The Coming Clone Age

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The January decision of the British House of Lords to allow human embryonic cloning coincided nicely with the publication of Wired magazine's lead article predicting that someone will clone a human in the next twelve months. The decision by the House of Lords is troublesome in many ways. First, the Peers had the opportunity to postpone their decision in favor of establishing a select committee to assist in doing the ethical analysis warranted by such a momentous step. After all, some of the most respected voices in England, including Lady Warnock's, called for such a commission. Instead, the Lords rushed in where angels fear to tread. Even worse, the policy proposed by the House of Lords requires that any cloned human embryo would have to be destroyed within 14 days after the procedure. Mandatory destruction hardly seems a fitting end for a human being who entered this world at the will of human somatic cell nuclear manipulators.

The temptation to manipulate another human life is almost irresistible to some. University of Kentucky reproductive physiologist, Panos Zavos, announced on 26 January that he and an Italian colleague, Severino Antinori, have joined a global consortium, which plans to produce the world's first cloned baby within one to two years. Some of his colleagues have labeled Zavos a 'medical cowboy'. Yet he and his collaborator doubtless believe they are more like Lewis and Clark than Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.

It hardly takes prognosticatory gifts to know that someone has already successfully cloned a human being or that a human will be cloned soon. The near inevitability of cloning does not, however, make its imminence more welcome. We are exquisitely ill-equipped morally to deal with the reality of a human clone in our midst.

He or she would first have to suffer the notoriety of being born through human somatic cell nuclear transfer. Next, his or her future would be shaped by someone else's past. That is to say, those who reared the clone would, no doubt, want to duplicate the environment of the donor as
much as possible. Otherwise the experiment would be less likely to produce an identical replica of the original, since environment is as important as inheritance. So much for that celebrated quality called human freedom. Furthermore, proprietary interests would be at stake. Who owns a clone--the cloned, the clone, or the cloner? In the commodified world of biotechnology, the one with the most investment money is likely to win. So, obviously, the cloner would own the clone. Prospective parents might be able to purchase a clone, but the market would determine the selling price. Will the price be set in pounds, dollars, Euros, or yen?

If there were ever an appropriate time to clone a human being (and there is not), this is not that time. At the beginning of the 21st century, we are experiencing a period of unequaled technological prowess combined with unparalleled moral vacuity, especially when it comes to judging who counts in the moral equation. Do clones count as persons? On what moral basis could one make such a judgement? On what moral ground could one deny the personhood of a cloned human? When does protectable personhood obtain? How does one avoid being arbitrary in determining personhood? Until these questions are answered thoroughly and satisfactorily, cloning a human being ought to be forthrightly banned or effectively postponed in order to engage in a global debate about the morality of human cloning. Critics of such a proposal say that the debate would prove intractable. Perhaps that fact alone is a necessary and sufficient reason to prohibit cloning a human being in the next twelve months, twenty-four months, or forever.

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