



ISSUE

CLONING OF HUMAN LIFE

Introduction

Every generation must deal with the question of how or whether to use new technologies and seek to define the relationship between means and ends. The realization that something can be done must always be accompanied by the question should it be done. If we are to be masters of our progress, it is imperative that we control the technologies we invent. It is also important that the limits we establish be grounded in moral and ethical principles that enhance rather than diminish our respect for human life.

One such new technology is cloning. Advances in the capacity of science to clone nonhuman subjects coupled with the more recent interest in isolating embryonic stem cells has led to increasing discussion of the scientific potential and the ethical concerns surrounding the cloning of human life.

Proponents of human cloning cite two possible applications of this new technology. The first is referred to as “reproductive cloning.” In this instance scientists would seek to replicate a specific human being by injecting that person’s DNA into a human ovum and implanting the newly formed embryo with the intent to carry the cloned embryo to term and deliver a healthy baby.

Another purpose for cloning is “research cloning.” Research cloning uses the same technology to create a cloned embryo, permits the embryo to develop for a certain period of time and then destroys it in order to obtain cells and tissue for research purpose. Research cloning is sometimes called “therapeutic cloning” though it is lethal, not therapeutic for the cloned embryo.

These scientific developments compel us to evaluate anew the moral question of whether the end justifies the means. This is not a question for scientists alone to answer, or solely the concern of researchers, venture capitalists, or legislators. It is a question for all of us.

Human life is not something we protect out of generosity nor is it something that owes its value to material promise. It is a gift that, when disvalued for some, becomes disvalued for all. Our laws and policies should treat it accordingly.

Catholic Teaching and Cloning

For Catholics human life is sacred from the moment of its conception until the moment of natural death. As an intrinsic good, human life may not be reduced to a means directed to the service of some other end. Accordingly, the choices we make, be they private decisions about our personal behavior, public policies, and decisions as to how to utilize medical technology and scientific advances must always be assessed in view of their impact on the dignity of human life.

What is wrong with human cloning?

“Human cloning ... turns human reproduction into a manufacturing process, by which human beings are mass-produced to preset specifications. The cloning procedure is so dehumanizing that some scientists want to treat the resulting human beings as sub-human, creating them solely so they can destroy them for their cells and tissues.” (Bishop Wilton Gregory, President of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2003)

It is important to note that Catholic teaching is not opposed to research that uses cells derived from living persons to develop tissue and organs and treatments for disease. All of this can be acceptable if the cells or tissue are not obtained by destroying human life, including embryos.

Legislation Related to Cloning

Legislation to ban human cloning has been proposed by both federal and state lawmakers.

On the state level this fall, the Governor vetoed legislation, Assembly Bill 499, which would have banned all human cloning in the state. In passing the bill the legislature resisted efforts to amend the bill to distinguish between “reproductive” and “research” cloning and instead affirmed what science shows - that all human cloning produces a human embryo, which is a human life with inherent dignity. While AB 499 did not pass with sufficient support to override a veto, it is important to continue building on the momentum generated by the initial passage of AB 499 and persevere in efforts to inform and educate policy makers both at the state and federal level.

Common Arguments and Suggested Responses

Cloning is a scientific issue. Churches should not try to limit such scientific exploration and discovery.

Response: Science may be able to help us discern when life begins, but no scientist can relieve us of our moral duty to respect the dignity of life. After all, science, not theology, tells us that from the time an ovum is fertilized a new life has begun. Science, not theology, tells us that this being is unique, with its own genetic code. Science, not theology, tells us that an embryo possesses a unity in which the parts of the embryo interact with each other to sustain the embryo’s life and foster its development.

Human embryos, whether conceived naturally or by artificial means, though human, are only “potential life” and thus beyond the law’s scope.

Response: It is the embryo’s very potential to become a healthy human being that makes it an attractive source of cells or tissue in the first place. More importantly, our inherent dignity as humans is not diminished by the fact we might become other than what we are. No person forfeits his or her right to life when they come to rely on other people to fulfill or sustain their potential.

The practice of cloning enables scientists to do research necessary to cure or prevent life threatening illness or disabilities. Such research serves the value of human life.

Response: Opposition to cloning does not mean that we are opposed to curing cancer or Parkinson’s disease anymore that those with moral qualms about the Tuskegee experiments opposed cures to venereal disease or those with objections to the death penalty are soft on crime. In each of these cases, Catholics and others urge society to prefer approaches that do not destroy or endanger human life. In the context of this debate it is humane, not irresponsible, to prefer research avenues that do not compel the destruction of human life and to discourage those that do.

Action Requested

Continue to urge elected officials to support Assembly Bill 499 and other state and federal proposals to ban all human cloning.

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