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Cloning: a choice for the future

by **Richard Norman** Mar 01, 02 | 12:27 pm

Professor Richard Norman looks at the issues - both fears and hopes - surrounding reproductive cloning.

The topic of reproductive cloning has been in the news lately, prompted by the announcement from an Italian-American team that it aims to produce the first cloned human being within a year. Many people's response has been one of immediate and horrified disapproval, and disapproval may in the end be the right response, but it may also be worth pausing to sort out the serious concerns from those that are the product of confusion. It is not obvious what view we should take of such developments, and there is a need for a responsible and rational ethical debate.

To the immediate practical question of whether attempts at human reproductive cloning should go ahead now, there seems a reasonably clear answer. I'm not a scientist and am in no position to make any independent judgement on the matter, but the overwhelming weight of scientific opinion seems to be that to proceed with such developments at present would be extremely risky and irresponsible. The techniques simply haven't been tested with enough care and caution.

It's worth dwelling for a moment on the central ethical point here. All medical innovations involve risk, and if risks were never taken there would be no advances. Whatever other ways of testing them there may be, any new technique eventually has to be tried on human beings for the first time. It is generally recognised, however, that if such trials are to be ethically acceptable, the people on whom they are tested must have given their informed consent. With human reproductive cloning it is of course impossible for prior informed consent to be given by the person most concerned — the new human being who would be created.

It does not follow that such developments should never go ahead. To take that view would be to rule out any new developments in reproductive technology or in any medical aspects of childbirth, for they all have to be used for the first time, and used to assist the birth of a new human being. What does follow, from the impossibility of having the consent of the person most concerned, is the need for extreme caution in assessing the risks. Those who are proposing to forge ahead quickly with human reproductive cloning do not appear to have recognised the need for such caution.

So the practical position seems, to my mind, to be clear: such a programme should not at present go ahead. That, however, need not prevent us from considering whether the concerns are simply those to do with the risks and the need for caution, or whether there are deeper ethical reasons for ruling out human reproductive cloning altogether and in principle.

To proceed with that question, we should first remove some misconceptions. Talk of "cloning" conjures up, in many people's minds, the scary picture of a "Brave New World" of mass-produced human beings, all identical and programmed to act like robots. We should be clear that that is nothing like what is being proposed, even by the most over-zealous. What is being considered is a new development in assisted reproduction, a new extension of techniques of in vitro fertilisation, intended, like other such techniques, to enable people to have children who would not otherwise be able to do so. The technique would (as I understand it) involve taking an unfertilised egg from a woman donor, removing the nucleus, replacing it with the nucleus of DNA from a cell taken from another human being, and then inserting the egg into the womb of the "mother", who might or might not be the donor of the original unfertilised egg, and who would then give birth to the baby in the normal way nine months later. The child who would be born would be genetically identical with the donor who provided the DNA. It's that last fact, of course, that people find disturbing, and it's the ethical significance of it that we need to think about. It threatens to upset in profound ways our accepted ideas of parent-child relations and our accepted ideas of identity. What are we to think about these? "

...your grandparents are really your parents!"

In an attempt to form a clearer view of the significance of cloning, one thing that we can do is to consider other cases that are analogous in some respect, and to think about the similarities and differences. Let's take the aspect of parent-child relations first. We can distinguish four components in our standard idea of parenting:

- (1) the genetic component: the child will normally inherit characteristics from two biological parents;
- (2) the sexual component: the zygote from which the child will develop will normally have been created by sexual intercourse between male and female parents;

- (3) the childbirth component: the mother gives birth to the child which has developed from the embryo carried in her womb through the nine months of pregnancy;
- (4) the nurturing component: the child is raised and cared for by his/her parents.

In the standard case these four components go together: the child is conceived by sexual intercourse between the genetic parents, the genetic mother gives birth to the child, and it is raised and cared for by the genetic parents. That this is the standard case is important. It shapes our understanding of the deep importance that parent-child relations have in human life. It is only in the light of this that we can understand why, for instance, people are often desperate to have children if the opportunity seems to be denied them, and why they find profound fulfilment in the raising of children, why people think of their children as their stake in the future, why people who don't know who their biological parents are want to find out about them, and so on. But of course these standard components of the parent-child relation can come apart from one another, and they would do so in the case of reproductive cloning if this were to go ahead. The childbirth component and the nurturing component would be as normal, but the sexual component would be absent, and the genetic component would be quite different from the normal case. In one sense, the child would have only one genetic parent, the donor of the DNA. In another sense, the child's genetic parents would be the parents of the donor of the DNA, since it is they who would have contributed the two sets of genetic material that would have been combined in the donor and replicated in the child. This is of course the sort of thing that has led commentators to expressions of shock and horror. "Imagine having to live with the fact that you have only one parent!" "Imagine how awful it would be to realise that your grandparents are really your parents!"

What would be so terrible about this? I intend the question as a genuinely open one. Note first that those ways of putting it would be misleading. It is not the case that a cloned child would have only one parent, or that its 'real' parents would be its grandparents. It would have as good a chance as any other child of being brought up by two caring and loving parents, one of whom could perfectly well be also the "childbirth" parent, and one of whom could be a "genetic" parent. That's the point of emphasising that there are different respects in which parents are parents, and that a child's parenting is not just a matter of its genetic ancestry. The point is not that a cloned child would lack normal parents, but that its nurturing parents would not (both) be its genetic parents. This itself might be problematic and disturbing, but that would certainly not make cloning unique. There are all sorts of other cases in which the standard components of parenting can come apart. The most obvious case is adoption. Consider the following thought-experiment. Suppose that adoption has never previously been practised in our society, and suppose that someone proposes introducing it. Proposed as an innovation to which no one is accustomed, it might well provoke similar expressions of outrage to those now provoked by cloning. "Imagine how awful it would be to discover that your 'parents' were not really your parents at all! Imagine how destructive that would be of your identity — you would have no idea of who you were!"

Now of course adoption can be problematic. Adopted children, especially if they have been brought up to think that their adoptive parents are their biological parents, may find it traumatic to discover the truth. Even if they have been brought up knowing the truth, adopted children are likely to want to find out about their biological parents and, if they can't, to feel that there is a gap in their understanding of who they are. Adoption, then, has its difficulties, but we live with them, and we think them a price worth paying for a valuable practice. Cloning might be like that.

"Oh my god, he looks just like his father!"

Adoption is by no means the only other case where the standard components of parenting come apart. Think of the consequences of divorce and re-marriage, where the new step-parent is now a "nurturing" parent but not a biological parent. Think of the various versions of the one-parent family, resulting from conception outside a marriage or relationship, or from separation or divorce, or from bereavement. Here, as a mirror image of the cloning case, there are two biological parents but only one nurturing parent. Finally there are the cases closest to that of cloning — the various recent developments in medically-assisted reproduction, such as in vitro fertilisation with or without a sperm donor or egg donor, and with or without a surrogate mother. Here, most dramatically, our standard ideas of parenting are subverted by the disruption of its different components. The point to be made about all of these cases is the same as for the case of adoption. They may all be problematic, even deeply disturbing for those who are involved, including and perhaps especially the child, but they are problems which people can live with and accept. And they do so because the profound value and importance of parenting in human experience leads people to accept divergent and incomplete forms of the standard case.

But of course all these analogies, it will rightly be said, fail to capture the one distinctive feature of cloning — the fact that the cloned child will be genetically identical with the donor of the cell nucleus. It is this which people find most disturbing. What are we to make of this?

There are other analogies that can help. The genetic relation between cloned child and donor would be the same as the genetic relation between identical twins. They would share the same DNA, but in every other respect, like identical twins, they would be separate and distinct individuals. The force of the analogy is the same as that of our previous ones. Perhaps identical twins find their situation difficult — I do not know.

Perhaps they do not — perhaps they think it a privilege to have this uniquely close relationship. But at any rate, the existence of identical twins is something that we recognise as perfectly acceptable.

The analogy is in any case too strong. The relation between cloned child and donor would not be as close as the relation between identical twins, precisely because donor and clone would be parent and child, a generation apart. As far as physical characteristics are concerned, child and donor would for obvious reasons not look the same. All that can be said is that the child would grow to look very like how the donor had looked at the relevant age. That is not an unfamiliar situation. It is simply a stronger version of the relation between any child and biological parent. Think of the innumerable occasions when people, cooing over a baby, say “She looks just like her mother” or “He’s the spitting image of his dad.” They say this in tones not of shock and horror (“Oh my god, he looks just like his father!”), but of delight.

Genetically inherited characteristics go beyond physical appearance. A cloned child sharing the DNA of the donor parent might inherit other features, just as any child will do — a propensity, perhaps, to a certain temperament, or certain talents. In all the important respects, however, like any child and biological parent, they would be distinct and unique individuals. The cloned child would have her uniquely individuating consciousness that would be constitutive of her personal identity. She would have her unique history of experiences, actions and achievements. She would be one person, and the donor parent would be another.

Immortality crazy?

This is why wild talk of using cloning to achieve immortality is nonsense. When you die physically, and your brain ceases to function, your conscious experiences end, and if your cloned child lives on, he/she is not you, but another person, with his/her own entirely distinct consciousness. It may be a comfort to think that someone to whom you are genetically related lives on after you are dead, but that is a thought that anyone who has children can have, with or without cloning. I am not sure what view to take of it. At one level it is innocuous and understandable. Given that our lives are finite, the closest that we can come to overcoming our mortality is for our children to survive us and carry something of us into the future. I suppose that that is one reason why some people have children, and it’s not necessarily a bad reason. It becomes pernicious when parents try to mould their child in their own image — insisting that he continues the family business, or that he goes into the parent’s profession, or that he follows certain interests and a certain lifestyle, depriving him of any chance to live his own life in his own way. That is something which ordinary parents may do, and probably any parent feels some temptation to do it, but it is a temptation to be resisted. Possibly, for the parent of a cloned child, the temptation might be even stronger, but banning cloning is no way of preventing it.

Cloning as a way of achieving immortality is crazy. Are there any good reasons for human reproductive cloning? The only possible reason I am aware of is that it might be the closest some people could get to having children if they cannot do so in any other way. In that way, again, cloning would be akin to other uses of in vitro fertilisation, with the same pros and cons. It is perhaps worth noting one special case. Cloning might be a way in which a lesbian couple could have children. It would, I imagine, be possible for one partner to donate the egg, for the other partner to donate the cell nucleus with its DNA, and for the first partner to gestate and give birth to the child, which is then brought up by both of them. No doubt such a prospect will confirm the worst fears of those who are horrified by the idea of cloning. For my own part, I am inclined to think that if lesbian couples were enabled to have children in this way, then, other things being equal, this could be a good thing.

I am, then, open-minded about whether human reproductive cloning would in principle be morally acceptable. I can’t think that it should be a priority for medical or biological research. There must be many areas of research that ought to have a much higher priority. Finding a cure for AIDS would contribute immeasurably more to the improvement of the human condition than producing the first human clone. For practical reasons, as I have said, it would be wrong to proceed with human cloning at present. In the meantime we should continue the debate, and try to sort out the rational concerns from the muddled and irrational ones.

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