes of research. Since this Act was passed, over 925,000 human embryos have been created (figures for 2001), with only 4% ever going on to be born – the very purpose of embryonic life. The rest died or were deliberately killed in experiments. In 2001, the same Act was extended to include the creation of cloned human embryos for research – despite the fact that back in 1990, scientists, pharmaceutical companies and politicians on both sides were queuing up to assure the public that the Act would not lead to such 'unethical practices.'³ This assurance seems even more ridiculous now that the UK Government has bowed to pressure from the scientific lobby to condone the creation of animal-human hybrid embryos.

3 What sort of research is being done?

Since the passing of the 1990 Act, none of the promised cures for diseases such as Parkinson's or Multiple Sclerosis have been discovered – certainly something to bear in mind when we hear similar promises being made concerning therapeutic cloning. Where embryo research has proven useful is in the refinement of abortifacient drugs – anti-baby weapons, as opposed to the baby-beneficial breakthroughs promised by the pro-embryonic research lobby in the 1980s. For example in one study in 1989, careful abortions of four-week-old embryos were carried out, and then dissected to remove arms and legs. Half these detached limbs were grown on plates infected with thalidomide and then compared to those grown on infected nutrient plates⁴. Experiments into the RU486 pill – the 'DIY abortion' – have also been tested on numerous occasions upon embryos whose mothers have been 'treated' with this potentially lethal drug.

In recent years, certain members of the IVF industry have been keen to take advantage of this legal source of unconsenting human guinea pigs. In 2003, one Israeli scientist announced that he had raided the ovaries of aborted baby girls to produce egg follicles which could be used in human reproduction. At the same conference, further announcements included the production of an embryo genetically half-male and half-female (a chimera)⁵. In other experiments, several embryos have been created genetically half human, and half from animals such as rabbits, sheep and pigs. Where is the 'special status' that back in 1984, Baroness Warnock argued could not be divorced from the human embryo?

4 Conclusion

Is it justifiable to carry out experiments that will end the short life of one human being, even for the

potential benefit towards another? Aside from the moral considerations to be made, various international documents and treaties appear to directly preclude this. For example, the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki states that 'In research performed upon humans, the interest of science and society should never take precedence over considerations related to the wellbeing of the subject'⁶. In other words, unless the subject of the research is likely to benefit, that research cannot be justified.

Discussing other concerns, we might also remember the words of Martin Luther King, who once said that: 'To deprive man of freedom is to relegate him to the status of a 'thing', rather than elevate him to the status of a person. Man must never be treated as a means to an end, but always as an end within himself.'⁷ When we treat the human embryo therefore as a pharmaceutical commodity to be used and abused for 'research' purposes, as opposed to individual and unique human beings at the very beginnings of their lives, we not only treat such human beings as means to ends as opposed to ends in themselves, but we ourselves also expose ourselves to corruption and degradation as human beings, by reducing ourselves to the status of technological killers.

In short, embryo experimentation is objectionable on several fronts: firstly, it can never be considered acceptable that one human being is created and destroyed, even for potential benefit to others; secondly, these dubious 'benefits' to society have been relatively modest in their actual tangible results; and thirdly, in allowing the weakest and most vulnerable members of society to be sacrificed for the stronger, we demean society as a whole. Technological holocaust can never be something we may consider acceptable in a society wishing to refer to itself as 'civilised'.

Further Reading

Embryos and Ethics – The Warnock Report in Debate	Ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron, Rutherford House, 1987
The Concentration Can	Prof. Jerome Lejeune, Ignatius Press, 1992
The Truth about Embryo Research	Michael Jarmulowicz, FRCPath, LIFE, 1995

References

- 1 *Nature* magazine, 4th July, 2002.
- 2 Quoted from "Embryos and Ethics: The Warnock Report in Debate"; edited by Nigel M. de S. Cameron, published Rutherford House Books, Edinburgh, 1987.
- 3 *Hansard*, Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill debate, speech by Kenneth Clarke MP (then Minister for Health).
- 4 *Analytical Cellular Pathology*, 1989; Volume 1, p.247.
- 5 Announced at the 2003 European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology conference.
- 6 Declaration of Helsinki; World Medical Organization; *British Medical Journal* (7 December) 1996; 313 (7070): pp.1448-1449.
- 7 *The Autobiography of MLK*, published 1999, Abacus Publishing; at p.20.