



Readings II in Faith & Science

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Cloning

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Cloning

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Recently, the news media were breathlessly agog at the reports of Dolly, the cloned sheep. The immediate reaction was one of wonder and of dire predictions and stern statements about never doing this sort of thing with humans. The President called together a task force to study the issue - Washington's ultimate weapon.

Then, more "thoughtful" voices slowly began to be heard. Others said, tentatively at first then with growing vigor: "Let's not do anything rash. Let's think about this. Maybe there are some perfectly legitimate reasons for pursuing the cloning of humans." That's pretty much where we are now.

Cloning is basically a procedure for reproducing an animal or a human from one genetic parent. In other words, it is basically xeroxing the genetic characteristics of a given animal or human. As I understand it, the Scottish scientist, Ian Wilmut, enucleated an egg and then fused it with the DNA from an adult sheep's mammary cell, having significantly reduced the nutrients on which the mammary cells were subsisting for five days.

As George B. Johnson tells it (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, March 20, 1997), the mammary cells were inserted inside the covering around the enucleated egg and a very brief electrical shock was applied. The electrical shock caused the plasma surrounding the two cells to leak, so that the nucleus of the mammary cell passed into the egg cell. The shock also kick-started the cell cycle, causing the cell to begin to divide. The cells, implanted in the womb of the "mother" resulted in the lamb, Dolly, the first successful clone generated from a fully differentiated animal cell.

What are we to make of all the hoopla surrounding this important scientific breakthrough? Even if it worked only once in 277 tries?

Cloning in Animals

First, let's deal with animals. In principle there seems to be little wrong with this technique for animal husbandry, always keeping in mind the apparent need for genetic diversity. As long as we carefully avoid uniformity - - making genes more like each other raises the danger that at some time in the future a disease might come up against which the common cloned animal has no resistance -- there does not seem to be a great deal of ethical difficulty with cloned animals.

Efforts at animal husbandry have obvious benefits from cloning. A prize bull - or a cow that produces more milk or a sheep that produces especially fine wool, or whatever -- could be cloned at some point in the future. Right now, the technique is too "iffy." The technique could also be used to ensure (or partly ensure) the survival of an endangered species.

There is also talk about research in cloning being advantageous in learning about various forms of cancer as scientists learn how genes are turned off or turned on. This work may facilitate the design of transgenic animal organs which would resist rejection in human beings. There would always be a danger, I would think, in this latter procedure. You cannot predict the behavior of genes when linked with other genes. But you never get something for nothing or in the modern parlance: "There is no such thing as a free lunch."

Cloning in Humans

It is inevitable in talking about cloning to wonder about the cloning of human beings. Are they to be cloned or are they not? If not, why not?

From a purely secular view, it is difficult to see why not. After all, secularly speaking, the human being is nothing more than a “higher animal.” Higher than what is more a matter of feeling than logical determination. Moreover, the technological imperative tells us that if we can do it, we ought to. We move from possibility to acceptance rapidly in this country, especially when it comes to “reproductive rights.” It is not hard to look down the road a little way and discover the emotionally laden arguments (and cases) that will be presented.

Take, for instance, the case of a couple (now beyond the age of reproducing) who have just lost a child. How will the void in their lives be filled? How about creating a clone? That would be one way to replace their child.

More, think of the potential! Genetics plays a significant (maybe even a dominant but not dominating) role in the formation of talent, appearance, temperament or ability of one kind or another. Think of a “stable” of Michael Jordans or Tiger Woods! What a glorious advantage to the nation or mankind! They could pass on virtually 100% of their genetic make-up.

There is always the omni-present hope for a cure for cancer and other such medical breakthroughs. We may even be able to do without men -- a fervent wish on the part of some women. Just think of the glories of a peaceful world without the presence of males! What bliss that would be!

Along the way we have the arguments of the politicians: “My fear is that someone, in their [sic] haste to respond to a fairly easy political issue to demagogue, will prevent research that can cure disease and potentially save millions of lives.” (Sen. Connie Mack, R-FLA.) Or: “Can you write a bill that is so narrow that you don’t jeopardize the very good research that has the potential to save millions of lives?” (Sen. Bill Frist, R-Tenn.). Or finally Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa: “What nonsense -- what utter nonsense -- to think that we can hold up our hands and say, Stop. Human cloning will take place, and it will take place in my lifetime. I don’t fear it at all. I welcome it.”

Even Ian Wilmut waffled some. After declaring “I have not heard a suggested application to clone a person that I am comfortable with” added that the methodology is not ready for that anyway.

Religious Opposition?

There are many reasons why a person with religious beliefs would not be in favor of cloning: cloning changes both the one cloning and the one cloned into research (or practical) objects, not subjects. They are means to an end, not an end in itself. Cloning of humans violates the integrity of what it means to be a human - at least a human as known up to the present.

Others would be against the cloning of humans because there is almost the inevitability of unsuspected genetic defects in the cloned individual. They are also against the procedure because the clone would be under pressure (internal or external) to develop the talents and traits for which it was cloned in the first place.

Another reason why some religious people would be against this is because it would certainly favor the elite (or notorious) in society. Others would oppose it because it would open the door to discrimination or worse, to cross-species experimentation and the creation of “human” drones, etc. These concerns might seem exaggerated if not impossible. But, given the current (and truth be told, historical) human drive to exclude “inferior people” from human commerce, such experimentation and activity might not be as far-fetched as we might like to think.

We as a society have already admitted (and approved) practices that undercut some or many of these concerns. Here reproductive freedom is sacred - the highest “virtue.” “Privacy” has assumed the mantle of great civic virtue. Parents have already conceived a child to provide bone marrow for a sick daughter. In short, is cloning such a drastic step?

A Catholic Perspective

All the above arguments are valid reasons for avoiding cloning, but not one (or all together) are dispositive of the case. These abuses need not happen in any given individual case. They may happen; they probably will happen; but they need not happen. Then, where do those arguments lead? Inevitably they will be dropped or very greatly modified.

The reason why a Catholic is against this procedure is doctrinal: the very basic foundations of our Faith. First, for a Catholic, the conception of a child is an act of procreation, not simply the product of reproduction. The procreation of a child requires a mother and a father. Ideally, they will be in love and the child will be a manifestation of that love. In cloning, it “takes only one to tango.” The creation of the clone requires only a single source. In Christian matrimony, the child is the result of a “two-in-one-flesh” relationship. The child is the result of father and mother, combining the genetic inheritance of each. In cloning, we essentially have a “one-in-one-flesh” identity, essentially denying the two-in-one-flesh nature of Christian matrimony.

The child will no longer be the direct result of the love (or relationship) of two people. It will be the product of only one human. It is as if the person were hugging himself or herself to himself or herself, and thereby producing a child. A clone is essentially a product, not a child. Chances are it will be born for a purpose, if only to provide spare parts for the mother or father of whom it is a copy. Presently, it is not possible to clone an organ. If we come to cloning humans we come to cloning an organism. To remove the heart from a clone for transplanting kills the clone. This will be true for the foreseeable future. We will all be deprived of something if this procedure is successfully allowed or promoted.

It all gives a new and bizarre meaning to two-in-one-flesh. In fact, it denies that relation which is at the heart of Christian living and loving.

Questions

There seems to be little wrong with cloning animals provided they are well treated. With humans it is a different story. What is the difference?

If animals have “rights,” why are they considered apart from humans? Or, conversely, if humans are merely “higher order” animals, why the problems? It doesn’t seem as if our rhetoric has caught up with the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

Is the theological two-in-one flesh argument valid? Why? Or why not? What really is the difference between “reproduction” and “procreation”?

“There is almost the inevitability of unsuspected genetic defects” in the cloned individual.” Isn’t this also true of children born in the ordinary, natural way? What’s wrong in favoring the “elite”? What has “Privacy” to do with all this?

Why is the clone a “product” not a “child”? How does cloning deny the “relation which is at the heart of Christian living”?

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