

December 2012

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## Recommended Citation

Becker, Daniel C. (2012) "Personhood: The Future of the Pro-Life Movement in the 21st Century," *Liberty University Law Review*: Vol. 6: Iss. 2, Article 2.

Available at: [http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lu\\_law\\_review/vol6/iss2/2](http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lu_law_review/vol6/iss2/2)

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## ARTICLE

# PERSONHOOD: THE FUTURE OF THE PRO-LIFE MOVEMENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY

*Daniel C. Becker*<sup>†</sup>

“[W]e move from the taking of life [abortion] through making life [IVF] to what I have somewhat crudely termed the faking of life: the capacity of developments in the fields of nanotechnology and cybernetics to manipulate, enhance and finally perhaps supplant biological human nature.”<sup>1</sup>

Chuck Colson and Nigel Cameron

“And the LORD said, ‘Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do [Tower of Babel]. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.’”

Genesis 11:6

## I. INTRODUCTION

Personhood is the biblical teaching on the sanctity of life. Throughout Church history, the doctrinal teaching on this issue has been based on the account of man’s creation revealed in Genesis.<sup>2</sup> Humankind is created “in the image of God” (*Imago Dei*) and therefore, has worth at all stages of life.<sup>3</sup> This principle—that man is created in the image of God—is the bedrock of Western civilization’s understanding and practice of human dignity. In the Gospels, it is also revealed that John the Baptist was known by God, called

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1. CHARLES W. COLSON, *HUMAN DIGNITY IN THE BIOTECH CENTURY: A CHRISTIAN VISION FOR PUBLIC POLICY* 26 (Charles W. Colson & Nigel M de S. Cameron eds., 2004).

2. *Genesis* 1:26-27. The Scripture says:

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his [own] image, in the image of God created he him; male and female he created them.

*Id.* (King James).

3. *Id.*

by God, named by God, and then filled by God with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother's womb.<sup>4</sup> This account of John the Baptist provides an excellent example of Personhood under the biblical worldview.

This biblical worldview must be contrasted with the emerging secular worldview. The following excerpt was taken directly from the FAQs listed on the website of Peter Singer, the DeCamp Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University:<sup>5</sup>

Q. You have been quoted as saying: "Killing a defective infant is not morally equivalent to killing a person. Sometimes it is not wrong at all." Is that quote accurate?

A. It is accurate, but can be misleading if read without an understanding of what I mean by the term "person. . . ."<sup>6</sup>

Professor Singer argues his perspective in the book *Unsanctifying Human Life*.<sup>7</sup> While Singer professes to believe that the "right to life" should be granted to all "persons" equally, his definition of "person" is extremely narrow. Thus, it excludes preborn and disabled children, the elderly infirm, and perfectly formed infants through eighteen months of age.<sup>8</sup> Singer goes on to declare that his own mother would probably no longer be alive if he were the sole caregiver in his family.<sup>9</sup>

One would expect to hear that Professor Singer's position haunts only the extreme fringe of public policy discussions. Surprisingly, however, his prestigious position at Princeton, coupled with his vast international influence, has earned him acclaim as one of the leading bioethicists of the day.<sup>10</sup> One should not be surprised if twenty years from now Professor Singer's positions on "Personhood" are encased in law, applied by hospitals' ethics boards, and result in the entombment and execution of embryonic

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4. Luke 1:13-15 (King James) ("For he [John the Baptist] shall be great in the sight of the Lord . . . and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb.").

5. Ronald Bailey, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, REASON, <http://reason.com/archives/2000/12/01/the-pursuit-of-happiness-peter> (last visited Mar. 18, 2012).

6. FAQ, PETER SINGER, <http://www.princeton.edu/~psinger/faq.html> (last visited Mar. 18, 2012).

7. PETER SINGER, *UNSANCTIFYING HUMAN LIFE: ESSAYS ON ETHICS* (Helga Kuhse ed., 2002).

8. See Bailey, *supra* note 5.

9. *Id.*

10. Peter May, *Life After God?—The Ethics of Peter Singer*, BETHINKING.ORG, <http://www.bethinking.org/right-wrong/intermediate/life-after-god-the-ethics-of-peter-singer.htm>.

children at research laboratories and universities all across this nation. Simply put, Personhood is not just one battleground of 21st century pro-life discussions; it is *the* battleground.

Pro-life bioethicist Wesley Smith asserts that the Right to Life movement is “fifteen years behind the curve in addressing and responding to these emerging 21st century threats.”<sup>11</sup> The narrow anti-abortion focus in the 20th century has failed to equip pro-life citizens with the ability to counter a host of 21st century issues. Even though national pro-life groups continue to warn of these emerging threats to human dignity, the local grassroots supporter is not engaged. Pro-life advocates must adjust their strategy and message to one of Personhood so that they can successfully transition the pro-life foundation to the appropriate arena; it must shift from one focused exclusively and narrowly on the issue of abortion to one that recognizes and seeks to protect the sanctity of human life wherever it is being assaulted.

## II. IT IS NO LONGER JUST ABOUT ABORTION

The failure of the Right to Life movement is demonstrated by its failure to respond to new and emerging challenges against the sanctity of all human life. In 2006, this failure was exemplified in the state of Missouri. On November 6, seeking to preserve the sanctity of human life, Missouri voters approved a “ban [on] human cloning.”<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, although espousing to ban cloning, it actually allowed cloning for what it described as “therapeutic” purposes.<sup>13</sup> Deceived by the use of the word “therapeutic,” the grassroots pro-life voters failed to discern that human life hung in the balance. The ban changed the Missouri Constitution to allow a human child—brought into existence in a laboratory through somatic cell nuclear transfer (SCNT)—to be “grown” for fourteen days, subjected to experimentation, and then destroyed.<sup>14</sup> The pro-life base failed to understand the issue or recognize the danger, and it accepted this assault on human life and dignity under the guise of a ban on cloning. More

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11. Interview with Wesley Smith, Senior Fellow in Human Rights and Bioethics, Discovery Inst., at the Georgia Personhood Symposium (May 2008).

12. 2006 *Ballot Measures*, MO. SEC’Y OF STATE ROBIN CARNAHAN, <http://www.sos.mo.gov/elections/2006ballot/>; see also MO. CONST. art. III, § 38(d), available at <http://www.moga.mo.gov/const/A03038d.HTM>.

13. William L. Saunders, Michael A. Fragoso & David Prentice, *False Promises: Common Cloning Claims Refuted*, FAMILY RESEARCH COUNCIL 10 (2008), available at <http://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF08I35.pdf>.

14. *Id.* at 11.

dramatically, this case verified that the word “therapeutic,” when placed in front of any unethical or life-assaulting biomedical practice, will satisfy the vast majority of voters, who will more readily condone the practice in question—in this case the destruction of children at an embryonic level. Whether the voters were ignorant of how broad this therapeutic exception would be, or if they simply bought the lie that procedures are moral if their aim is to discover cures for diseases such as Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s, the consequence is the same: the continued destruction of human life.

Destruction of human children at the embryonic level has now expanded beyond research laboratories and has become enshrined by the Supreme Court as a “procreative right” of infertile couples seeking to become parents. When parents are seeking alternative ways of becoming pregnant, it is not uncommon to create anywhere from fifteen to twenty embryonic children, and then through a process of selective reduction or the eugenic practice of pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD), to kill all but one or two of those children.<sup>15</sup> As tragic as it may be for a couple to struggle with infertility, when did it become acceptable for a couple’s “right to parent” to supersede another’s “right to live?” Infertility is not justification for murder. Neither is infertility untreatable. A pro-life couple must be fully informed of all of the available options before embarking on a path that assures the fertility clinics and biotech industry more human subjects to sacrifice on the altar of technology.

Drug companies and biotech businesses need human subjects to perfect their products. They also need steady supplies of human embryos to conduct these lethal experiments. Because fertility clinics cannot possibly supply the large number of embryos needed, the biotech industry has resorted to a transgenic solution: combining 98% human DNA with 2% cow DNA to form a human-animal hybrid known as a “chimera.”<sup>16</sup> In May of 2008, scientists at Cornell University created a “glow in the dark” human child by crossing human genes with a fluorescent gene from an Australian jellyfish.<sup>17</sup> The embryo was destroyed before her third week of life, and a spokesperson for the National Institutes of Health explained, “the Cornell

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15. Randy S. Morris, *IVF What should I expect*, IVF1, [http://www.ivf1.com/ivf-real-answers/\(0%-100% of 20 eggs\)](http://www.ivf1.com/ivf-real-answers/(0%-100%+of+20+eggs)).

16. Alok Jha, *First British human-animal hybrid embryos created by scientists*, THE GUARDIAN (Apr. 1, 2008), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2008/apr/02/medicalresearch.ethicsofscience>.

17. Andrew Pollack, *Scientists engineer human embryo*, N.Y. TIMES (May 13, 2008), <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/13/health/13iht-embryo.1.12831841.html>.

work would not be classified as gene therapy in need of federal review, because a test-tube embryo is not considered a person under the regulations.”<sup>18</sup>

The pro-life movement’s efforts to promote a culture of life in the 21st century require that it develop a clear and consistent message to alert the culture to the dangers that lie ahead if the definition of “person” continues to shift away from its historical meaning. Again, personhood is the clear battleground of the pro-life movement in the 21st century.<sup>19</sup>

### III. PERSONHOOD: TODAY’S DEBATE, TOMORROW’S FUTURE

America is unique in that it was founded upon the Judeo-Christian belief that every human being is “endowed by his Creator with certain unalienable rights”<sup>20</sup> and that “among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”<sup>21</sup> The right to life is a person’s most basic right. Without its protection, all other rights become moot.

Seldom will one find disagreement with this premise. The arguments arise when a nation attempts to answer the questions of “when” our rights attach and “who” qualifies as a person under the law. The *Dred Scott* Court answered these questions in one way, and Nazi Germany answered these questions in another way.<sup>22</sup> In the United States, the Supreme Court has wrongly restrained the right to life, applying it only to “born persons.”<sup>23</sup>

Over the past 37 years, the debate over this complex question typically centered around traditional pro-life issues, particularly abortion. Nevertheless, with the emergence of new biotechnologies, the debate must widen from the ethics of life and death to the ethics of human nature and what it means to be created in “the image of God.”<sup>24</sup> Why is protecting human dignity as important as protecting the right to life? The answer to this question serves as what this author proposes ought to be the foundation

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18. Andrew Pollack, *Engineering by Scientists on Embryo Stirs Criticism*, N.Y. TIMES (May 13, 2008), <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/13/science/13embryo.html>.

19. The author’s pro-life organization, Georgia Right to Life, has produced a website at Personhood.net in its attempt to engage the 21st century with a clear “Sanctity of Human Life” foundation. The author would encourage everyone to familiarize themselves with its resources and message.

20. THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE para. 2 (U.S. 1776).

21. *Id.*

22. *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. (19 How.) 393 (1856).

23. *See, e.g., Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973).

24. *See Genesis* 1:26-27.

of the 21st century pro-life ethic. The pro-life movement must mature beyond the singular goal of “saving babies” and engage the current “culture of death” with a return to the foundational premise that each and every innocent human being must be respected and protected—from its earliest biological beginning until its natural death. Personhood is the means to achieve this maturation and advance the respect and protection of human life.

#### IV. THE MAKING, TAKING, AND FAKING OF HUMAN LIFE

The 19th century has come to be known as the Industrial Age, while the 20th century has been dubbed the Atomic Age.<sup>25</sup> The 21st century, in contrast, seems destined to be remembered as the Biotech Age.<sup>26</sup> The modern-day secularist-prophet Ray Kurzweil has proved empirically that there is an exponential curve in the current growth of biomedical knowledge.<sup>27</sup> He predicts that the amount of biomedical knowledge acquired since the dawn of history will double within the next decade, and he further asserts that it will double again in the following decade.<sup>28</sup>

Professor Michael Sleasman, managing director and research scholar for The Center for Bioethics & Human Dignity, explains it this way:

[W]hile many of the ethical questions of the late 20th Century dealt with bio-ethical concerns over the beginning and end of life issues (the making, and taking of human life), the questions raised by these new, these emerging technologies threaten to change the nature of the human species and the very essence of what it means to be human.<sup>29</sup>

“Germ-line intervention” is a term that describes the ability of the current state of bio-science to alter the human genome in ways that will be transmissible through normal sexual reproduction.<sup>30</sup> This new technology

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25. SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY OF TERRORISM AND COUNTERTERRORISM 98 (Tushar K. Ghosh, Mark A. Prelas, Dabir S. Viswanath & Sudarshan K. Loyalka eds., 2002).

26. *Id.*

27. RAY KURZWEIL, THE SINGULARITY IS NEAR: WHEN HUMANS TRANSCEND BIOLOGY 11 (2005).

28. *Id.*

29. Michael J. Sleasman, *The Center for Bioethics & Human Dignity*, <http://cbhd.org/content/thinking-through-technology-part-i> (last visited Mar. 18, 2012).

30. *Definition of Mutation, germline*, MEDICINET.COM, <http://www.medterms.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=15924> (last visited Feb. 8, 2012).

involves the use of genetically altered eggs or sperm to correct or improve the genetic makeup of a child.<sup>31</sup> On its surface, this technology promises a generational cure for diseases like Tay-Sachs, which primarily afflicts Eastern European Jews, and Sickle Cell Anemia, which primarily afflicts the Black race.<sup>32</sup> This is a laudible objective. The problem, however, is that once a genetic change is made to the human genome and is allowed to propagate within the human gene pool, it cannot be undone. Put another way, once the genie is out of the bottle, it is impossible to put it back in the bottle. This raises the sinister specter of irreversible harm. Once the notion of “therapeutic” germ-line intervention has become commonplace, and the people of this nation have subscribed to the idea that genetic superiority is an ideal to be achieved, the darker approach embodied in eugenics type practices will not be far behind.

A culture that rejects the absolute truth that God created humanity in His own image will naturally evolve to demand that humans create humans in the image of an idealized man. Trans-human enhancement, designer babies, cyborgs (human-machine hybrids), and chimeras (human-animal cybrids) suddenly come into focus as useful and desirable objectives. The advancement of the human species by such means is already being advocated in the philosophies currently presented in many of this nation’s colleges and universities.<sup>33</sup> No longer, so the trans-human philosophers enthuse, will humans be called *Homo sapiens*, but humankind will now be designated *Homo perfectus*. In contrast, however, Personhood as a public policy not only protects preborn children, but, as the basic embodiment of *Imago Dei*, it assures the protection of what it means to be human by establishing a benchmark for human dignity.

Western civilization is at a critical juncture. According to United States Congressman Brad Sherman, a member of the United States House Science Committee, the unprecedented capabilities of emerging biotechnologies have set the stage for a technological revolution. Representative Sherman has even claimed that the advancements in this field are analogous to the

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31. *Id.*

32. 4 ROBERT K. AUSMAN & DEAN E. SNYDER, *MEDICAL LIBRARY: LAWYERS EDITION* 262 (1989).

33. See Paul Privateer, *Studies in the Transhuman: Genetics, Robotics, Information Technology, Nanosciences Biopolitics and the Human Future (s)*, ARIZ. STATE UNIV., available at <http://www.cspo.org/outreach/courses/Studies%20in%20the%20Transhuman3.pdf>.



development of nuclear technology.<sup>34</sup> Modern culture has indeed reached an ethical crossroads, something evidenced by the statements of Representative Sherman at a “nano-policy roundtable” held in 2006. “Now, like my colleagues, I do not have any answers. Rather, I hope to identify some of the questions. I know that the right time to start thinking about these questions is now. . . . What is the definition of a human?”<sup>35</sup> Marty Spitzer, speaking on behalf of Representative Sherwood Boehlert, Chairman of the House of Science Committee, had this to say: “We are talking about a suite of technologies that are going to revolutionize the way we do things and how we live. And the questions are ‘How will that happen?’ and ‘What will we do as this unfolds?’”<sup>36</sup>

What are the policy implications of the emerging medical technologies? The courts are demanding both definitions and laws. Christian bioethicist, Nigel Cameron, the president and cofounder of the Institute on Biotechnology & the Human Future, has stated that “the problem is brought into ready focus by the manner in which bioethics has essentially emerged as the conjoined twin of bio-policy.”<sup>37</sup> He further predicts that two terms will dominate public policy in the 21st century—transhumanism and eugenics.<sup>38</sup>

Who lives and who dies? Who benefits from our finite medical resources? Whose lives may be sacrificed so that others may live? If only “persons” benefit, then who qualifies as a “person?” The answers to these questions require a deeper look into the nature of ethics, policy, ideas, and actions.

In the 20th century, it was sufficient for Right to Life advocates to focus on being anti-abortion. This singular focus, however, will not be sufficient in light of the new “killing fields” of the 21st century. The pro-life advocates’ role in advocating Personhood is to facilitate, educate, and disseminate a biblical worldview within the Church. This will lead to a response within the larger, grassroots, pro-life movement and will place the pro-life policy and strategy soundly on the biblical foundation of the whole range of issues embodied in the phrase “sanctity of life.” Only by expanding

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34. Marty Spitzer, *The View from Congress: A Roundtable on Nanopolicy* 9 (2007), [http://media.wiley.com/product\\_data/excerpt/97/04700841/0470084197.pdf](http://media.wiley.com/product_data/excerpt/97/04700841/0470084197.pdf).

35. *Id.*

36. *Id.* at 4.

37. Nigel Cameron, Inst. on Biotechnology & the Hum. Future, Address at breakout session of the National Right to Life Convention (June 17, 2005).

38. *Id.*

the scope of what pro-life advocates establish as their fundamental presumptions to include all aspects of personhood will we be able to stand against the onslaught of contrary philosophies and fickle public opinion; only then will we be in a position to defend human dignity both now, and beyond our present age. We must recognize this truth: it is no longer just about abortion.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Because mankind bears the image of God, all humankind—by extension every human life—possesses a “special-ness,” a unique value and worth that demands respect and legal protection. Each human life, from its earliest stage of development, is a unique person who bears God’s likeness and deserves the same protection under law that is afforded all other “persons” in society. For this reason, all human life must be respected and protected in law.

This respect for human life is due regardless of the manner of conception, whether through marital consummation or the heinous act of rape or incest; whether the egg is fertilized “in vitro” (IVF) or through the “ex utero” process of somatic cell nuclear transfer (cloning). Regardless of the manner, age, or degree of disability or dependency, a human life has immeasurable worth in the eyes of God—an inestimable, intrinsic value that must be acknowledged by the culture and protected in its code of law.