

# Philosophical Conceptions: Ronald Green discusses his new book, *The Human Embryo Research Debates*

BY ROXANNE KHAMSI '02

*When Ronald Green received a phone call in early January 1994 from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) inviting him to serve on a new panel dealing with research on embryos, he accepted with curiosity and enthusiasm. Green, the Eunice and Julian Cohen professor for the study of ethics and human values and director of the Ethics Institute at Dartmouth, takes us on his journey as a member of the NIH's panel in his new book, *The Human Embryo Research Debates*. From controversies regarding cloning to stigmas surrounding stem cells, the book reveals that science will never give us all the answers we seek. Green argues that we cannot discover important and morally decisive events in embryonic development; rather we must decide which events are significant by identifying and applying our values. He recently spoke to the Dartmouth Undergraduate Journal of Science about his book and the importance of embryo research.*

**Roxanne Khamsi:** Your book followed your participation as a member of the National Institutes of Health's Human Research Panel and gave a first-hand account of the human embryo research debates. Why did you choose this presentation of the controversies?

*Ronald Green:* It was a gamble on my part because I could have written a more straight philosophical book, but I thought it would be more interesting for people to see the way we encountered the issues.

**RK:** What were your reasons for writing a book on the subject of human embryo research?

*RG:* There has been an increasing amount of opposition to reproductive research driven by

religious forces. It never existed this way before. It has become a crescendo. There are groups that have never had these views before and now they have become articulate opponents of reproductive research in many areas; they've stopped reproductive research dead. If you ask why in 2002 we still don't have an adequate, safe contraceptive for women, it's partly what these people have accomplished over 20 or 30 years of stalemate.

In the wake on the human embryo panel, which was such an emotionally engaging experience, I decided to write the book. I saw major health problems that people were unaware of, to which they had to have their attention drawn. I saw a grave injustice being done to many women and couples through the denial of adequate research and science. I saw the power of religious opposition group in Washington, D.C. around



courtesy Ronald M. Green

these issues and I said somebody has to know what's going on. Part of the problem is that the issues really are complex.

**RK: In the introduction to your book, you state that, "...infertility, as a major source of suffering caused by a biological abnormality, meets every criterion for being a serious illness or disease." What are the implications of viewing infertility as a disease?**

RG: It has two components: It's an abnormality and it is a cause of suffering. It's not just that it's an abnormality. It's a mistake to think that a disease must threaten your life. There are many disease conditions that you'll die in bed with at 90 years of age. But they cause extreme suffering because they represent an abnormality in function.

The interesting thing about infertility—you take almost any one of the other things that people think are diseases, like cancer or heart disease, and every human being at every moment of their life faces those as a threat. Infertility only hits people at a narrow slice of life of the life cycle. So as I say in the book, most young college kids are trying to avoid fertility. Then, many people have a baby, two babies, they're finished with parenting, they've got fifty years of their lives ahead of them and [they can] say "That's not my problem."

**RK: You state in your book that (even when the only means of reproducing involves cloning) "people have a right not to be impeded in their efforts to biologically related children." What is the reasoning behind this statement?**

RG: The desire to parent and the desire to parent biologically related to you is a real and reasonable desire.... It is as reasonable to have a biologically related child so long as that does not wreak harm on the child or on other members of society. I answered a question from a journalist who asked, "Is it right for people to deliberately have a

deaf child?" I'm still convinced that it's not right to do that to a child. That's why I'm opposed right now to reproductive cloning, because I do believe that it would invite severe physical harm for a child.

**RK: Many of the scientific innovations you discuss in your book, such as in vitro fertilization and in vitro maturation, involve increasing human control over various aspects of reproduction. Do you believe that we can go too far in controlling reproduction?**

RG: Human individuality and freedom are uncontrollable and if people think that they can so control the reproductive process as to get the perfect child, that's not a healthy way of looking at parenting. Children will always be resistant; they will always be their own selves. You buy the genes for Tiger Woods and you're going to get someone who wants to spend his time in the Dartmouth Library. The limit I would say is the effort to control and shape the child. I think using reproductive technologies to have a happy, healthy child is perfectly all right.

**RK: You talk about the sanctity of human life, and at some point in the embryo's development one could say that it has human life...**

RG: I think it becomes morally protectable. And frankly, for me, full equality and protectability does not occur until birth. If we ever put the fetus and mother on a full plane of equality, then it could be that a court could rule that a mother should die for the baby and I think that's absolutely wrong.

It's asking the question: Does the embryo at eight days have such weight that we cannot destroy it for scientific research. First of all, it's understanding how valuable the scientific research is and it seems to me overwhelmingly valuable. Clearly, lives are at stake. We're not using these for cosmetics; in fact, we'd probably ban it for that [purpose].

It's a philosophical mistake to equate a living, sentient, cognitive being with a being [an embryo] that hasn't even reached the stage of being able to process thought.

**RK: It seems difficult to select a single stage of development in which the embryo acquires "personhood." Do you think that there is a decisive moment?**

RG: I think that there are just points and bands on a line that we judge to be important. Even things that looked at one time like definitive points, the more precise our measuring instruments get, the more we see them as processes that are more analog, in the sense that they reach magnitudes and then you say that that magnitude is important. The critical, most important single idea in the entire book is that these are decisions; they are not merely discoveries of things out there. The mistake that a lot of people left and right have made in these debates is they said, "It's just a question of finding that point where the qualities [indicate that the embryo has entered personhood]." No!

**RK: So it's a construction then?**

RG: It's a construction through a value-based decision. Just as the end of life is. [For example] is it going to be cortical death? We decide [where that point is]. We're always looking to offload our decision onto something that will instruct us and it effaces that reality that we are deciding.

**RK: In your book you discuss how you took a pluralistic approach to understanding the ethics of human embryo research. Could you describe what this means and why you chose this type of approach?**

RG: Because I found people who wanted to alight on a single feature and that makes for so many conceptual mistakes and errors. No rational decision that we make is a function of one thing.

Here's an example: [You say,] "I went to Dartmouth." [And then someone asks you] "Well why did you go to Dartmouth?" And you think for a moment and then you say, "Because it's in such a beautiful rural place." "Well then why didn't you go to Bowdoin, it's even more rural?" People jump on you like that. Of course it's not just one reason; you spoke elliptically. We jump on one thing. Similarly we look at the early fetus and [mistakenly] try to look for a single criterion....The point is that there are a whole bunch of different things going on here.

Everyone goes about this in the same exact way [looking for a decisive feature]. Left and Right. Right hand says "genetic potential" and claims it's objective. Well, it's only objective in the quality, not the choice of the quality. The choice is radically subjective. But they think it's objective because they've got a hard quality that they can measure. And from the left, you can look at brain activity and sentience. But they're failing to see that they're losing the nature of the whole process.

**RK: What appeals to you most about the field of biomedical ethics? Why did you pursue this area?**

RG: I like philosophical quandaries. And I found many of these to reside in the area of gene ethics, the ethics associated with creation.