On the UN's Failure to Pass an Anti-Cloning Treaty

Post Date: 01/13/2005
Author: Samuel D. Hensley
Issues:
Cloning

Recent efforts to ban human cloning through the United Nations have apparently failed. The final outcome likely will be a less powerful, nonbinding declaration that would include language ambiguous enough to please both sides. In other words, this august body is rising to the challenge of finding words that will mean all things to all people and therefore will mean nothing at all.

The original resolution, offered by Costa Rica and supported by sixty-two other nations, would have banned all forms of human cloning. A distinction is being drawn between reproductive cloning? (cloning to produce children) and therapeutic cloning? (cloning to obtain embryonic stem cells for scientific research). However, there are no valid moral grounds for making this distinction. Biologically speaking, human life normally begins during fertilization when the male and female complement of genetic material is combined (syngamy), and ends at some future stage of development along a continuum to old age. In cloning, the process begins when the donor cell nucleus is placed in an enucleated egg and the embryo begins to develop. The bottom line is that all cloning results in reproduction. The issue is how we view human life at this stage of development. For Christians, this should not be difficult. All human life should be respected from its earliest stages because, unlike animals or other forms of life, human beings are made in the image of God. Because we are made in the image of God, we have an inherent dignity that must be respected.

It should be noted that to some research scientists and many in the biotech industry, nothing is more galling than bringing human dignity into the discussion. Suddenly, destructive embryo research and destructive fetal research are off limits. These kinds of research can only be justified if human beings are simply another form of animal, and do not acquire the moral status of persons? until much later in development? at consciousness or some other arbitrary milestone. Any view of the world that gives to human life a special niche or exclusive dignity is perceived by the biotechnology community as a threat to unfettered scientific research. In this, they are correct. Respecting human life will slow the breakneck, no holds barred approach to
biologic research, research that has the potential to alter, at the deepest genetic level, what it means to be human. These technologies are enormously powerful and therefore enormously dangerous if misused. Society has both a right and an obligation to be involved in these decisions.

Dr. Leon Kass, the Chairman of the President’s Council on Bioethics recently wrote:

Because it is essentially instrumental, technology is itself morally neutral, usable for both good and ill. There are, of course, dangers of abuse and misuse of technology, but these appear to be problems not of technology but of its human users, to be addressed by morality in general. And, besides abuse and misuse, there is the genuine problem of technology itself: the unintended and undesired consequences arising from its proper use. Thus, the problems of technology can be dealt with, on one side, by technology assessment and careful regulation (to handle side effects and misuse), and, on the other side, by good will, compassion, and the love of humanity (to prevent abuse). This combination will enable us to solve the problems technology creates without sacrificing its delightful fruits.

In spite of the merits of a balanced approach to research and technology—especially when human life is involved—opponents of cloning have been described as befuddled antibiotech progressives, a bizarre alliance of antiabortion religious zealots, and technophobic neoconservatives. In a similar vein, the editor-in-chief of the American Journal of Bioethics compared Dr. Kass to a fictional movie assassin.

In light of the determined push for unfettered research at all costs, we must ask ourselves if a compromise resolution, either in the United Nations or in our own Congress, is of any comfort. To me the answer clearly is No! As long as cloning is permitted, the boundaries on embryonic and fetal research will be stretched further and further until, should it become feasible, cloning to produce children will become simply the next logical step. Even this drastic step would be only a way station on the road to a future in which humanity is defined in biological rather than moral or cultural terms, a posthuman future.

This entire discussion, however, can be misleading if not considered in context. Someone with no knowledge of the issues might mistakenly conclude that our choice is between honoring all stages of human life and obtaining remarkable medical breakthroughs that will alleviate vast amounts of human suffering. In fact, although it is beyond the scope of this article, the most promising developments in regenerative medicine have come in the field of adult stem research where these ethical issues do not arise. The danger behind the push for cloning and destructive embryonic stem cell research is that it will divert money from the most promising forms of research into areas less likely to produce beneficial results. In short, we can balance the benefits of technology with an understanding of the intrinsic dignity of each human life, or we can choose a path that leads to a posthuman future resulting in the extinction of the human species, as we now understand it.

Wesley J. Smith closes his recently published Consumer’s Guide to a Brave New World (a must read book that covers eloquently these and related topics in great detail) with this
comment:

These issues are too apocalyptic to be ?left to the scientists.? Nor can we afford to allow the marketplace to determine what is right and what is wrong. The stakes are too high, the impact on each of us and on society too profound, the implications for our progeny too irrevocable, to remain passive and indifferent to the decisions we face. It is our right and our duty to participate in the historic cultural and democratic debates over biotechnology in which our polity is now immersed. The human future depends on it.7

I would add only that as Christians our responsibilities to engage in debates as stewards over creation are of eternal importance and consequence.


2 Genesis 1:26-27.


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