
Cloning - philosophical, ethical and religious considerations

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Human cloning is considered in theological and philosophical circles largely from the ethical standpoint. The arguments against human cloning in this type of contemporary theological and philosophical apologetics generally focus on three criteria which, it is claimed, the advocates of human cloning fail to take into consideration. These are:

- a) moderation
- b) limits
- c) the entity as a whole

Permit me to set out in brief the main points of reference on which the arguments are based, in the same order.

Human cloning and the criterion of moderation

When debating how modern civilization differs from the civilizations of ancient Babylon, Egypt, Persia, India, China, Greece, and the Maya and Aztec civilizations, or with those of mediaeval Christendom and Islam, for example, there are many points at which one may give accurate and truthful answers. But certainly, to arrive at the appropriate answers, one must agree beforehand on the criteria by which the comparison between modern and ancient or mediaeval civilizations is to be made.

If we start, say, from the **criterion of moderation**, which the religions of all these ancient civilizations taught, it is clear that in ancient times the maxim of moderation in all things protected not only nature from the onslaughts of humankind, but also human nature from human assault.

The philosophers and men of religion who founded the Axial Age - Socrates, Buddha, Confucius and others - incorporated into their teachings and preachings certain interdictions beginning with "Do not", "Thou shalt not". This "Do not" advises us to be circumspect in regard to our actions: for humankind experiences incomparably greater misfortunes as the result of human action than from inaction. More human tears have been shed as a result of the malign use of human knowledge than from the inaction of ignorance¹.

There can be no criterion of moderation without inter-

diction. It is perfectly understandable, therefore, that the human cultures and religions of ancient times were based above all on commandments forbidding humankind to act in certain ways. The Bible and the Qur'an have their Ten Commandments, most of them interdictions. People knew, of course, that this "Thou shalt not" did not belittle the human being, but rather affirmed human dignity, uniqueness and moral rectitude on this earth, among the mineral, plant and animal worlds, and even among the spirit civilizations that the religions called angels, jinns, and satans.

The heavens forbade the mineral, plant and animal worlds nothing, nor, eo ipso, were they commanded as humankind is commanded. These worlds, or what we call nature, live out the balance that is bestowed on them - indeed, they are balance itself.

The way God maintains that balance in nature often seems harsh or cruel to us. Animals eat one another, plants come to life and burgeon in spring but with the relentless onset of autumn, nature dies down again. Population explosions among locusts bring corresponding increases in the flocks of birds that feed on them. We see in all this how the world of nature is pleasing to God, however obscure or puzzling the way He has ordained it may seem to our minds, however little sense we may be able to make of earthquakes, floods, volcanic eruptions, or destructive tornados. There is no human court that can put God or nature on trial for the ravages wrought by natural disasters. However horrifyingly powerful the technology we now possess, our most effective response to an ordinary earthquake is still our humble prayers to God.

And yet, these events in the world of nature, impenetrable to our minds, are but the incessant manifestation of natural equilibrium. And it is only ourselves who are able to inflict deliberate disorder on the mineral, plant and animal worlds.

As a result, humankind must be commanded to observe balance and moderation, for we are not merely beings of necessity and nature, but beings of freedom and culture.

¹ They say that Buddha taught inaction and abstention from speech: he sat silent beneath the Bo-dhi tree, and acted but little in Kapilavastu for forty years, teaching his disciples to behave in the same way.

In short, the heavens have sought to bridle us, human beings, with endless constraints. We are not merely beings of nature, not merely part of the natural animal environment; we are world beings. And this means that we are beings with immense potential, both good and evil as well as ethically neutral. It is no doubt because of this human potential, because of these multiple relationships between humankind and the world, that we have been hedged about with so many religious interdictions. They stand before us, before our views, our actions and our thoughts, as a warning or caution.

To put it in commonplace language, all these religious and ethical systems, all these rights and laws are there, in our human world, to constrain us from behaving the way the birds do to the locusts, the lion to the antelope, the wolf to the sheep.

Today's condemnation of human cloning by religious communities the world over is based above all on the ancient tradition of moderation. Human cloning is an assault on human dignity, cloning is seen as a guerilla war being waged by the scientific, irresponsible technological mind against human nature. Human cloning is going too far, and present-day theological writings see it as a kind of rebellion against the Divine order in which His creatures are born.

Modern theology asserts that the religions of the ancient civilizations affirm men and women as universal beings, but that the universe of religious commandments says human universality is contradictory and dangerous. The infinite starry heavens above us call to us, inviting us to embark on the path of the Unknown and Distant, but the moral law within us warns us that we may not take every path, may not use every means to attain the Beyond.

In this context, the aspiration to clone living beings, to clone humans, is a direct betrayal of the criterion of moderation, consistent with which humankind must live on this earth².

The criterion of the limit

Here we come to the criterion of limits, the bounds that the moral law within us warns us of, whenever we permit it to do so. The great religions - Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and others - all count on that moral

threshold within us, and the main calling of those ancient teachings, as before and since what cultural anthropology calls the dawn of civilization, is to arouse in us a cognition of the bounds, of measure, of that unquestionable moral axiom. In the Islamic tradition there is extensive literature on the limits (hudud) that we may not transgress.

If we recite a Biblical or Qur'anic commandment - Thou shalt respect thy father and thy mother, say, or a prohibition, such as Thou shalt not commit adultery - it awakens in us a sense of limits, of the fact that a parent is an inviolable boundary to the child and the child to the parent, the mother - in her motherhood - to her son, and that she watches over that boundary purely as a mother.

If a mother were to become her son's wife, or a father his daughter's husband, this would be to go beyond the bounds. When a man turns into a woman, or a woman into a man, that too is to exceed the limits. Sexual intercourse between man and man, or woman and woman, is to breach the limits. This awareness of such bounds has passed from religious teachings into the legislation of many states. All the features of morality that lie in our civil or even our secular laws and codices owes its origins to religion, just as all the warmth still retained and with which nature still breathes after sunset has reached earth from that sun, and no other.

True, in exercising our relative freedom, we may not only transgress those religious prohibitions and go beyond the bounds, but also break the laws of the state. Human cloning, and the cloning of other living beings, is clearly a violation of many bounds. Of course, it is nothing new for humankind to exceed the limits - many are the individuals who have done so, and at times so have entire civilizations³. Going beyond the limits is what religion calls sin. While the laws of state and society regard murder as a crime, for religion it is a cardinal sin⁴. All the prescriptions, interdictions and commandments of religion, all the laws of the state, are designed to restrict and bring order into human freedom and human knowledge. Unconstrained human freedom and irresponsible human knowledge lead to the verge of chaos - what could be better evidence of this than the various horrific types of bomb, some of which have already been used. These bombs and other weapons of mass destruction are the consequence of human knowledge - irresponsible knowledge - not of ignorance.

² This modern civilization of ours, rightly called technological, has trampled many criteria underfoot, including that of moderation. I invite everyone to reflect on the fact that as we are discussing our topic, at least five hundred million private vehicles in motion the world over, at least two thousand aircraft are in the air, and that never before has so much fuel been consumed on earth at the hand of man. The spirit of the times in which we are living is that our planet is infinite and that all its resources are inexhaustible.

³ The Qur'an refers to the people of Lot, who went beyond the bounds of married life.

⁴ In his studies of so-called primitive societies and communities untouched by the civilizations of either Christendom or Islam, Claude Lévi-Strauss noted that they have perfect customs and systems of taboos that forbid murder, theft, incest and the like. All the fundamental family regulations very similar to those of the great religions are already to be found in these primitive societies. A mother is a mother, and is a limit; a daughter is a daughter, and she too is a limit. Lévi-Strauss convincingly demonstrates that primordial humans always have a primordial belief in God. (See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale deux*, Librairie Plon, Paris, 1973).

Human cloning, as theological and many philosophical writings on cloning note, is a violation of the limits set by God. Theologians and philosophers who are opposed to cloning ask simple questions such as: Who is the mother of the clone? Who is its father? Is a cloned person deprived of the mystery of natural creation and spontaneity? Do we have the right, by cloning someone, to deprive him or her of the distinctiveness that is the result of creation?

In short, do we have the right to copy someone's face, that miraculous bodily island through which our soul manifests itself, and with which that soul regards all the wonders of this world. That face we each have is so diverse, so utterly ours. It is the seal of God, the Divine warrant of our authenticity, a guarantee that we are not a copy or a counterfeit; it is the warrant that He has created us as a unique entity, thereby dedicating to us the Divine Universality, the Universality of His Mercy which He bestowed upon us at the moment of our creation.

Will cloning, which is copying, desecrate the symbol and miracle of the unique, unrepeatable nature of every human individual? What kind of a world would it be that seeks to deprive us of the right to have our own unique face, recognizable and visible through our own distinctive, incomparable joy and laughter, our own wistful glance?

An Arabi poet write: "O Man, you will never be able to laugh with your back." This was his way of acknowledging the extraordinary mystery of the human face, on which God has bestowed our own unique features.

God creates; God does not copy. God is One, but all that He creates, He creates differently. God never repeats Himself.

Modern theological and philosophical writings claim that the abolition or violation of a single fundamental limit will lead to the abolition of thousands of other limits. By way of example, when modern science first made surrogate motherhood possible, a limit was breached, but it did not stop at this one; after it, barrier after barrier came down: natural, ethical, legal, religious. Surrogate motherhood bears with it an unresolvable ethical and religious question for the child born of such an experiment: the woman who gave birth to it is not its mother, but the mother whose egg conceived it did not give birth to it.

The problem is not, then, that with surrogate motherhood we have resolved a problem, but that we have given rise to a dozen new ones.

Modern theologians believe this and, with good reason, resolutely reject cloning while warning us of the limits that must not be transgressed.

But why do we need to be reminded of these limits?

Probably because we are faced with many broad paths, far broader than any other creature. While religion claimed that these paths may be safely trodden only by those whose provisions for the journey include an inviolable respect for the limits, the technological age has made us chafe against those limits. The technological spirit celebrates Prometheus and his theft of fire from God. At the height of the technological age, as the twentieth century is known, when more than fifty million people were killed in the two world wars alone, Karl Jaspers, prompted by a sense of responsibility in his philosophical thought, developed the doctrine of the human being in extreme situations - situations at the boundary. Birth is a boundary, sex - being born as male or female - is a boundary, being born rather than cloned is a boundary, language is a boundary, disease is a boundary, corporeality is a boundary, spirituality is a boundary, death is a boundary. It is a boundary, an extreme situation, that we have our own, not someone else's face and person, and that we share this with no one else.

Karl Jaspers' message in his doctrine of extreme situations in human existence is clear: there is and can be no technology that is able in a moral fashion to transcend or abolish these extreme situations, these boundaries of humankind.

The criterion of the entity as a whole

The acquisition of an awareness of and respect for the limits enables us to recognize the criterion of moderation, which is extremely important. The criteria of moderation and of the limits are closely related to that of the **separate entity**. The human individual, a bird, a blade of grass, an earthworm: all these are separate entities, individual examples of the whole. But every being experiences its separate entity within another, wider whole. The entity in which a human being is human is not an autonomous entity. We are still somehow connected with the multiplicity of things known and unknown, joined by countless umbilical cords that can never be severed, linking us to visible and invisible entities. We breathe the air, are able to walk thanks to the weight of the entire world, draw our nourishment from the animal and plant world as a whole, and so on. It is as though our separate human entities, like our human destiny, were articulated into the entities and destinies that surround us like a myriad concentric circles. This is how things are when we consider them in their outward aspects.

But an entity also has its inner aspects. Theologians and philosophers who oppose cloning claim that the Divine act of creation takes place through the creation of an entity, not by copying it or creating a part-entity. A grain of

wheat is an entity, an ant is an entity, a bird is an entity, a human being is an entity. Creation is always the creation of an entity. It is impossible to give birth just to a heart, or a pair of lungs, or other organs required for transplant.

True, there are attempts to ascribe human intentions to cloning, with assertions that by cloning or copying we shall obtain what we need - a heart, kidneys, a knee-joint or whatever. And to obtain the part, we need to clone the whole, since the only way to get the part is to take it from the whole that made it possible.

Theologians are unanimous in their view that if cloning succeeds, it will raise a whole range of ethical, legal and moral issues. It is a deprivation of mother, father, kindred; a deprivation of what we call the soul, the self, the

individual view of the infinity of the heavens. Whatever the outcome of cloning may be as an entity, the ban on killing it to obtain the organs that some say it will offer will still stand.

Cloning is yet another attempt to use technology to escape death or, if that is impossible, to defer it. Cloning is an attempt by technology to steal from God the mystery of creation, so that we might laugh at eternity without experiencing death.

The religions claim that there is eternity, but that the only way to it is through death.

I recall a short verse from the Qur'anic Sura an-Najm (the Star: v. 24): "Does man imagine that it is his due to have all that he might wish for?"