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ON THE ETHICS OF CLONING

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On February 23, 1997, scientists in Scotland cloned an adult mammal for the first time, producing a lamb named Dolly. Five years later, on December 26, 2002, the Clonaid Company announced that the first cloned human baby was born at an undisclosed location. Although there was deep skepticism about Clonaid's announcement, both events sent shock waves through the general community, immediately producing reactions of horror at the idea that scientists might be able to create a new human being who is physically identical to an existing human being. Preachers thundered "Never!" from the pulpit, and several politicians, with the support of the President of the United States, sensing a hot campaign issue, introduced bills that would legally prohibit human cloning.

It is interesting that most philosophers who think and write about issues in medical ethics did not react in the same way. One reason is that they had already dealt with some of the same ethical issues thirty years earlier when they were confronted with genetic or germ-cell therapy in which the hereditary genetic material of an individual is altered so that his descendants will not inherit disease-causing genetic material. They had also seen some of the ethical issues surrounding cloning when the first "test tube" (in vitro fertilization) babies were created in the 1970s..

Here are some of the ethical issues raised then and confronted now by the prospect of producing human clones.

Playing God

The objection that scientists ought not to try to produce a human clone because this will be "playing God" implies that scientists ought not to try to duplicate a natural event. But surely this is an inadequate basis to condemn cloning. After all, a scientist is trying to duplicate a natural event when he attempts to emulate an earthquake in the laboratory. And a doctor is duplicating a natural event when she helps an infertile couple have a child by combining sperm and egg in a test tube to pro-

duce an embryo (which is then implanted in the woman's uterus). The fact that a procedure helps to create a natural event is not a sufficient reason to morally condemn it.

The "Identical People" Objection

Some people appear to object to the fact that a human clone would be genetically identical to its original. But if this is what we find objectionable about cloning, then we should also object to the existence of identical twins! It should be pointed out, by the way, that a clone, like an identical twin, would only be genetically identical to her original. She would not be psychologically identical; that is, she would not share its character or personality. After all, genetically identical infant twins usually develop into quite different adults, leading different lives, having different experiences, and developing unique personalities. This is exactly what we should expect to happen if we were to produce a human clone.

The "Evil Purposes" Objection

Some people are afraid that clones might be produced for evil purposes, e.g., they would be used as slaves, for medical experiments, or as a source of spare body parts for transplantation into "real" people who need them. But is there any reason to think that we could not use our legal system to prevent this from happening? If you and I are legally protected from such evil practices because we have constitutionally guaranteed rights, then surely the same protections can and would be extended to someone who came into this world as a clone.

Damaged Goods and Other Harms

Finally, there is the fear that either the first human clone will be a monster, he or she would die early of a painful condition, or the entire human "gene pool" will be damaged because populations need a diverse genetic makeup. Without that diversity, a lethal disease that is able to strike one human might wipe out all the clones too. These, I think, are the most plausible objections to cloning, and they should be taken quite seriously. If cloning is wrong, it is only because it will be shown to cause harm to present and future generations. But only time and lots of hard work in the laboratory will allow us to determine this. We will learn nothing about the potential of human cloning for harm or benefit if we legally prevent scientific research on human cloning altogether. ☹

Laurence Houlgate is an Emeritus Professor of Philosophy. He specializes in Philosophy of Law, Medical Ethics and Family Ethics.