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Review of Ronald M. Green, *The Human Embryo Research Debates*

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Green, Ronald M. *The Human Embryo Research Debates: Bioethics in the Vortex of Controversy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. xvi + 232 pp. Bibliography. Appendixes. Index.

This book arises from Ronald Green's experience as a member of the National Institute of Health's Human Embryo Research Panel in 1994 and reflects his experience in both content and quasi-autobiographical form. The book presents the numerous questions addressed by the panel, details various experiences Green had before, during, and after his service there, and provides a defense of the panel's basic conclusions, including the approval of the use of "spare" embryos left over from IVF for research and also the creation of embryos specifically for research purposes. The defense of these conclusions rests in part on the promise of great benefit to humanity through enhancing human fertility, improving contraception, and developing effective therapies for a wide range of disorders including Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease, and diabetes (92). It follows from the judgment that the human embryo lacks moral status sufficient to outweigh the potential benefits of research (92). In a related area, Green also argues for the permissibility of therapeutic cloning (chapter 6) as well as embryonic stem cell research (chapter 7) and against a significant role for religion in public policy (conclusion).

Green's conclusions are conventional in secular bioethics, but his method of argument is not. Green believes it a mistaken approach to look for any necessary condition "out there" for personhood in a human being (be it membership in *Homo sapiens*, the primitive streak, viability, birth, or ability to communicate in a sophisticated way). He would rather determine the personhood of a human being by means of an act of choice that would establish who counts as a person. Green suggests drawing the boundaries of personhood and nonpersonhood by weighing the values involved and the costs of drawing various boundaries. "The plurality of considerations

that indicate when a class of beings should receive moral protection roughly corresponds to the diversity of views on this matter present among members of society" (67). One wonders if this conception of personhood could secure inalienable human rights for any human being. If personhood depends upon the weighing of costs involved in granting personhood against the costs to others, the door is opened, in certain circumstances, for that calculus to lead to the denial of personhood even to rationally functioning adults, whether as individuals or as members of a class.

"The alternative to abuse and exclusion is not to obscure the need for choice and decision in these matters, but to make choice explicit and to be prepared rationally to defend one's criteria before the entire human moral community. Every member of this community has a vital stake in these matters, and every person has a right to be aware of and to participate in these determinations" (52). However, one can hardly determine who is a member of the human moral community by discussion with members of the human moral community. This circularity occurs regularly in Green's justification of embryo research.

Green turns to this pluralistic choice-based model for determining personhood out of dissatisfaction with the claims of some necessary condition for personhood. Although he briefly critiques breathing, self-awareness, and rational ability as single markers, he spends the most time arguing against human conception as a marker for personhood, in part because conception is not an event but rather a process of transformation from sex cell to zygote (20). "If life begins at conception, as [William E.] May and [Richard] Doerflinger unhesitatingly affirmed, then conception must be something obvious. It would be nice if this were true. But our increasing understanding of biology does not support it" (20). Of course, neither May nor Doerflinger claim conception must be something obvious, nor is this entailed by opposition to lethal research from the very beginning of a human's life. If one opposes

all sexual intercourse without consent, it surely does not follow that one must believe that consent is something obvious nor that one must have an explicit view about what does or does not undermine consent. (Does a blood alcohol level of .08, the drunk driving limit in most states, invalidate consent?)

In arguing for the need for research on embryos, Green powerfully and persuasively shows that infertility “meets every criterion for being a serious illness or disease” (xi) and marshals considerable evidence that IVF as currently practiced in the United States presents significant risk to the well-being of families, women, and children. Despite the large numbers of IVF procedures in the United States, more than sixty thousand each year, IVF cannot claim to be a resounding success given its expense, the frustration endured by users, and the relatively low rate of live births. And sometimes an unhealthy number of (often premature) births take place, leaving children severely handicapped for life. Green believes, I think rightly, that such children have been wronged by their parents who could have and should have taken steps to ensure that they had a normal chance at good health (128). “A generation of children with birth-related cerebral palsy, mental retardation, and severe respiratory or digestive problems” (xii) is grounds enough for Green to justify destroying human embryos *in the hope of* reducing such handicaps, but not grounds enough for him to endorse the more immediate, effective, and financially feasible solution to such problems—ending the practice of IVF.

Finally, the incessant condescension towards religion in general, Catholicism in particular, will annoy many readers of this journal. For example, a representative of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops he names the “villain” of his narrative (17), and “prolife” appears always in scare quotes. In his simplistic meta-narrative, scientific reasonableness battles religious fanaticism. Such swipes at the opposition considerably mar *The Human Embryo Research Debates* as an attempt at real dialogue about deter-

mining good public policy. However, despite its conclusions, it is important to grapple with this book in the debate about human life’s beginning and its value.

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Kavanaugh, John F., S.J. *Who Count as Persons? Human Identity and the Ethics of Killing*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2001. xiv + 234 pp. Bibliography. Index.

This book offers a powerful, challenging view of the human person for the modern world as a basis for ethical decision making, especially on life-and-death issues. The author calls his view “radical personalism”; it is based on a revised, nuanced version of the traditional Aristotelian/Thomistic view, and also on a parallel rejection of influential modern views. These include political views stemming from Kant and Mill, but also reductionist views coming from Derek Parfit, Daniel Dennett, and others whose aim is to reduce human uniqueness and personhood to brain activity. The book also offers a strong critique of the excesses of capitalist consumerism and of the disastrous effects of the media-driven, exploitative, commodity mentality on human dignity and relationships.

Kavanaugh argues that “our immediate experience of ourselves in the world is a unity prior to brokenness, prior to a delusion that we must be either of two isolated substances, soul and body, that somehow must now, by philosophical conjuring, be brought back together” (32). We are what he calls “embodied reflexive consciousness”; this is not the “I think” of Descartes, or the “transcendental unity of apperception” of Kant, or Hume’s observer of images. The fact that we are *em-*