

The Case Against Human Cloning

PETER WEHNER / SEPT. 4, 2015



A new report published in *The New Atlantis*, “**The Threat of Human Cloning: Ethics, Recent Developments, and the Case for Action**,” is worth your attention.

The report is written by the Witherspoon Council on Ethics and the Integrity of Science, a blue-ribbon bioethics committee established in 2010 and chaired by Princeton University’s Robert P. George and Dr. Donald Landry of Columbia University.

This is the first major report to study human cloning since 2002. Much has changed since the last report, the most important of which is that human embryos were successfully cloned for the first time in 2013.

The report calls for human cloning to be definitively prohibited in the United States. It points out that while there is virtually no public debate about human cloning going on, the research and scientific breakthroughs are. We are wandering toward a Brave New World with hardly any discussion about the matter. “The Threat of Human Cloning” aims to correct that.

The report begins with a fascinating history of cloning before moving on to the ethical issues raised by its applications, beginning with the use of cloning to create children. (To its credit, the report describes in a fair-minded way the supposed benefits of cloning-to-produce-children.) It discusses the potential health and safety problems and the unavoidably experimental nature of cloning whose purpose is to produce children.

But what interested me the most is the deeper moral objections to cloning that are presented — and the effort by the Council to give voice to the objections most Americans have to cloning, to legitimize their moral intuitions.

“The Threat of Human Cloning” quotes from a 1997 essay by Dr. Leon Kass, who argued that a feeling of repugnance can be “the emotional expression of deep wisdom, beyond reason’s power fully to articulate it.” That deep wisdom recognizes the ways cloning would warp the relationship between the generations, put enormous psychological burdens on the children being created, and transform procreation into a kind of manufacturing. The Council addresses each of these problems in turn, concluding that “taking a stand against cloning while there is still a consensus among Americans that cloning is profoundly wrong will be an essential part of a defense of the family in coming years.”

The Council then turns to the question of cloning for the purposes of biomedical research. This might seem less morally problematic — after all, its purpose is a noble one: healing the sick. But the Council argues that research cloning is “already at the bottom of the slippery slope,” since it inherently involves the creation, destruction, and exploitation of embryonic human life.

From the report:

Cloning-for-biomedical-research is a deeper violation of the meaning of the procreative act and the obligations we owe to future generations than cloning-to-produce-children. Both involve seeing offspring as products of our will, made to serve our purposes. But the direct aim of creating human lives in cloning-for-biomedical-research is the destruction of those lives, and the transformation of their bodies into biomedical research supplies. It literally involves manufacturing and commodifying human life...

The report goes on to survey the efforts of policymakers to regulate cloning in the United States, analyzes some of the relevant legal and constitutional arguments, and (in Part Five) specific recommendations, including language for federal and state laws.

Regardless of where one stands on this issue — and there are complicated matters to sort through and different moral imperatives to weigh against each other — “The Threat of Human Cloning” raises precisely the kind of questions we need to engage, and it does so in a thoughtful, careful, and comprehensive way. Human cloning has profound human consequences; we need to think through the implications now rather than later when even more ethical and moral lines are crossed. That is precisely what this impressive report does.