Commentary

Cloning and ethics

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The first successful cloning of an adult sheep, the details of which were recently revealed, has aroused widespread scientific and popular interest. Few have failed to appreciate it as an event of great moment. However, there has been disagreement about whether this milestone is to be greeted as signalling another exciting, even if awesome, advance in the history of biological science, or whether it portends great evil unless checked by swift and robust legislation. Dolly, the clone, is a symbol of new possibilities for the reproduction of both animals and humans. For some, these possibilities are to be embraced, even if cautiously, because of the great benefits they could yield. Others warn that in overcoming the technical obstacles to cloning, we face a moral minefield in which, if we proceed, we risk catastrophe.

Concern for the ethical implications of scientific advances is to be welcomed. There are, after all, too many who are happy to greet the expanding limits of the possible without a care for the limits of the permissible. However, just as failure to detect moral problems is a defect, so is the inability to discriminate between real and imaginary problems. There are alarmists who see moral peril at every turn. Heeding their calls does not come without cost. It can impede progress and deny great benefits to many. Thus, there is no side of caution on which one can err. Acute judgement cannot be avoided.

Cloning does raise moral questions, to which close and detailed attention should be given. For instance, there is the (currently open) question whether the cloning technique is prone to harm the clone, either by damaging its DNA or by condemning the clone to premature ageing. And, if performed on a large scale, cloning could undermine biological diversity, raising the spectre of weakened stock and the possibility of extinctions. These considerations, although presently insufficient to decide against cloning, do call for caution and detailed study as the technical limits are extended. However, much of the uproar about cloning has focused not on such sober questions, but rather on charges of human impertinence and the invocation of dystopian projections of our descent into a moral abyss.

A number of the arguments—such as claims that cloning is unnatural and a usurpation of God’s authority—are generic objections that have been raised against numerous scientific advances and much else. Rarely are we told, however, why ‘unnatural’ is ‘immoral’ or why some scientific advances amount to ‘playing God’, whereas others do not. Why is it that animal breeding is not a (wicked) departure from natural evolution, but cloning is? Why is life-saving surgery to correct congenital abnormalities not an (evil) interference with evolution whereas cloning is? Why are (some) forms of gene therapy, and now cloning, an intrusion into God’s domain, whereas pharmacological therapy is not? And it is curious that new advances, deemed to be ‘playing God’, soon become uncontroversial components of medical practice after they have been around for a while. The defenders of the natural order and the divine realm must explain these anomalies.

To be fair, opponents of cloning have fleshed out their objections. Sometimes they describe frightening close and detailed attention should be given. For instance, there is the (currently open) question whether the cloning technique is prone to harm the clone, either by damaging its DNA or by condemning the clone to premature ageing. And, if performed on a large scale, cloning could undermine biological diversity, raising the spectre of weakened stock and
offspring, we are informed, would be robbed of their selfhood. Their ‘parents’ would seek to live vicariously through them. They would not be respected as separate beings, choosing their own goals and living their own lives, but would be expected to live up to the once thwarted aspirations of the person from whom they were cloned. The cloned being could make up for lost and bungled opportunities by living again through the clone. All these scenarios, we are reminded, would violate the Kantian requirement to treat people always as ends and never merely as means.

Such dehumanization is deeply troubling, but what is forgotten is that there is a difference between cloning in and of itself and the goals to which cloning might be put. Perhaps the unscrupulous might attempt to clone a slave class. Egotists might seek to produce others in their own image and then expect these clones to lead their lives. But this speaks not to the wickedness of cloning, but rather to the evil to which cloning could be put. To fail to make such a distinction is to damn not only cloning but just about everything else. Take transplant surgery, for example. There are cases of organs being stolen from living people. And we can imagine nightmare scenarios in which the powerless are routinely turned into involuntary live donors of vital organs. But none of this shows that organ transplantation is wrong. It shows only that organ transplantation can be practised in an immoral manner.

Perhaps the opponents of cloning will respond that unlike organ transplantation, cloning is extremely likely to lead to widespread abuse, because it necessarily involves treating the clone as a means to some other end. Clones, it should be noted, are produced not for their own sakes but to serve the interests of others. I wonder, however, how different cloning is, in this regard, from ordinary procreation. Children are brought into existence not in acts of great altruism, designed to bring the benefit of life to some pitiful non-being suspended in metaphysical void and thereby denied the joys of life. We have children for our own sakes—to serve our own needs—not theirs. Thus it seems that ordinary procreation is not unlike cloning in this way. If cloning violates the Kantian requirement of respect for persons, then so does procreation. And if procreation does not necessarily entail treating the resulting children as means, then neither does cloning. But in both cases a distinction is to be drawn between the bringing about of the individual—by reproduction or cloning—and the way the individual is then treated. Although one cannot have a child for its sake, once it is brought into being, it has interests of its own. We can either foster or thwart these interests. It is not only clones whose interests can be trampled upon and treated merely as means to the ends of others. Many parents seek to live vicariously through their children, and consequently fail to regard their children as beings with independent lives. In such cases, what is usually condemned is the inappropriate attitude to and rearing of the child, not the procreation per se. If that is the case, then why should a similar attitude not be adopted to cloning and the subsequent treatment of clones?

The first step, it seems, in preventing the abuse of human cloning is to counter the misinformed views about what cloning can achieve. Cloning produces a copy of a being, not another instance of the same being. It is a remarkable copy, physically mirroring the original, but it is not the same being. The failure to see this is attributable to the seductive power of an oversimplified view of genetics. Persons may be partly constituted by genes, but they are much more than that. Environment and experience play important roles in the formation of persons. Once this is realised, then the futility or inefficiency of cloning drones, slaves and attitudinal replicas of oneself can be seen. Servility, for instance, is not inscribed in genes. A servile mentality is (most effectively) formed by experiences not DNA. If, through the efforts of scientists and others, people can be made to understand the limits of genetic potency, then we shall have removed the incentive of tyrants, bureaucrats, egotists and others to use human cloning to effect their nefarious goals. There would be no special obstacle to respecting clones as persons.

References