

Human Cloning

Cloning a human being may someday be possible, by replacing the nucleus of an unfertilized human egg, activating cell division, and then transferring the new embryo to a woman's uterus, where it will then proceed as a normal pregnancy. If we gain the ability to do this, will it be morally permissible to clone humans?

Clearing up some mis-conceptions: (1) First, note that the clone will begin as an embryo. This means that, if you cloned yourself, your clone would NOT be the same age as you. If you were 20 years old when you cloned yourself, your clone would be 20 years younger. (2) Clones would ONLY share their DNA with their clone parent. If you were cloned, your clone would not be a total "duplicate" of you, with all of your memories, or beliefs, goals, etc. Basically, having a clone would be just like having an identical twin, but instead of being born minutes apart, you would be born YEARS apart.

Leon Kass provides four reasons why it would be morally wrong to clone:

1. Cloning is physically harmful to the clone: Cloning would be unethical experimentation due to the low success rate that cloning would have initially. When a sheep was cloned in Scotland, 277 eggs were fertilized, 29 embryos were implanted for pregnancy, and only one sheep was born. Not only is the PRE-BIRTH success rate low, but once the clone IS born, the majority of clones experience major disabilities and deformities.

According to Kass, "attempts to clone human beings carry massive risks of producing unhealthy, abnormal, and malformed children."

Reply: In light of our discussion of the Non-Identity Problem, what can we say about this objection?

2. Cloning would be psychologically harmful to the clone: Cloning may result in psychological trauma to the clone because the clone will be a genetic duplicate of an already existing person. This may cause confusion about identity and individuality. "Who am I?" the clone may ask, and find no simple answer. Additionally, the clone may experience constant comparison to his/her "parent," especially if that parent is someone gifted or famous. This may cause people to place unwarranted expectations on the clone, and it may be difficult for the clone if they don't "live up to" the successes or reputation of their parent.

Reply: Once again, the Non-Identity Problem may be relevant when responding to this worry. Furthermore, identical twins DO already exist. Are present twins faced with confusion about identity or individuality, or comparison to their twin?

3. Cloning will turn procreation into manufacture: Since clones will be produced by scientists in a lab, it is possible that they will be viewed as the “property” of those scientists, rather than human beings with full human rights. This is because, as Kass explains it, clones will be “made” and not “begotten.” If clones are seen as a thing that is manufactured, rather than human beings, it is possible that they will be treated as a commodity to be bought or sold.

4. Cloning would be a perversion of the parent-child relationship: Parents typically agree to conceive and then raise a child, whatever they turn out to be like. With cloning, the child’s DNA would be chosen in advance, such that the parents have complete control over the child’s genetic make-up. Furthermore, this may result in the parents having certain expectations of their child, and parents might coerce their cloned child to pursue certain hopes or dreams that the parents have, and want to fulfill vicariously through their child. Finally, clones who encounter difficulties or failures of their own may blame their “parent” for their own shortcomings.

According to Kass, this “contradicts the entire meaning of the open and forward-looking nature of parent-child relations.”

Reply: Objections 2, 3, and 4 all seem to raise worries about things that may or may not happen. Should worries about consequences that could be prevented be taken into account when trying to consider whether or not an action is prima facie morally wrong? For instance, what if the parent insisted that they would treat their clone child as a unique human individual, and accept them however they were, without forcing any expectations upon them? Furthermore, can you think of any precautions or regulations that could be put in place that would reduce the likelihood of these consequences occurring? Finally, if objections 3 and 4 are successful, would they also rule out artificial insemination, and the screening process that occurs with sperm donors, as morally impermissible?

5. Cloning is “playing God”: Kass does not himself raise this as an objection, but does briefly mention the reaction that many have regarding cloning, that cloning would be a case of “playing at being God.” Many think that it is morally wrong to “play God.”

Reply: Do you think it is wrong to “play God”? What might the definition of “playing God” be? We must be careful here, for a definition as broad as “intervening in the course of nature” might rule out life-saving medications or surgeries. Isn’t removing a tumor a case of “intervening in the course of nature”? If we restrict our definition to be “creating life in an unnatural way,” then this might rule out artificial insemination, or in vitro fertilization—practices typically thought to be permissible. So, what exactly is it about cloning in particular that is objectionable?