



## PROTECTING THE EMBRYO: WHY IT'S ESSENTIAL



## Laying the Groundwork for Research on Human Embryos

In 1990, Parliament entered a new era when it passed the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act of 1990 (“HFE Act 1990”). This Act permitted licensed individuals to experiment with embryos for the first time. For the next eighteen years, scientific “advancement” came at the cost of human dignity as scientists used embryos in massive numbers for research purposes and then discarded them with no regard for their supposedly “special” status.

In 2008, Parliament continued its onslaught against the intrinsic value of human life by allowing, most shockingly, for the creation of animal-human hybrid embryos. Parliament authorised such immoral conduct under the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008 (“HFE Act 2008”).<sup>1</sup> In so doing, the United Kingdom not only spurned a principled ethical framework, but also overstepped the ethical boundaries of virtually every other European nation in its far-reaching attempts to further scientific research. Human dignity has been crushed beneath the weight of political pressure from innovation-driven scientists and the financial interests of the biotechnology industry.

## A Brief History of Embryonic Research

Before exploring the contours of the HFE Act 2008, however, it might be helpful to clarify what the HFE Act of 1990 did—and what it did *not*—permit scientists in the UK do with regard to embryos.

When passed, the HFE Act 1990 paved the way for experimentation on embryos by creating the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA). The HFEA acts as a gatekeeper for the licensing of individuals qualified to conduct research on human embryos and to treat couples using assisted human reproduction (IVF). It allowed for consent to be obtained for embryos to be used for three purposes. Firstly, in IVF treatment for infertile couples; secondly, to be donated for the infertility treatment of others; and thirdly, for human embryos to be used for research.<sup>2</sup> The 1990 Act refers to “embryos” being “appropriated”<sup>3</sup> for the purposes of any project of research and infertile couples could donate embryos not used in

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<sup>1</sup> The HFE Act 2008 amends and inserts sections into the HFE Act 1990, so that it becomes the HFE Act 1990 (as amended). The original HFE Act 1990 (as amended) by the HFE Act 2008 is still the main legislation. Reference is made in this brochure to the separate Acts in order to illustrate the changes in 2008.

<sup>2</sup> See Schedule 3 of the HFE Act 1990.

<sup>3</sup> See section 15(4) of the HFE Act 1990.

their own IVF treatment for research purposes. Simply speaking, the HFE Act 1990 and subsequent regulations made it possible for scientists to do three things: (1) to use donated embryos created in IVF for research, (2) to allow for the artificial creation of embryos for research by cloning techniques and (3) to experiment with—and ultimately destroy—these donated and artificially-created embryos in the hope of developing treatments for a variety of diseases, including treatments derived from the embryos' stem cells.<sup>4</sup> In sum, the UK's support for embryonic research not only far exceeded commonsense ethical boundaries with regard to embryonic research, but also breached—and continues to breach—the European Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine, which bans the creation of human embryos for use in research.<sup>5</sup>

The 1990 Act allowed for the abhorrent view that human embryos “surplus to requirements” in IVF infertility treatment could be used for research and even for the artificial creation of embryos by cloning. The embryo was then seen as nothing more than scientific experimental material to be manipulated and used, rather than sacred potential human life.

As morally reprehensible as the HFE Act 1990 was in its commodification of the human embryo—a *human life* with growth potential—it still recognised that (1) children have a need for fathers, (2) creating animal-human hybrid embryos is unacceptable, and (3) human beings should not be created solely as “saviour siblings”. As we shall see, even these modest restraints no longer exist.

## Where Are We Now?

Unlike the HFE Act 1990, the HFE Act 2008 casts off any moral reservations that Parliament may have had about embryonic research. Firstly, the HFE Act 2008 places human dignity at an all-time low by promoting experimentation with mixed human and animal embryos. These hybrid embryos come in several forms including chimeras, hybrids and cybrids<sup>6</sup>, but are referred to uniformly as “human admixed embryos” in the HFE Act 2008. The important point is not what distinguishes these types of animal-human mixtures, but rather that experimentation on them raises serious moral and ethical concerns about the value of human life and what it means to be created in the *imago Dei* (“God’s image”).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The HFE Act of 1990 was amended in 2001 to allow for scientists to use embryos for research into diseases and their treatments, and for research into the development of human embryos.

<sup>5</sup> Article 18(2) states that: “The creation of human embryos for research purposes is prohibited”.

<sup>6</sup> MacKellar, C., “Chimeras, hybrids and ‘cybrids’”, *CMF Files*, No. 34.

<sup>7</sup> See Genesis 1:26-27.

Secondly, the HFE Act 2008 discards the requirement that the IVF provider take account of the resulting child's "the need...for a father". "Father" is a term that figured in the HFEA code of practice for determining who could receive *in vitro* fertilisation (embryo implantation), elaborated under the HFE Act 1990. The 2008 Act replaces "father" with "supportive parenting." This is, of course, overt support by Parliament for same-sex parenting and signals the UK's more general acceptance of homosexual practices. In practical terms, it means that children, all of whom have a well-documented need for a *father*, may now be freely placed with couples defined by their homosexual practices. The existence of a father is considered archaic, no longer a necessity in the process of deciding if a woman is eligible for *in vitro* fertilisation.

Thirdly, the HFE Act 2008 gives its support to the creation of "saviour siblings" through the use of pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD). PGD is a new technology used for embryo analysis and selection to ensure that the embryo's tissue is compatible with the embryo's elder sibling.<sup>8</sup> In the PGD process, embryos are fertilised, and those embryos deemed genetically "imperfect"—to put it succinctly, those who do not genetically match the ones they are created to "save"—are then destroyed. The genetically-compatible (tissue-typed) embryos are then implanted in the mother's womb so that blood cells extracted from their umbilical cords (and possibly other "tissue") at birth may be used to treat the pre-existing elder sibling. In other words, these human embryos are created for the primary purpose of providing transplant tissue or cells for another. This thought should not be foreign to Christians, because we may rightfully say that we exist for the purpose of worshipping God<sup>9</sup> and of furthering His Kingdom.<sup>10</sup> These human embryos, however, are not created for such a purpose. They are not created because they are unique individuals of the highest value, having that value because they are made in God's image. Instead, these embryos are created solely because of the functionality of their genetic components to another human being. Apart from understanding the core reasons why this practice is morally reprehensible, even calloused human beings recoil at the thought of being a "product" and nothing more. Yet, that is precisely how we have valued—or devalued—human life.

## Why Research on Human Embryos is Wrong

Scientists often claim to contribute to the greater good by utilising available resources efficiently in their search to find disease cures. If, however, human embryos

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<sup>8</sup> Barker, P., "Thinking through . . . pre-implantation genetic diagnosis" *Nucleus* 2007, Autumn, at pp. 6-9.

<sup>9</sup> See Philippians 2:9-10; see also Matthew 4:9-10.

<sup>10</sup> See Mark 16:15.

are nothing more than inanimate biological matter; debating their use in research would be pointless. In fact, that is exactly what a secular, Christ-less culture would have you believe—that this really is a debate needlessly belaboured by Christians attempting to impede scientific progress with outdated notions of morality. We *are not*, however, talking about a primitive, undeveloped organism with no human identity here.

Hopelessly obscured in the discussion is the fundamental importance of human dignity and what being created in God's image truly means. Even more disturbing is the fact that this denigration of human dignity has been accomplished so cleverly that the casual observer—even the discerning Christian—might never notice. It has been done in the name of science, in the name of advancement—all for the “greater good” of humanity. The cruel irony is that the heightening of man's scientific knowledge, unchecked by wisdom and discernment, is actually the downfall of his humanity.

At base, one principle predominates in the thinking of those who support research on human embryos. That principle has many names, but its state of being alive remains the same: it is the principle of functionality.<sup>11</sup> Essentially, this principle states that we are valued only according to what we can “do”, not because we were made in the image of God and have intrinsic value apart from our abilities. This mode of thought runs directly and fundamentally at odds with the principles of Christianity, which emphasises our weak, fallen nature, while at the same time exalting in the redemption found only in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We are loved, not because we have the capacity to be lovable, but rather because we are covered with the blood of Christ. The principle of functionality—a form of utilitarianism—contradicts this principle by treating human beings as commodities and valuing them only according to what societal good they can accomplish.

Although an embryo cannot yet breathe or move—it is qualitatively human in the sense that its chromosomal makeup is that of a human being.<sup>12</sup> Once the sperm has fertilised the ovum, a new individual has been created. The key difference between the small embryo and the slightly larger baby is almost purely one of development. A fertilised embryo already has all of the necessary genetic makeup for becoming a fully-developed human being. Essentially, it only requires nutrition and time. The human embryo *is* dependent, but it is only dependent in the same sense that a newborn child is dependent on its mother to provide nourishment, without which it would fail to continue to develop and die.

The inescapable conclusion, then, is that the human embryo is not a “potential human being,” for calling it such accords it a sub-human status; rather, the

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<sup>11</sup> Saunders, P., “The moral status of the embryo” *Nucleus* 2006, Summer, at pp. 17-26.

<sup>12</sup> See *id.* at p. 17.

human embryo is a human being laden with potential for developing into a form that we easily recognise as human. The mere fact that we do not clearly discern some of its outward human characteristics does not make it any less human—or any less deserving of protection by the Government. It is the difference between *perceiving* the truth as we think it is, and seeing truth as it *actually* is. For example, one may firmly perceive that the bottom of a pool is but a short depth, but that perception of depth does not change the reality that refractions of the light may falsify our perception, giving us an imperfect picture of what is *actually* true.

Consider, on the other hand, the logical out workings of the principle of functionality. Infanticide provides a good example. Infanticide means the putting to death of the newborn. While illegal and not accepted in the vast majority of civilised nations (yet), this practice already enjoys a robust life in academic circles and is promoted by some of the foremost “ethicists” in the world, most notably Peter Singer of Princeton University.<sup>13</sup> These “ethicists” support such arguments by following their premise that “human beings are simply functional, utilitarian beings” to its logical conclusion, that is, that society determines the value of human life. Society, not God, determines the value of human life. Sadly, it is the same principle that pervades our culture and which, in its highest stage of development, has led to some of the most oppressive and Godless societies in the history of the world.

Aside from being facially reprehensible, this theory of human value has an arbitrary benchmark for determining what is “human” and what is just a “thing”. Functionality has *no* basis in principle at all. In the hands of moderately reasonable people, one may only see it moderately abused. Nevertheless, its destructive power remains the same. It is, in fact, a principle reincarnated in many forms and in many places—the very same stance that justified Nazi oppression of the Jews, as well as numerous other atrocities carried out in the name of “purging” societies of “undesirable” components. Those components were not viewed as having a social utility—in other words, they were not seen as functional—in the societies these dictators were attempting to create. This should deeply offend our sense of human dignity because we *know* that we are more than the sum of our physical parts. We *know* that we are not simply living a self-serving existence in a Godless universe. We *know* that we have been endowed by our Creator God with inalienable rights—rights that do *not* come from our social utility, but come from the mere fact that we are human beings, created in the image of a sovereign God.

Briefly, let me voice two more thoughts regarding what we instinctively know about the humanity of the embryo and why protecting it is vitally important. First, the human embryo is an unborn child. Experientially, we are aware of this fact.

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<sup>13</sup> Singer, P., *Practical Ethics*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, 1993.

Even the most jaded feminist by default will, when referencing that “thing” growing in her own womb, call it a baby. I say by “default” because an un-socialised human being responds innately (and correctly) to a new life by calling it what it really is—a baby. Second, all civilised societies are largely defined as “civilised” because they respect the rights and liberties of human beings. They claim to champion the cause of the weaker elements. They fight against discrimination. They launch campaigns and political rallies in the name of equality. This is truly one of the greatest ironies imaginable—that a society which claims to champion the weak often, in reality, only champions those whose weakness it is politically expedient to champion. Those with no voice, but who are just as fundamentally human, are forgotten.

## **The HFE Act 2008: A Reprehensible Piece of Legislation**

For reasons already discussed, the HFE Act of 1990 and its subsequent amendment by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology (Research Purposes) Regulations 2001, which allowed for the cloning of human embryos for research into disease cures, crossed a significant moral threshold. The HFE Act 2008 greatly expanded upon this already bad legislation with regard to embryonic research, most notably in sanctioning the creation of animal-human hybrid embryos and in supporting the use of pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) to create “saviour siblings”.

### **a. Creating Animal-Human Hybrids: Why Not?**

Instinctively, there is a human repulsion to the idea of creating a hybrid animal-human embryo. Some would dismiss this as irrelevant, but others might rightfully point out that this type of response is indicative of our knowledge of the way things *should* be. Simply speaking, the average person can recognize that cross-species breeding of humans and animals is discordant with the natural order of creation and the way in which God ordained things to operate. The law should not allow the creation of animal-human hybrids, because it fundamentally violates the natural order of creation. All things considered, we must be wise in how we obtain knowledge, for our Christian ethic does not condone an “ends justify the means” principle of operation. Ultimately, wisdom is knowledge tempered by God-given judgment and discernment, most especially in the light of our unique role as ambassadors for Christ.

At base, science cannot simply pursue the acquisition of knowledge without any consideration of the means involved in reaching its desired ends, even if those ends are purportedly altruistic (e.g. finding disease cures). Science *must* operate within ethical boundaries.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, science must operate within

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<sup>14</sup> MacKellar, C., “Chimeras, hybrids and ‘cybrids’”, *CMF Files*, No. 34.



a framework that has boundaries that are not merely the product of social consensus. Otherwise, our system would operate according to little more than a thinly-veiled version of “might makes right”. Essentially, society tells us our worth, believing we are nothing more than the product of space and time. That is deeply troubling. It is in this vein, then, that we should realise not only that human embryonic research is a blight on human dignity, but also that the creation of animal-human hybrids is equally repugnant in its devaluation of human life created in God’s image.

### **b. The Creation of Saviour Siblings—Is it Such a Bad Thing?**

The HFE Act 2008 sanctions using pre-implantation diagnosis (PGD) to select from among human embryos ones that are “compatible” with a pre-existing elder sibling. The genetically-compatible embryos are then implanted in the mother’s womb, and the remaining incompatible embryos are destroyed or donated to other women seeking IVF treatment. Once the implanted embryo is born, blood stem cells from the umbilical cord or cells from the cord itself (and possibly other body elements) are harvested and used to treat the ill sibling. If taken at face value, PGD to pick a “saviour sibling” may not seem all that harmful. In fact, it seems like a social good, because a new human being is brought into existence and a living one is kept alive. This process, however, both in practice and in principle, violates Biblical ethics.

In practice, it is easy to forget that PGD chooses from among a number of human embryos (unborn children), only selecting a small number and discarding the rest. The “rest” are every bit as human and as precious as the ones who are chosen. Yet they are destroyed because they cannot “do” what the others can and, thus, at the level of principle we come back to functionality—human life is not precious in and of itself. If life is precious at all, it is only made so by what it can accomplish to further the ends of others. In practice, we are condoning the killing of innocent human life, something that is unacceptable even if done to save another’s life. Additionally, we are denying not only the paramount value of human embryos in principle, but also our own humanity.

Undoubtedly, the issue of “saviour siblings” is an ethical tightrope, and questions arise as to whether this practice would be permissible even if it were to be carried out without destroying genetically incompatible embryos. Though a difficult question, a Christian philosophy of life itself indicates that this practice would be unethical under any circumstance, largely because it is essentially making children a commodity. These children are created for their physical usefulness: they are created as “spare part children”. In practical terms, child commodification is an affront to human dignity in the same way that slavery is universally reprehensible in civilised nations. Indeed, we *know* that we are more than just the sum of our physical parts.

## Alternative Research Methods: Embryonic Stem Cell Research is Unnecessary

Bolstering the philosophical arguments for protecting human embryos are practical arguments for banning embryonic stem cell (ESC) research. The fact of the matter is that ESC research is simply unnecessary. More than that, ESC research has proven universally unsuccessful, while other ethically-sound methods of research using “adult” or non-embryonic stem cells have seen significant success in treating a large variety of diseases.<sup>15</sup>

Amidst the controversy surrounding research on human embryos, alternatives are rarely mentioned. The continued success of stem cell treatments using adult or non-embryonic stem cells is so encouraging that discussing it openly and frankly would expose the delusional bias of parts of the scientific community. First of all, adult stem cells, for example, have seen great advances in treating numerous diseases and injuries, including spinal cord injuries,<sup>16</sup> heart abnormalities,<sup>17</sup> diabetes<sup>18</sup> and in supplying bone marrow for transplants (to name but a few). Furthermore, umbilical cord blood stem cells have been effective in treating childhood leukaemia,<sup>19</sup> cancer<sup>20</sup> and brain damage,<sup>21</sup> amongst other things. Finally, there have been recent breakthroughs<sup>22</sup> in a third type of research involving “induced pluripotent” stem cells (IPS), which are adult stem cells that have been reprogrammed to act like ESCs and a fourth, where the patient’s own cells are used to cure his or her own diseases.<sup>23</sup>

The significance of this recent scientific advance in IPS research is that it directly responds to the key argument used by pro-ESC research proponents

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<sup>15</sup> Pickering, R., “Positive research outcomes show how useful adult stem cells could be” *Triple Helix* 2007, Winter.

<sup>16</sup> “Stem cell research in pursuit of spinal cord injury treatments”, at: <http://www.sci-recovery.org/stem1.htm>.

<sup>17</sup> “Stem cells could repair hearts”, BBC, 26th April, 2004, at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/3658927.stm>.

<sup>18</sup> “Diabetics cured in stem-cell treatment advance”, *The Times*, 11th April, 2007, at: [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life\\_and\\_style/health/article1637528.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/health/article1637528.ece).

<sup>19</sup> “Umbilical cord treatment best for childhood leukaemia”, *The Guardian*, 8th June, 2008, at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2007/jun/08/health.medicinelandhealth1>.

<sup>20</sup> “Cord blood cancer therapy boost”, *The Times*, 16th May, 2008, at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/7405167.stm>.

<sup>21</sup> “Umbilical cords to repair brain damage”, BBC News, 19th February 2001, at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in\\_depth/sci\\_tech/2001/san\\_francisco/1177766.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/sci_tech/2001/san_francisco/1177766.stm).

<sup>22</sup> “Skin transformed into stem cells”, BBC News, 20th November, 2007, at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/7101834.stm>.

<sup>23</sup> See *The Times*, 19th November 2008: “Claudia Castillo gets windpipe tailor-made from her own stem cells” at: [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life\\_and\\_style/health/article5183686.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/health/article5183686.ece).

in support of ESC research. That argument is that ESCs are more versatile than adult or umbilical cord blood stem cells and could, consequently, be used to treat a greater range of diseases. Although this claim had dubious academic support to begin with, even this argument in support of continuing ESC research in the face of advances in alternative areas has now been seriously undermined with the successful reprogramming of adult stem cells to possess all of the essential qualities of ESCs. In light of these facts, then, the real puzzle is why the scientific community continues fruitlessly to try to pursue ESC research community instead of putting putting the bulk of its time into something with an already proven track record, but not-yet-fully-explored potential. It is interesting to note that the scientific community has been reluctant to back research into animal-human hybrids financially.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, scientists have argued that such controversial animal-human hybrid embryo experiments are doomed to failure and will not deliver medical benefit.<sup>25</sup> So not only is such research unethical, it simply does not work.

## What Does It All Mean?

Christians should not—indeed, *cannot*—be exposed to the truth and remain unchanged. The undeniable truth is that we are created in God's image, endowed with His divine purpose and summoned to worship Him forever. We should, therefore, act in a manner that reflects our knowledge of this fact.

What should be abundantly clear from this discussion, is that truth is not the product of social convention. It is not what the majority says, simply because the majority said it. If this were so, human life would have no intrinsic value and our reason for existence would simply be a matter of our social utility—something that can change radically from age to age. We can rejoice, however, in having been created in the image of God Almighty and, more importantly, we should not shirk our obligation to be witnesses to the light of this truth in a darkened world.

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<sup>24</sup> See the BBC News report of 13th January 2009: "Uncertain future for hybrid research", at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/7826331.stm>.

<sup>25</sup> See The Daily Mail, 3rd February 2009: "Experiments fail—Controversial human-animal hybrid embryos 'will not deliver medical benefit'" at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1134483/Experiments-fail-Controversial-human-animal-hybrid-embryos-deliver-medical-benefit.html>.

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### Postal Address:

CCFON  
70 Wimpole Street  
London  
W1G 8AX

[admin@ccfon.org](mailto:admin@ccfon.org)

