Written by **Selwyn Duke** on February 2, 2016

Scientists Granted Permission to Genetically Modify Humans

Have we descended into the "inhumanity of a hive or a heathen city," as G.K. Chesterton wrote in 1926, where we're starting to accept the proposition "'Actions are only wrong if they are bad for society'"? Many would say this is the case, with British scientists having been granted permission to genetically modify unborn human beings. Writes the *Telegraph*:

> British scientists have been granted permission to genetically modify human embryos by the fertility regulator.
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> The Francis Crick Institute could begin the controversial experiments as early as March after the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) gave the green light this morning.
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> The scientists want to deactivate genes in leftover embryos from IVF clinics to see if it hinders development.
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> It will only be the second time in the world that such a procedure has been undertaken and the first time it has been directly approved by a regulator. A Chinese team carried out similar experiments last year to widespread outcry.
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> Currently around 50 per cent of fertilised eggs do not develop properly and experts believe that faulty genetic code could be responsible.
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> If scientists knew which genes were crucial for healthy cell division, then they could screen out embryos where their DNA was not working properly, potentially preventing miscarriages and aiding fertility.

The aforementioned controversy surrounds the idea, as the paper also reported, "that allowing embryos to be edited opens the door to designer babies and genetically modified humans." The concern is a risk of "a future of genetics haves and have-nots, a world with new forms of inequality, discrimination and conflict," to quote one critic's 2015 warning. "Imagine if someone wealthy had a custom baby designed, with good looks, high intelligence, athletic ability, longevity and so on. Such children would have an incredible advantage over their peers. If such a movement spread and became accessible only to the wealthy, the implications could be horrifying," elaborated writer Marshall Connolly just today.

While these are valid concerns, they're also lamentations of that which appears inevitable. Ever since we left Eden, scientific advancement, for good or for ill, has been a given. Will we avoid the development of this genetic technology any more than we did that of nuclear weapons? Proceeding differently will no doubt make the progress slower, but progress the research will.

And it does have legitimate applications. If we can administer intrauterine genetic medical treatment — and cure Down syndrome, spina bifida, and other conditions and abnormalities in the womb — it will greatly reduce suffering, increase quality of life, and eliminate an incentive to resort to pre-natal

infanticide. But just as the correct use of this technology is dependent on morality, so is the correct development of it; since it's not a matter of if it becomes a reality but only when, how it becomes a reality is of utmost importance.

The admonition not to "use people" is often issued, taught to the young by good parents. You don't "use" — in the term's negative sense, which is often synonymous with "abuse" — others simply to make money, achieve fame, or get something else you want. This includes better health. Sure, we can happily accept an organ donated by another or take a drug tested on those who volunteered for trials, but the knowledge that an organ was torn from a hapless, unwilling soul would disgust any moral person. Note that *genetic experimentation* on unwilling human subjects is largely why Nazi death-camp doctor Josef Mengele has his monstrous reputation.

The standard response here is that Mengele used the already born, whereas today's genetic adventurers are using "embryos." Yet when there's no agenda to advance, the truth often comes out. Consider Dictionary.com's definition of "embryo": "1. the young of a viviparous animal, especially of a mammal, in the early stages of development within the womb, in humans up to the end of the second month."

It does not define it as a "lump of tissue," a "bunch of cells," or "unviable tissue mass," but as an "animal." This means that a cow thus developed is a bovine, a horse thus developed is an equine — and a person thus developed (though not a mere "animal") is a human.

Saying otherwise is generally motivated by a desire to advance the proposition that lesser development can equate to lesser rights. But the reasoning used against pre-natal infanticide also applies here: If it's okay to experiment on an unborn baby of a certain age, what about one a nano-second older? What about one nano-second after that? And what about another nano-second, and another and another and another…? Carry it forward and it follows that if it's morally licit to experiment on the youngest of humans — who just happen to occupy the womb — it's also so to experiment on the oldest of them or anyone in-between. Carry it back and it follows that if Mengele was wrong to experiment on eight-year-old children, it's also wrong to experiment on eight-day-old children.

If anyone would disagree, it's incumbent upon him to explain what moment the "unviable tissue mass" becomes human and why. How is it that one nano-second the being is a person, whereas the previous one it was _____?

Of course, there is only one moment that matters here: conception. Without it, there is no development as a human because there's nothing human to develop; with it, the person will start developing and continue changing until naturally induced death — whether from cancer at 50 or miscarriage at 5 months — or until someone kills him. It's as with a fire. Once the right ingredients for its existence combine, combustible materials, oxygen, and a spark, it will burn until it burns itself out. Or until someone snuffs it out.

Many won't like any comparison involving Dr. Mengele. But while cruel in the execution of his endeavors, it appears his primary motivation was the same as that of today's genetic researchers: cold scientific curiosity. And this can only be properly controlled via coolly contemplated moral philosophy. It's fashionable today to say "Science must be allowed to go wherever science leads," and many scoff at the idea of self-appointed philosopher kings or, perish the thought, "politicians!" telling scientists what to do. But someone must. Scientists, assuming they remain purely scientific, cannot police themselves because science is limited to examination of the physical world via empirical research. "Should" (the

abstract) is the realm of philosophy; you cannot place a principle in a Petri dish and observe a moral with a microscope. Scientifically speaking, murder, theft, rape — and using people — aren't "wrong," only possible.

Unfortunately and to echo Dostoyevsky, without God all things are "morally" possible. As long as we wallow in relativism and are thus detached from the Eternal Rules of Conduct, we won't properly develop our science — or properly use it upon its flowering.