

Human Cloning Revisited: Ethical Debate in the Technological Worldview

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Abstract

Like many controversies about new technologies, debates over the ethics of reproductive cloning are divided between utopian (pro-cloning) and dystopian (anti-cloning) approaches. The former see the rise of cloning a simple case of technological progress, backed up by an insistence on respect for reproductive rights; the latter argue that the possibility of human cloning threatens individuality and raises the danger of turning human beings into mass-produced commodities. I evaluate these debates through a Heideggerian reading, arguing that the dystopian position falls prey to the typical setbacks confronting humanism, while setting the entire controversy within the assumption – shared to some extent by both sides – that the humanity of human beings is reducible to their physical nature. Utopian arguments either defend their position on ethical grounds, which conflict with this basic presupposition, or simply reject the relevance of ethical debate to what are largely questions of progress driven by market forces. Dystopian arguments, by contrast, tend to defend human uniqueness and dignity, but these attempts are undermined by the underlying assumption that humanity is directly

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shaped by its biology, so that a proliferation of cloning will inevitably change the human world into a posthuman one. I argue that given this assumption as the guiding framework within which the controversy takes place, no genuine ethical debate is possible; both sides, by reducing humanity to biology, undermine the grounds of ethical discourse. I conclude that the condition of possibility for an ethical debate over cloning requires an understanding of the human that does not reduce the essence of humanity to physical nature, allowing for a confrontation with the essence of technology rather than one fully circumscribed by its limits.

Keywords

Heidegger, Genetic Manipulation, Human Cloning, Posthumanism, Technology

When the possibility of human cloning arrived at our doorstep, it was greeted with the usual and expected responses, mirroring what Don Ihde has called the “utopian” and “dystopian” views of technology.¹ On the dystopian, or anti-cloning side stands the large assortment of ethical and religious critics, who fear that “creating life” is a kind of “playing God,” an invitation to catastrophe and an attack on the sanctity of individuality. The pro-cloning utopians, on the other hand, stress that technological advancement is inevitable and that fighting against it is useless; they then rejoice in the creation of improved humans or point to the benefits of overcoming infertility. The utopian position does not argue so much that no ethical analysis of cloning is warranted, but only that this analysis is pointless. Similarly, the dystopians do not deny that technological progress will continue; they merely bemoan it. My goal in this paper is to

address, with reference to Heidegger's comments on the essence of technology and its relation to humanism, the question of the possibility of an ethical analysis within the technological worldview.

Although there are a number of serious ethical issues surrounding the various concrete practices involved in cloning research (Green et al. 2002), as well as the therapeutic potential of cloning, I will focus here on the heart of the matter: the ethics of reproductive cloning. The debates around reproductive cloning – despite discussions of posthumanism (Simon 2003; Fukuyama 2002) – remain largely humanist. That tradition imposes a dual set of conditions on any understanding of the human being: this being, understood as a rational animal, is seen as subject both to the laws of nature, which govern animality, and to rationality, which distinguishes this animal species. Heidegger's well-known critique of this tradition argues not so much that humanism is mistaken, but that it never gets to the essence of the human (Heidegger 1993). It fails because it begins, as it were, from the wrong starting point. Instead of attempting to grasp the essence of the human from within, it goes after it through an understanding of human nature in terms of physical nature. Humanism first defines the natural world, then the animal being within this framework, and finally throws in rationality to set humans – seen as fully natural beings – apart from other natural beings. The definition of human being is dependent on the understanding of nature.

But within the essence of modern technology, nature, on Heidegger's view, is understood merely as “standing reserve” (Heidegger 1993), a claim that is misunderstood unless one recognizes the attendant claim that the essence of modern technology follows as a logical development of the history of metaphysics. That history is one of redefining nature with the goal of mastering it; the final stage of this process reduces nature to something that is masterable in its essence: it no longer stands against us,

as something to be encountered, but merely lies fully exposed, waiting to be used and manipulated. The humanist tradition, embedded as it is within the history of metaphysics, here goes astray. Insofar as human nature is defined entirely by reference to nature, and nature itself is understood as standing reserve, the human being equally becomes standing reserve.

If this characterization seems outdated or mistaken to contemporary thinking, this may be largely because we accept its implications so readily. Consider, for example, Ronald Bailey's claim that, "Each skin cell, each neuron, each liver cell is *potentially* a person" (Bailey 2001). Bailey's point is that cloning technology now makes it at least potentially possible to create an embryo, a baby, and finally a person from any cell of the body. There is clearly a double reduction going on here: on the one hand, the person is reduced to a cell. On the other hand, the human body, as a vast collection of cells, becomes something like a storage space for potential persons. That this claim seems perfectly reasonable and inevitable given current technological abilities strongly suggests that Heidegger's analysis is on target. Ihde has remarked that this analysis "doesn't ring a bell anymore" (Ihde 2000) with the new generation, which accepts technology for its promise and disregards the supposedly dystopian elements of Heidegger's thinking; but this seems to be precisely because the claims of an episteme appear unavoidable and absurd to its alternatives when it has fully dominated the intellectual landscape.

I will argue that the logic of the human being as standing reserve is the dominant presupposition of debates over the ethics of reproductive cloning.² Commenting on discussions of cloning in the media, Debbora Battaglia notes that "polemical presentations of the issues produced bipolarities that defied mutual negotiation: on one side, cloned embryos were endowed with a capacity for agency and social personhood; on the

other, cloned persons were denied subjectivity, that is (for the most part implicitly), represented as things, disattributed of agency” (Battaglia 1995). This is the dual logic of humanism within the enframing essence of technology: on the one hand, it is accepted that human beings – with all the qualities of persons – are fully reducible to their physical nature. On the other hand, as merely natural beings, or products of the manipulation of nature, clones are seen as something other than human. Humanity is something to be manipulated, but in being manipulated it ceases to be fully human. This logic provides the background for the confrontation between the utopians and the dystopians.

The pro-cloning utopian arguments cover a wide range: cloning provides a way to overcome infertility, to make life better for one’s children (who can be engineered with better features than the original);³ it should be allowed “because you believe in freedom,” “because so many people want cloning,” or because “countries that fail to research human cloning will suffer economically”(Smith 2002). These arguments fall essentially into three basic categories.

- (1) Cloning is the inevitable result of human technological progress. Opposition to cloning on ethical grounds is, therefore, simply misguided.
- (2) There are real moral grounds for cloning: allowing childless couples to overcome infertility; respecting the autonomy of parents to choose their means of reproduction; providing a better life for one’s children, and so on.
- (3) People do or will want cloning. So why not give it to them?

I want to examine these strands in turn. The argument from the inevitability of technological progress is clearly not an ethical argument: it

is exactly the opposite; its claim is that ethical arguments as such are misguided. Critics note that this argument is absurd: regulations can prevent the spread of human cloning, even if some violations will occur. The same is true for any crime: as Fukuyama points out, making murder illegal has not fully prevented the existence of murder in human society; but this fact cannot serve to justify legalizing murder (Fukuyama 2002). Cloning becomes inevitable only if sufficient numbers of people accept it as inevitable and choose to do nothing about it. The appeal to inevitability thus conceals precisely what it attempts to bypass, namely the need for ethical analysis.

The supposed moral arguments for cloning, on the other hand, attempt to confront critics on their own turf. Cloning is seen as offering genuine improvements to human life, and therefore has real moral value. Arguments of this sort strike me at best as rationalizations for what is in any case seen as an inevitable outcome of technological progress; at worst, they are simply inconsistent. The utopian promise of cloning is the overcoming of humanity: the fallibilities instilled in human beings by nature - such as infertility, illness, genetic defects, and perhaps even the necessity of death - are to become obsolete. On the utopian logic, the human being is reducible to its physical nature; altering this nature will necessarily alter the human being. Of course the utopians may deny that this alteration must undermine human dignity or rights. As Bostrom argues, the scenarios of unenhanced humans losing their rights or dignity, like the science fiction fantasy of a war between the enhanced and the unenhanced, are overblown and far from inevitable (Bostrom 2005). If anything, human society has become *more* egalitarian over the ages, not less so. Changes in actual human nature have no essential connection to corresponding changes in normative concepts like equality and dignity; the latter can thus remain intact whatever changes human beings undergo

in fact.

While it is true that concepts like equality and dignity are normative concepts, it does not follow that they are unresponsive to facts. Peter Singer's attempt to extend the normative concepts to all sentient animals, for example, has so far met with more resistance – both philosophical and popular – than acceptance (Singer 1989). If major differences become apparent between different classes of human beings – which would not be a surprising posthuman scenario, given the rather apparent differences in wealth currently on display and the obvious connections between wealth and access to technology – the grounds for the optimism that normative concepts will not follow are opaque. And that apparent differences will emerge is assumed: were the idea of increasingly apparent differences viewed as far-fetched by utopians, talk of posthumanism would make little sense.

Moreover, if there is a sense in which technological enhancement may increase autonomy, as Bostrom suggests, a link between (enhanced) natural endowment and normative evaluation is already drawn. There are, of course, two ways to take Bostrom's suggestion. One might be simply descriptive: enhancement increases human autonomy in much the same sense as having more breakfast cereals to choose from enhances autonomy. But Bostrom – especially when he suggests (repeatedly) the possibility of controlling our emotions and character traits – seems to have something more in mind. Control over the passions is historically a key feature of the normative concept of autonomy: it is because reason has (potential) power over emotion in us that we are such a special part of nature.⁴ But if we make the human being as we know it obsolete down to its normative features, it hardly makes sense to retain the ethical convictions attending this obsolete model. If the human being is somehow about to go out of date – to become posthuman – this can be justified

only by appeal to the inevitability of progress; it does not make sense to justify it morally; that would amount to a moral justification of the overcoming of morality.

But the moral arguments, more commonly, avoid the complexities of fantasy, focusing on more concrete matters. It is *good*, we are told, to keep the government out of human reproductive choices, to allow potential parents their autonomy (Gillon 1999). Human cloning thus *actualizes a value* – the value of respecting a parental right. In fact, the claim that allowing cloning has some value (however minor, relative to other considerations), together with the rejection of arguments against it, is the most common strategy employed by the utopian side. The trouble with this strategy is that it biases discussion from the outset. By phrasing the issue in terms of reproductive rights, it already paints the dystopians as infringing on liberties (Shuster 2003).⁵ The terminology thus biases us in favor of upholding a desire (painted as a right) against government intervention, overlooking the fact that in order to be feasible at all, human cloning requires a great deal of funding which necessarily draws on public money at some level (de Melo-Martin 2002), and it challenges social values and assumptions, making it, at least presumptively, a political issue (Snead 2005).

For all the talk of rights and values, then, the moral arguments, along with the technological inevitability argument, may well come down to the third category: the argument that cloning is desired. If there were no interest in cloning, there would be no capital to advance the technology. Nor would there be any reason to think that some question of rights or values is at stake. The moral arguments really claim that giving people what they want is a morally sanctioned act. But this is hardly a genuine ethical position; if anything, it is simply the ethics of consumerism.⁶ There is, however, nothing inconsistent about such a position. If human beings

are reduced to their physical nature, and there is nothing clearly wrong with the commercial exploitation of nature, then there is nothing wrong with the commercial exploitation of humanity. Standing reserve is there to be mastered and used, and it does not matter whether it is physical nature or human nature (which comes to the same thing) that is embodied in this standing reserve.

Turning to the dystopian arguments against cloning, we find that they do not fare well under scrutiny. These arguments, too, can be placed into three categories:

- (1) Cloning violates the laws of nature or the laws of God.
- (2) Cloning violates the individuality of the human being or, alternatively, cloning violates the moral conception human beings have of themselves.
- (3) Cloning violates the autonomy of the human being by reducing it to a commodity.

Taking these in order, we can see that the first type of argument is fairly difficult to pull off; it seems to be self-undermining. If cloning can, in fact, counteract or transgress laws of nature or God, then these laws are not immutable. If so, it is not clear what the grounds could be for taking them to be laws in the first place. A changeable law is simply not a law. Conversely, if one argues that these are not real laws but ideal laws, the difficulty becomes one of showing why we should stick to some ideal unless it is in turn grounded in a genuine law. The argument can be phrased in a more sophisticated way: natural laws are not immutable, but they do provide sound guidelines for human flourishing. The response to this version, however, can simply point out that not all “natural” ways of behaving or being human are especially good ones. If the claim is that

“natural” automatically means “good,” this will thus have to rest on a highly contentious – not to mention truncated – account of what is natural. If, on the other hand, the point is just that what is good for us is what is natural, we will have to determine what is good first and the appeal to nature will be largely irrelevant.

The second set of arguments suffers from another difficulty. At first glance, this is a typical humanist response to the idea of mass-producing genetically identical human beings in a laboratory. The humanist critic of cloning strives to protect the dignity of human beings by preserving their unique identity. Yet on closer inspection this argument turns itself inside out. To suggest that cloning somehow threatens human individuality is to suggest that our uniqueness is largely contained in our genetic inheritance. If we follow out the implications of this view, it leads to the proposition that a human being is merely a biological organism, different from other human beings by virtue of little more than a tiny fraction of nucleotides. But if human beings were *merely* their (manipulatable) biological endowment, if individuality consisted of nothing more, then why would anyone bother with preserving this individuality and not, say, the individuality of an Oreo cookie? As in Heidegger’s critique of humanism, the humanist conception of humanity turns on itself, denying human beings the dignity it strives to defend for them. If we accept the reduction of humanity to a manipulatable physical nature or standing reserve, it becomes correspondingly more difficult to mount any principled defense of humanity and human uniqueness against that reduction.

Other ethical arguments in this category are equally problematic. Take, for example, a common objection to cloning emphasizing its tendency to undermine the relation between parent and child (Kass 1998). If a clone is a copy of only one of its parents, its relation to its parents will be necessarily skewed (Fukuyama 2002). But why is this an argument

against cloning at all, rather than, say, against adoption?⁷ Furthermore, this argument operates on the mistaken presupposition that our current moral norms are sound reasons to object to a world where those norms do not hold. Fukuyama himself offers that, “biotechnology offers the potential to change human nature and therefore the way that we think of ourselves as a species” (Fukuyama 2002). But surely the relation of a child to its parents is an obvious example of the sort of change in human nature that would be brought about by biotechnology. If we are comparing a world in which the parental relation is of one kind with a world where that relation is different, why should the standards of the former world, rather than the latter, adjudicate between these two relations on a moral level?⁸

Moreover, what makes this argument problematic is that it accepts the parental relation as a biological one. But, why should a merely biological relation be worth preserving rather than altering? The argument could easily be reversed, arguing that a posthuman ethics of human relationships is preferable to the current, merely human one, because the former is created by us, while the latter is imposed on us by our nature. The ethical arguments against cloning thus seem to come down not to a true ethical opposition to some change, but to the opposition of the current ethical framework to a different, feared one. As I have been arguing, this collapse of substantial ethical argumentation occurs precisely because the dystopian position already accepts the claim that humanity is determined by its physical nature, so that the alteration of the latter will necessitate an alteration in the former. If so, the ethical arguments against cloning have no substantial grounding in anything other than “the way things are,” opposed to a different way that we, for whatever reason, do not want. But this is not a truly ethical argument. A truly ethical argument deploys ethics for the sake of the good. But arguments of this sort deploy ethics for

the sake of ethics; they argue that the problem with a world of human clones is that the ethical rules will be different, and we should oppose the coming of such a world because we want the ethical rules to stay as they are. But, just as the utopians cannot coherently use ethics to argue for the overcoming of ethics, the dystopians cannot coherently use ethics to argue for the preservation of (current) ethics. If ethical arguments are not about the good, but are simply about the preservation of those arguments themselves, ethics loses its relevance to human action in the world.

The third sort of dystopian argument, on the other hand, faces a different problem. The foregoing analysis of utopian arguments has already suggested that the true utopian justification for cloning is really only an expression of the logic of consumerism. The dystopian sees this justification for what it is, and objects to the reduction of human beings to commodities or consumer products (Putnam 1999; Annas 1998). This argument, however, is difficult to maintain on ethical grounds if one accepts that human beings are simply standing reserve, to be manipulated like any other piece of physical nature. But the argument does seem to already accept this: otherwise it could not insist that clones *will* be merely consumer products. Just as the second sort of dystopian argument assumes that human beings in a posthuman world will no longer be individuals, this argument assumes that clones will be mere products, and it uses that assumption to argue against cloning on the grounds that it will reduce human beings to mere products. But since that reduction is already assumed in the argument, at least insofar as it takes for granted that clones are somehow substantially different from originals, it loses its footing on solid ground.

Of course this presentation is a bit disingenuous: the danger is not that clones will *be* products, but that they will be *treated as* products by parents or, perhaps, by society at large. The reasons for thinking this, of

course, are that we *already* think of children as commodities in some sense, and that allowing the production of clones – because they can be produced “to order” – will tend to reinforce this tendency. Instead of simply thinking of children as products, we would be producing them *as* products. But surely cloning is not the problem here: it is our reduction of humans to commodities, following the logic of reducing humans to nature and reducing natural entities to commodities. That allowing cloning may reinforce our framework is certainly a strike against it, but it is the entire framework of the cloning debate that is culprit; actual cloning – if it had the dire consequences suggested – would be merely a symptom, perhaps one that would exacerbate the other symptoms, but hardly the genuine threat.

In an excellent article, Levy and Lotz (2005) argue that the cultural tendency to think of the *genetic* relation between parent and child as central to that relation and thus valuable is based on a number of mistaken assumptions. But this tendency is the backdrop for the plausibility of the argument that cloning should be viewed as a technological treatment for infertility and thereby seen as a matter of reproductive rights.⁹ Therefore, the conclusion goes, the arguments in defense of cloning are undermined and we have a consequentialist consideration against it: allowing cloning will increase the tendency to think of humans as reducible to their biology, and this is a bad thing. No doubt this is right, and reinforces my suggestion (above) that the ethical arguments in favor of cloning come down to a question of consumer preferences. But surely the problem is not cloning: the problem is the worldview that makes cloning appear desirable – and, conversely, that threatens to allow for the reduction of clones to commodities – in the first place. Nor is it obvious that allowing cloning *would* exacerbate the reductive tendency. The presence of clones in our midst – should they often turn out to be quite different from the

originals – could have the effect of freeing us from the delusions of genetic reduction. So the genuine argument is not against cloning at all; it is against the framework within which cloning appears desirable, a framework, moreover, that we must already occupy if we are to recognize commodification, loss of dignity and individuality, and so on as threats stemming from allowing the practice of cloning. The dystopian arguments oppose the reduction of humanity, but they do so on the assumption that the reducibility is possible. If human beings are more than standing reserve, treating them as such is unlikely to change that.¹⁰

What I have been arguing, then, is that there is no genuine ethical debate about cloning: the conditions of possibility for a true ethical debate remain unmet so long as both sides accept the reduction of the human to standing reserve. That even the dystopians accept this reduction is already clear from the reasons for which they oppose cloning. They accept the reduction of the human to the merely natural, and argue against a world in which we accept that reduction as true. But that world is already here. It is the world in which we live, and thus the world in which the utopian arguments are not ethical ones, whereas the ethical dystopian arguments are self-defeating. The conditions of possibility of an ethical debate are hinted at by Heidegger, who writes that we operate “within a destining that in no way confines us to a stultified compulsion to push on blindly with technology or, what comes to the same, to rebel helplessly against it and curse it as the world of the devil. Quite to the contrary, when we once open ourselves expressly to the *essence* of technology, we find ourselves unexpectedly taken into a freeing claim” (Heidegger 1993). The suggestion can be expressed so: the unqualified defenses as well as the attacks on technological progress take place within a space of discourse already determined by the essence of technology, a point I have been defending throughout this paper. But if we recognize that the humanity of the human

is something beyond its physical nature – that, rather, it lies precisely in the ability to disclose the world, and itself as a being in the world, in a certain way – then the path is open for a genuine confrontation with technology. If we recognize technology as a means of disclosing the world, an essentially human activity, we can come to view its allowances as extensions of human powers for purposes not themselves determined by the technological means of disclosure, but by an equally compelling ethical worldview.

In closing, then, I want to draw out the main implication of this idea. There is no genuine ethical debate about the rightness or wrongness of cloning human beings, because this debate takes place under the universally shared assumption that human beings are reducible to their physical nature. This assumption, however, cuts us off from the possibility of consistently arguing that something about humanity resists such reducibility, makes its commodification repulsive, and demands the maintenance of the ethical status quo. Any response to this must recognize humanity as something that transcends human biology. If so, then the biological changes brought on by advances in biotechnology need not determine us to a posthuman worldview. If humanity is something over and above its biology, then that humanity can be maintained even in a world in which human cloning is commonplace: a first step might involve recognizing as fundamentally correct the claim that clones of human beings would be as human as the originals. They too will be individuals, they too will be greater than their biology, and they too will be irreducible to market commodities, precisely to the same extent as the originals are. If we accept from the start that the reduction of humanity will be a necessary result of cloning, this can be only because we have now already accepted the reduction of humanity as a given. The opening of a genuine ethical dialogue involves overcoming that reduction.¹¹

NOTES

1. The distinction is a running theme in Ihde's work up to the present day. For an early expression of it, see his *Technics and Praxis* (Ihde 1979).
2. My argument here diverges from previous attempts to highlight the problematic assumptions on both sides of the debate. My claim will be that genuinely ethical debates cannot even get off the ground so long as humans are reduced to something to be used and manipulated for human interest; the point is one of the ontological presuppositions of ethical debate. My argument thus differs from those of de Melo-Martin (2002), who argues that both sides fail to take important social and scientific considerations into account, or Hayry (2003), who tries to show that neither side succeeds in making a rationally conclusive case (a particularly puzzling point, since it applies to virtually all ethical debates over controversial public topics). Primarily because these authors (among others) have already covered the positions on both sides in detail, I will dispense for the most part with analysis of individual arguments, focusing instead on more general trends.
3. Technically, genetic manipulation falls outside the scope of this essay. Cloning can, however, be used to eliminate some genetic illnesses by using, for example, the genetic material of only the unaffected parent. Much of this essay, however, will apply, perhaps with slight modifications, to genetic manipulation as well as cloning.
4. See Augustine (1993), 12-13, for one of the clearest early accounts of this view.
5. Shuster goes on to argue that clarifying the terms and categories used in the debate is thus a crucial task of bioethics.
6. Although of course it is a genuine ethical position to the extent that preference utilitarianism is a genuine ethical position. In any case, however, my claim is only that the desire for access to cloning technology is the main issue in question. Should we want to add that the presence of a desire in itself raises a presumptive right, we will need to examine whether the desire is one worth having or, more importantly, worth investing in satisfying.
7. In fact, adoption seems far worse than cloning, since the child is there not a copy of even one of its parents.
8. We may, of course, simply be attached to *our* particular familial relations, but that

is hardly an ethical argument. Or we may claim that our relations are more conducive to human flourishing. But certainly plenty of excellent alternatives to the two parent system exist: consider, for example, the African extended family model of child rearing (Ikuenobe 2006). If it takes a village to raise a child, why shouldn't it take one to raise a clone child? If the claim is that human cloning would lead to negative consequences given the present parental structure then, given the accompanying fear that cloning will undermine that parental structure, the argument runs into internal incoherence.

9. Here we find the beginning of a response to the idea that satisfying consumer demand is in itself valuable from an ethical standpoint, namely, the standpoint of preference utilitarianism. If the claim of preference utilitarianism argues that fulfilling any preference whatsoever is good, it runs to serious, well-known, and rather obvious problems, e.g., those involving distorted preferences. If the position is taken in the form in which it is most commonly defended – i.e., the position that it is the satisfaction of *informed* preferences that matters – we can respond that the preference to have genetically similar offspring is not an informed one.
10. Of course this assumes that genetic manipulation will not actually alter the genetic basis for those capacities that manifest as individuality and autonomy. See Gillon, 1999.
11. I would like to thank Don Ihde and Dan Ernst for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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