An Overview of Human Cloning

Post Date: 07/02/2001
Author: John F. Kilner
Issues: Cloning

Now that researchers have cloned a sheep, we know that producing identical genetic copies of human beings is also likely possible. The process is novel though the concept is not.

We have long known that virtually every cell of the body contains a person's complete genetic code. The exception is sperm or egg cells, which each contain half the genetic material until the sperm fertilizes the egg and a new human being with a complete genetic code begins growing. We have now learned that the partial genetic material in a female's unfertilized egg cell may be removed and replaced by the complete genetic material from a cell taken from an adult. With a full genetic code, the egg cell behaves as if it has been fertilized and begins to grow. At least, that's what happened in a sheep.

We've been anticipating this possibility in humans for decades and have been playing around with its possibilities. Many years ago there was the movie "The Boys from Brazil" about an attempt to clone Adolf Hitler, as well as Aldous Huxley's book Brave New World in which clones were produced to fulfill undesirable social roles. More recently the movie "Multiplicity" portrays a harried man jumping at the chance to have several clones of himself made--one to do his office work, one to handle the home chores, etc. It all seems so attractive at first glance, in an overly hectic, achievement and efficiency crazed society.

The Difficulty of Getting There

But how do we achieve this seemingly blissful state? "Multiplicity" is silent on this matter, implying that the technique is best left to the scientists to handle, as if people in general would be interested only in the outcome. But the experiments of Nazi Germany and the resulting Nuremberg Trials and Code taught us long ago that there is some knowledge that we must not pursue if it requires the use of immoral means to get it.
To the extent that the research necessary to develop human cloning will likely cause the deaths of human beings, the cost is unacceptably high. In the case of the sheep cloning process, it would seem likely that many human embryos would be lost as the technique is improved. In the case of the monkey cloning process more recently announced, a living embryo is intentionally destroyed by taking the genetic material from the embryo's eight cells and inserting it into eight egg cells whose partial genetic material has been removed.

**The Danger of Being There**

Yet, is the production of human clones even a worthwhile goal in the first place? As the movies and novel suggest, and godly wisdom confirms, human cloning is something neither to fool around with nor to attempt seriously to do.

Cloning typically involves genetically copying some living thing for a particular purpose--a wheat plant that yields much grain, a cow that provides excellent milk. The problem with such a utilitarian approach to human beings, however, is that they are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27; 9:6; Jas. 3:9). They have a God-given dignity that will not allow us to use them merely as a means to fulfill our desires. We must not, for instance, produce clones with low intelligence to serve society's needs for menial labor, or produce clones to provide transplantable organs (in that the identical genetic code would minimize the threat of organ rejection). We should not even produce a clone of a child who dies tragically in order to remove the parents' grief, as if the clone could actually be the child who died. All people are special creations of God who should be loved and respected as such. We must not demean them by fundamentally subordinating their interests to those of others, forcing upon them conditions that they might not have consented to had it been possible to consult them.

There are a host of problems with human cloning that humanity has yet to address. Who are the parents of a clone produced in a laboratory? The donor of the genetic material? The donor of the egg into which the material is transferred? The scientist who manipulates unwanted cells from anonymous donors and facilitates the production of a new life? Who will provide the love and care this embryo, fetus, and then child will need--especially when mistakes are made and it would be easier simply to discard "it." The problems become legion when having children is removed from the context of marriage and even from responsible parenthood. The Bible portrays children as the fruit of a one-flesh love relationship, and for good reason. It is a context in which children flourish--in which their full humanity, material and non-material, is respected and nourished. Those who provide them with physical (genetic) life also care for their ongoing physical as well as non-physical needs.
It is all too easy to lose sight of the fact that people are more than just physical beings. What most excites many people about cloning today is the possibility of cloning Michael Jordans or Mother Theresa's or--fill in your own hero. However, were clones of any of our heroes to begin growing today, these clones would not turn out to be our heroes, for our heroes are not who they are simply because of their genetics. They, like us, are shaped by genetics and environment alike, with the spiritual capacity to evaluate, disregard, and at times alter either or both. Clones would be subject to unique sets of environmental influences, and there is no good reason to think that God would deny them souls.

Indeed, new genetic and reproductive technologies are making it possible to intervene into two of life's great mysteries: the genetic code and the conception of life. The problem here is not the mere fact that technology is involved. Technology is a gift that can help us better do what God has for us to do. The problem arises when we use technology for our own purposes, i.e., when those purposes conflict with God's. In a sense, we are like sheep after all, for "we all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way" (Isa. 53:6). Yet God calls us and enables us to be more--to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Jesus expanded people's vision to see as a neighbor even the farthest away person: the enemy (Matt. 5:44). Today that vision remains large enough to encompass the seemingly distant clone as well.

To produce people to serve others' needs without their consent--even for well-intended reasons--is no frivolous matter. It is not yet to institute a new high-tech slavery or to establish Huxley's oppressive brave new world. But it is to propel us, perhaps unstoppably, in that direction.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License.

Source URL (modified on 01/05/2018 - 18:17): https://cbhd.org/content/overview-human-cloning