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Should We Clone Humans? Beyond the “Yuck Factor”

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The development of a human embryo from a cloned cell—as claimed by a group of South Korean scientists—has pushed the clock of genetic engineering toward the midnight moment of full human cloning. Quickly pushed into the background by the rush of other news, this development signals a new urgency and the need for serious debate on the cloning of human beings before the technology is fully upon us.

At present, the debate is limited to elite sectors where scientists, theologians, philosophers, and governmental officials have attempted to keep their discussions as close as possible to the fast-paced front lines of technological experimentation. In less than two years the cutting edge of clonal experimentation has moved from Dolly the cloned sheep to the cloning of monkeys, mice, cattle, and now human cells.

The South Korean scientists claimed to have aborted their experiment only after the cloned embryo had experienced cell division, and was ready for implantation in a human womb. Though some scientists have disputed the Korean claims, few informed persons doubt that the technology to clone fully-developed human beings is very close at hand.

For some, this is a most welcome development. Advocates of human cloning point to the benefits of custom-designed and replicated human beings, free from unwanted genetic features, and blessed with optimal health, intelligence, talents, strength, and appearance. Others simply make the argument from inevitability. Human cloning will eventually be an accepted feature of modern medicine and reproduction, they argue, if for no other reason than that it has happened and will be available. Technologies will be used, the argument goes, and morality will adjust.

Cloning has its evangelists, too. Richard Dawkins of Oxford University is an unabashed proponent of human cloning, and he has admitted that he would like to have himself cloned, just out of curiosity. Critics of the technology include those, like Leon Kass of the University of Chicago, who respond with moral repugnance. Such revulsion, he admits, is not an argument, but “the emotional expression of deep wisdom, beyond reason’s power fully to articulate it.” This is sometimes called the “Yuck factor,” implying that some acts and practices are too grotesque for human acceptance.

The problem is that the “Yuck factor” fails to sustain moral objection over time. Human beings and the cultures we create are amazingly—and frighteningly—adept at losing the “Yuck factor.” A quick look at the collapse of medical ethics under the Nazi regime should be sufficiently sobering.

In the case of new scientific discoveries, familiarity breeds moral apathy and acquiescence. Professor Dawkins is well known as a militant atheist and evolutionary theorist. So far as he is concerned, the idea of cloning human beings is not repugnant at all, and those who argue otherwise are sentimentalists. Dawkins gets right to the point: “In the case of human cloning, if some people want to do it, the onus is on those who would ban it to spell out what harm it would do, and to whom.”

Setting aside the scientific hubris of his statement, his point still stands. It is up to those of us who oppose human cloning to make our arguments clearly . . . and quickly. We must move beyond emotional arguments to answer “what harm it would do, and to whom.”

Such an answer would start with a denial of human beings as sovereign lords and masters of our own fate, and detail the damages and evil wrought by those who have sought to redesign the human race to their own liking. It would proceed

to demonstrate the damage of separating procreation from sexual reproduction, the disastrous consequences of genetic imbalance, the danger of raising a race of “customized” children, and the dismantling of the family.

In the end, we must be honest in admitting that the only compelling arguments arise from the biblical worldview of the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the end, the limits of our sovereignty are explained only by our status as a creature, made in the image of God. Our decision to set such a technology aside can be justified only by our acceptance of our creaturehood, and our dreadful knowledge of how human evil could employ this technology in the creation of a living nightmare.

It may be too late. Our secular age may have little interest in God-talk when such a commercially attractive technology presents a powerful temptation. On the other hand, we have a small window in which to make our case—and we had better get busy. We will have to do better than the “Yuck factor.”

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