

Case 8

“Lords of Creation”

Following heated debate, the British House of Lords passed the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill, which allows the creation of mixed human-animal embryos for medical research purposes.

After removing the nuclei from animal embryos, human DNA is inserted into the embryo to create interspecies embryos—cytoplasmic hybrids or “cybrids” for short—that proponents claim are 99.9% human and .1% animal. Cybrids may be kept for a maximum of fourteen days, after which time the beginnings of the spinal cord and brain begin to form. Stem cells can be harvested during those two weeks to be used for research purposes. The legislation prohibits the implantation of cybrids into humans.

Supporters claim that due to the short supply of human embryos, interspecies embryos are necessary. Contributing to the shortage of human embryos in Britain is the prohibition of the sale of human ova, which are necessary for making human embryos. Human embryos are used, among other things, as a source of stem cells. Stem cells are used in research to better understand and develop treatments for neurogenerative diseases, developmental abnormalities, cancer, and a host of other diseases and injuries. Among other promises, stem cell technologies hold the potential for improved burn treatment, regenerative medicine, organ transplantation, and providing the means for infertile couples to have children who carry some of their genetic material. Better treatment of disease and traumatic injuries has tremendous social benefits for individuals and their quality of life. There are potential economic benefits for society as well, due to greater productivity of healthier individuals and reduced cost for treatment for traumatic or chronic conditions. The research will offer insights into the working of the human body on both the cellular and integrated levels, including human growth and development.

Opponents claim that creating interspecies embryos tampers with the fundamental nature of what it means to be human, and challenges the dignity of human beings. Many members of society hold deep religious convictions against tampering with human embryos. Some fear that it is inevitable that a cybrid will be implanted in a human uterus...or in an animal uterus, and allowed to develop to term, resulting in the birth of a cybrid. Many types of research have resulted in devastating unforeseen consequences. It is not possible to predict how this research will affect the course of human and animal evolution: opponents claim it is particularly troublesome that these consequences may affect the fundamental meaning of being human.