

OBLITERATING REPRODUCTIVE ROULETTE

GARETH JONES



GARETH JONES is Professor of Anatomy and Structural Biology at the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand.

MAKING PEOPLE IN ONE'S OWN IMAGE SEEMS TO STRIKE AT THE CORE OF OUR HUMANITY. To set out to make someone just like me gives the impression that it will deprive that new person of the opportunity to make a life for themselves. It is the essence of human aggrandisement, and for many people this is the problem with medical technology. It is delving into areas that should be kept far away from prying eyes and manipulating hands. Cloning is nothing more than the supreme example of this ghastly enterprise and, consequently, is the easiest procedure to dismiss as beyond the pale of civilized behaviour.

THE SUBTLE ALLUREMENT OF CLONING

But why would anyone want to clone in the first place? At one extreme, there are those who think so highly of themselves that they must ensure that they continue into the next generation. Or cloning is seen as a means of cheating death, for egotistical or spurious religious reasons. However, an individual would live on in his or her clone only to the same extent that we currently live on in our naturally conceived children – no more and no less. Cloning will never provide a technological route to eternity.

More substantial reasons for cloning include the desire of infertile couples to have a child genetically related to one of the partners. Or think of a couple in which one partner has a genetic defect; the couple could avoid the risk of passing on this defect to their children by having cloned children of the healthy partner. Reasons like these should not be dismissed out of hand.

Cloning could be resorted to as a way of replacing a dead baby or child killed in an accident. However, the replacement would not be the same as the original. There would be subtle genetic differences, and more importantly they would be new individuals.

Parents looking for a sibling to be a compatible tissue or organ donor for a child dying from leukaemia or kidney failure could use cloning. In this case, care would have to be taken to ensure that the clone was loved for its own sake, as well as serving the needs of someone else.

THE FEAR ADDUCED BY CLONING

For many, the innermost workings of what we are as human beings are sacrosanct and should always remain so. In some indefinable way, this central part of us is divine and should not be touched. Cloning is feared because it may intrude into this divine centre of our humanity. By producing children with all the

characteristics of just one parent rather than the usual two, we may alter what they are as human beings.

Some Christians are concerned because they wonder whether clones will have souls. For them, cloning is interfering with God's way of making children, and this is wrong. It is a way of designing children, thereby rejecting the divinely ordained genetic roulette.

However, we currently alter humans in numerous ways – from education to surgery – and we consider we are acting with God rather than against him. Additionally, cloning would be a very crude way of designing human beings, since clones will be the same as pre-existing people.

A *second* fear is that cloning would be mass-producing humans, just as we mass-produce washing machines and cars. Clones would be made to order, so that they could function, as we want them to function. But none of this is even remotely feasible, since human beings are profoundly different in their organisation from machines.

A *third* fear is that clones would not be unique individuals, since they would be genetically the same as (strictly, very similar to) someone else. This would deprive them of their human dignity. However, identical twins clearly demonstrate that people who are genetically identical are still unique people. This is hardly surprising since they have different brains and different experiences. Clones, too, would be unique individuals, making their own choices and creating their own lifestyles. As far as we can tell, they would be viewed by God as once-and-for-all people, with a dignity and worth stemming from their uniqueness as individuals.

A *fourth* fear is that clones would be manufactured, and so would be dehumanised. This is an objection raised mainly by Christians, who draw a distinction between "begetting" and "making". Begetting is normal sexual reproduction, whereas making is any form of artificial reproduction. For some writers, "begetting" results in the birth of someone like us, whereas "making" results in the birth of someone unlike us. They argue that we can only love children who have been begotten, whereas those who have been made are less than us and will be used by us. This has always struck me as being grossly unfair on those parents who have had children by in vitro fertilisation (IVF) and who love them deeply, and always do their best for them.

Under no circumstances should we contemplate cloning other humans at present ... the chasm of unknowns is prodigious, and no one acting in an ethical manner would even contemplate cloning humans.

This is an argument against any form of technological interference with the reproductive process, which some view as a move away from the personal towards the impersonal. They want to retain the idea that children are a gift from God, to be accepted for what they are. I have great sympathy with this, but there is no reason why children cannot be accepted as a gift from God, even when there has been technical and medical assistance.

SHOULD WE CLONE?

Under no circumstances should we contemplate cloning other humans at present. The enormous risks currently associated with attempting to clone laboratory and farm animals point to the immense dangers of cloning in the present state of scientific knowledge. Currently, the chasm of unknowns is prodigious, and no one acting in an ethical manner would even contemplate cloning humans, regardless of whether they are acting out of clinical bravado or on the basis of pseudo-religious ideals. The overall success rate is of the order of 2–3 per cent of cloned embryos producing live births. Of those animals born alive, many have abnormalities.

This argument is a pragmatic one, and the same applies to any other scientific or clinical development. This may change with time, but that will depend on a large amount of animal experimentation and a considerable increase in understanding of the scientific processes involved.

Does this leave the door open to human cloning in the future? Perhaps it does, but only for a very limited range of conditions. However, enormous care would be required, since one of the great dangers of cloning individuals would be to think of children as products, who would be expected to conform to our expectations. This, again, is not inevitable.

MEETING A CLONE

It is relatively easy to dismiss the cloning of human beings as extreme and foolish, and I have no desire to encourage it. But what if cloning does proceed and human clones are born? Will they be sub-human and so be like slaves or second-class citizens?

Pictures like this are grotesque. Clones will be far more like the rest of us than they will be like the semi-human robots of science fiction, regardless of the motives of those who brought them into existence. They will soon emerge as being people who have been created by God; they will have the gift of human life, and they will have a God-bestowed dignity. Should clones ever exist, they

should be given every opportunity to be themselves and to develop in their own ways.

Jesus repeatedly emphasised the central place of the *weak and disadvantaged in society* – those unable to defend themselves or stand up for themselves. And so he placed the spotlight on children, on widows, on the outcasts and the unlovely (Mk 10.14; 12.40). They were not to be treated as of lesser value than the power brokers of their society. All, including clones, are equal under God and all must be treated as equal. The major problems would revolve, not around scientific issues, but around ill treatment and abuse, if clones were treated as of lesser importance than others. We (clones included) are more than our genes. What is important is the wholeness and integrity of our lives, because these mirror what we are in the sight of God.

Clones also highlight the value of *diversity* and the worth of people who are different from us (1 Cor 12). Anyone foolish enough to produce clones to be like himself or herself would soon discover that their clone had their failings, as well as their strengths. A clone could also turn out to have completely different interests from the person who was cloned. Their differences would mark them out as people of significance and worth.

Clones, therefore, should be accepted and recognised for who they are before God. All are one in Christ Jesus: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female” (Gal 3.23–29), and we can add, neither clone nor naturally fertilised. Clones should be served, as others should be served (Mk 10.41–45). This is the opposite of looking upon clones as a subservient class created for our pleasure.

CLONES AND CLOWNS

One of the problems with modern science and modern technology is that we take ourselves too seriously. We are unable to laugh at ourselves in the way in which clowns laugh at themselves and at others. We think we can accomplish more than we really can, and that we actually do hold the world in our hands. We come to think of ourselves as omnipotent, able to bring perfect life into being, able to bring to an end imperfect life, and able to ward off death indefinitely. All of these are dangerous illusions.

No matter how great our abilities, they need to be balanced by humility. Only in this way will they be directed towards ends aimed at improving the welfare of others.

We are not the centre of all wisdom, and we need to laugh at our overweening pretensions and misguided designs. Whenever we think we can “cure” death, or create babies in our image, we need to step back and laugh at the comic situation created by our pretensions.

► We are not the centre of all wisdom, and we need to laugh at our overweening pretensions and misguided designs. Whenever we think we can “cure” death, or create babies in our image, we need to step back and laugh at the comic situation created by our pretensions.

To think that cloning is the path into some bright new future for the human race is to misunderstand the science of cloning. Humour, and awareness that we are accountable to God, will prevent us making fools of ourselves. Nevertheless, there may be some important therapeutic applications of the cloning of tissues (therapeutic cloning). We should not lose sight of these in the midst of a tirade against reproductive cloning. But even here humour has its place. Not everyone will be able to have his or her own tissue banks. Even if they could, tissue banks are not a panacea for all illnesses, let alone for disillusionment, dashed expectations, spoiled relationships, or a lack of hope and fulfilment.

WHAT CAN CLONING TEACH US?

Cloning has more in common with the other artificial reproductive technologies than often recognised. It is to be found towards one extreme end of a continuum, with fertility treatment at the other end, and IVF in the middle. It is not such a dramatically new development as some like to think.

The emphasis so often placed on (reproductive) cloning as the worst possible development that could confront the human race is misguided. This emphasis allows us to ignore the good we could do by committing adequate resources to alleviate malnutrition, providing adequate clean water supplies to numerous populations, and ridding countries of eminently preventable killer diseases. What we need is a balanced perspective, that aims to treat everyone as people of worth, those living in advanced technological societies, and those living where malnutrition and infectious diseases are endemic.

Cloning fascinates and appals. The science evokes awe and wonder as it delves into the complexities of cell development and differentiation. The potential significance of some of the findings for human self-understanding is revolutionary in scope, and both pharmaceutical and therapeutic applications tantalise with the breadth and profundity of what may emerge. On the other hand, the control of both animals and humans that may follow from these developments feeds the imagination, leading to visions of doom and a future for humans quite unlike anything that has gone before. It is hardly surprising that Christians find themselves at a loss when confronted by these opposing scenarios.

Unfortunately, the extreme, and scientifically unrealistic, context in which theological debate is conducted does not help. I have attempted to provide a balanced assessment, accepting that this entails walking a tightrope between the bravado of the scientific elite and the cataclysms of the theological doomsayers. Careful discernment and spiritual wisdom are essential accompaniments of this dangerous journey. ■

EDITORIAL NOTICE: COLIN GUNTON

It is with great sadness that we record the death of the Revd Professor Colin Gunton on 6 May 2003. He was a powerful, and profoundly Christian, voice in British and worldwide academic theology over the past thirty years, teaching for all that time at King's College London, and deploying the resources he found in classical doctrines, particularly the Trinity, to expose the ethical and intellectual incoherence of modern Western culture. In recent years he was a key part in setting up a research partnership between Bible Society and the Research Institute in Systematic Theology at King's, a partnership designed to take further this theme of engaging missionally with our culture.

He will be missed by many who knew his faith, his humour, his enthusiasm and his intellectual power. Our prayers are with his wife Jennifer and the family.