



Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri

NATIONAL BIOETHICS COMMITTEE

IDENTITY AND STATUS OF THE HUMAN EMBRYO

(22nd June 1996)

abstract

The existence of biomedical practices that can lead to damage of the human embryo have induced the NBC to analyse the biological data of the beginning of human life and to question the ontological meaning of “person”, “individual”, “identity”, which is followed by a statement of the prevailing theoretical positions and the most significant biological data for the beginning of the personal life of the embryo.

The document retains all the complexity of the current debate, without renouncing to taking a unanimous position. The Committee majority believes that the human embryo is a being endowed with individual identity from conception. Even those that consider it so only after formation – between the eighth and fourteenth day after fertilisation – of the primitive streak or line, consider it dutiful to respect and protect the embryo. In the uncertainty surrounding the status of a person in a specific early stage, the very doubt alone is sufficient to impose abstention from causing it any harm. As regards this, the document draws attention to the fact that – despite the difference of positions – the embryo is never considered as a thing, but as a “being belonging to the human species”.

The complexity of the subject has led to a differentiation of the bioethical conclusions related to the lawfulness of certain practices. The following are unanimously considered morally illicit:

- production of embryos for experimental, commercial or industrial purposes;
- multiple generation of genetically identical human beings through twin fission or cloning;
- creation of chimeras using human embryos;
- production of human-animal hybrids;
- the transfer of human embryos into an animal uterus or animal embryos into a human uterus.

A part of the Committee believes that illegality subsists even in “the suppression or any form of harmful manipulation of embryos”; pre-implantation diagnosis for the purpose of eugenic selection, the formation of in vitro embryos not destined for the mother’s uterus. The Committee has unanimously considered morally licit any therapeutic interventions on embryos, when they are directed to the safeguard of their life and health and experimentation on dead embryos originating from abortions.

The diversity of opinion on certain specific aspects of the ontological status of the embryo and the lawfulness of possible treatment is expressed – not only in the text of the document (approved unanimously) – but also in the appendix which contains several personal remarks of the Committee members.