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"Know that the Lord is good. He made us and we are his – his people, the sheep of his flock."

So began the Office of Readings the day I sat down to write this article. This verse seemed ironically fitting to reflect upon in considering human cloning.

At last year's U.N. Conference on Racism in Durban, South Africa, the "Contribution of the Holy See" closed with the disturbing specter of the "risk of a new form of racism," one presented most compellingly by the prospect of human cloning. The Contribution warned that techniques of "artificial procreation, the use of 'superfluous embryos,' [and] so-called therapeutic cloning ... could lead to the creation of a 'subcategory of human beings,' destined basically for the convenience of certain others." This, they argue, would be "a new and terrible form of slavery. Regrettably, it cannot be denied that the temptation of eugenics is still latent, especially if powerful commercial interests exploit it."

This is strong language—racism, slavery, eugenics. Is the Holy See being alarmist? Is this language designed to condemn human cloning through guilt by association? Or is this a prophetic warning based on the very public actions, rhetoric, and pretensions of those within the scientific and biotechnology community?

Cloning, SCNT, and the Legislative Moment

Cloning is now often referred to as "somatic cell nuclear transfer," abbreviated "SCNT." To clone, researchers must obtain an oocyte (a woman's reproductive cell) and remove the nucleus (which contains most of the genes, and directions for function). Imagine taking a chicken egg and somehow, without destroying the egg, removing all of the yolk, leaving only the egg white within the shell. Then, a cell (say, a skin cell) is taken from the body of a different adult. Since it comes from the body it's referred to as a "somatic" cell. The nucleus of this skin cell is removed and injected or "transferred" into the enucleated oocyte. This is like injecting it into the de-yolked chicken egg, only on a much, much smaller scale. Stimulated with an electrical charge, the combined materials from the two different cells fuse. The oocyte realizes that it now has a full complement of DNA (instead of the half that it has on its own) and it begins to act as if it's been fertilized. It begins to divide and grow as an embryo. At this point, two things might happen. The embryo could be implanted into a woman's uterus and brought to term. Or it could be used for research. Either way, one has cloned a human.

Currently three pieces of legislation that will determine what, if any, of the above is legal, are competing for votes in the U.S. Senate. One bill calls for a comprehensive ban on human cloning. Should the Senate pass it, cloning human embryos (for any reason) would become illegal in the U.S. In classic ethical terms, proponents of this bill hold that no end for which cloning might be used would justify this means of achieving that end.

Others have introduced alternative legislation that tries to distinguish between the purposes to which cloning is put. This legislation would permit scientists to use SCNT to create human clones in their labs, to use them for research and as a source of stem cells. This application of cloning is referred to as "research" cloning or "therapeutic" cloning. But it would ban implanting such an embryo in a womb (or carrying the embryo to term), to prevent what some call "reproductive" cloning.

How could cloning be "therapeutic" (since it certainly isn't therapeutic for the clone)? Advocates claim that stem cells derived from embryos "left over" after in vitro fertilization (IVF) procedures will not be as helpful as some claim, because of the problem of tissue rejection. Therefore, if we are to realize the promise of human embryonic stem cell research (ESCR) for the millions of people who suffer from Parkinson's, diabetes, ALS, spinal cord injury, and so on, patients will need embryos that match their own individual tissues. In other words, to create a therapy for a patient, the patient will first need to be cloned.

Racism and Slavery

It is generally considered bad form to invoke in ethical argument the historic specters of slavery or the Nazis. But an increasing number of critics, both secular and religious, have recognized a dangerous connection between human cloning and these historic forms of injustice. Racism and similar forms of discrimination entail the belief that particular groups of human beings are excluded from the political and moral community on the basis of perceived differences. Physical and other differences between humans are used as markers for exclusion. Philosophical and ideological concepts are often overlaid onto these differences to justify the resulting exclusion and exploitation.

Those who oppose racism and discrimination (whether based on race, gender, disability, class, etc.) are united in saying that the morally relevant criterion is our shared humanity. As the founding documents of the U.S. declare, "All humans [to correct for their exclusive language] are created equal." All humans, in other words, are of equal, incalculable, moral worth. The acknowledgement of human equality and dignity stands against utilitarian calculations of the value and worth of an individual. To create a hierarchy of value among humans based on physical differences or abilities, opponents of racism maintain, is morally corrupt.

Or so we declare. As we know, however, our actions and lives often belie our rhetoric. Racism is deeply entrenched not only in the U.S. but globally. The dignity and equality of human beings is an ideal – a claim we believe to be true and a practice we strive to make real. For Catholics and others committed to consistency in their ethics, any systematic assault against innocent human life further devalues all human life.

The current rhetoric surrounding ESCR and human cloning sadly fits the classic understanding of racism. Some philosophers have even attempted to claim that human embryos ought not to be understood as either human or alive. This intentional distortion of language and common sense is as transparent as it is disturbing. It is the ultimate dehumanization and discrimination, a tactic used primarily to justify violence (think of how we dehumanize the enemy in times of hatred and war).

Most advocates of ESCR and cloning, however, do not go quite that far. The National Bioethics Advisory Commission (NBAC), in its 1999 report *Ethical Issues in Human Stem Cell Research*, noted a broad agreement that "human embryos deserve respect as a form of human life." What they give here with one hand, however, they take away with the other. After acknowledging that embryos are indeed human life, they go on to recommend that "leftover" embryos can be destroyed for research or in service to others. They hold open the possibility of creating embryos solely for research or via cloning in the future. In effect, NBAC not only sanctions the systematic destruction of human life but defines a class of human beings it is morally acceptable to use for our own purposes. Embryos are not the moral equivalent, NBAC agrees, of full-fledged persons. They do not have the same value or worth because they lack certain characteristics (rationality, self-consciousness, autonomy) or, as some argue, because they look different from us. They are not, therefore, members of the moral community (language eerily similar to that used in the Dred Scott decision on slavery).

Cloning for research purposes takes this logic one step further. Now it is not only "leftover" or "surplus" embryos that can be traded, exploited and destroyed for human benefit. Now advocates are lobbying hard to actually *create* a new class of human beings whose sole reason for existence is to be exploited, and possibly owned, by others.

Not only does this offend those who work diligently to defend the sanctity and dignity of human life in all its forms. It likewise horrifies secular commentators. Many who lobbied hard in favor of ESCR drew the line at creating embryos for research (whether through cloning or IVF). Proposals to clone

embryos for research would cross that line, representing the first time we would intentionally create human beings solely for use of their parts. Charles Krauthammer, syndicated columnist and member of President Bush's Council on Bioethics, supports ESCR and does not believe that embryos are "persons." Nonetheless, as he notes:

> *There is a great distance between inviolability, on the one hand, and mere "thingness" on the other. Many advocates of research cloning see nothing but thingness. That view justifies the most ruthless exploitation of the embryo. Embryos are created with the explicit intention of eventual destruction. Deliberately creating embryos for eventual and certain destruction means the launching of an entire industry of embryo manufacture. It means the routinization, the commercialization, the commodification of the human embryo.*

This, he and many others argue, goes too far.

From the Therapeutic Imperative to the Therapeutic Bait-and-Switch

Advocates of ESCR and human cloning are savvy marketers. They have learned from the past fifteen years of developments in biotechnology—especially from the Human Genome Project and the field of gene "therapy"—that the way to overcome public opposition to a highly controversial new venture is to cast it in the language of therapy. The language of therapy functions rhetorically as an argument in itself; no further argument need be offered. No opposition will be broached. For who but a moral barbarian could oppose a technique that may relieve the pain and suffering or extend the life of someone who is ill, especially a sick child?

This "therapeutic imperative" is problematic in a number of ways. It forecloses public discourse. It trades on the compassion of the American public, appealing emotively rather than rationally, manipulating public opinion and policy. For Christians, while reducing suffering and ameliorating life threatening diseases are important mandates, we must be suspicious of rhetoric that turns health and healing into an idol, an end in itself to which all else is sacrificed. It is also often deceptive. As many prominent scientists have noted, any "therapeutic" application of ESCR is most likely a long way off at best. Many prominent scientists admit that the therapeutic promise of human embryonic stem cell research is overstated. This is even truer with cloning, given the preliminary nature of the work, the low efficiency rates and the high rates of genetic deformity in cloned animals.

It is this therapeutic imperative that gives rise to concerns about the slippery slope. Witness the shift in momentum from ESCR to cloning. As long as "therapy" and simple utilitarianism drive the discussion, it becomes impossible to argue against any further step that claims to address human illness and disability. Cloning advocates and eugenic futurists already anticipate human-animal hybrids, intentionally mutated human bodies developed for use only as parts, the development (intentionally or by economic default) of subclasses of human beings to serve as slaves for the rest. Shortly after Dolly's birth, some speculated about the possibility of a disturbing prospect: creating headless human clones, grown in artificial wombs. Lee Silver, molecular biologist at Princeton and cloning advocate, was quoted as finding "nothing wrong" with doing this.

I cite these examples not to be alarmist but because cloning advocates trumpet them as noble and inevitable outcomes. Historically, reproductive and genetic techniques developed in animals have, for the most part, eventually been used in humans. Already, researchers say they have fused human DNA with ova from cows and rabbits, to circumvent the problem that cloning requires lots of hard-to-come-by human ova.

In addition, we face what one might call the problem of the "therapeutic bait-and-switch." Once public support has been won and techniques have been developed, new technologies tend to become detached from their therapeutic moorings and be made available for decidedly non-therapeutic purposes. One need only think of the "Microsort" sperm-sorting technology, originally developed to aid persons bearing X-linked chromosomal disorders but immediately offered to those who wanted to "balance" the genders of their children. Or the potential to use gene "therapy" to treat baldness, a possibility that was heralded in 1999 as a fortuitous outcome of research. Or Botox—the botulism toxin that was originally developed to treat spasmodic conditions of the eyes, but off-label has become the treatment of choice among the cosmetic surgery set, comprising twenty percent of all cosmetic surgery interventions done in the U.S. annually.

Should "therapeutic cloning" move forward, how would we guarantee that embryos were created and destroyed only in service of the great and noble good of therapy? What "off-label uses" would be developed in the private sector? The history of government regulation hardly instills confidence here.

Of course, the most significant "off-label" use of research cloning would be reproductive cloning. These efforts are already afoot. Researchers in the U.S., Italy and China all claim to have made progress toward producing the first cloned human infant.

Although almost everyone agrees that reproductive cloning should be banned, such a ban would be nearly impossible to enforce once we allow cloning of human embryos for research. These researchers, and many fertility specialists, accept the argument that cloning is simply another form of assisted reproduction. The Human Cloning Foundation argues that to ban cloning would violate the human and constitutional right to reproduce in the manner of one's own choosing, without undue government interference. Along with the quasi-religious pro-cloning group Clonaid and scientist Richard Seed, this foundation also sees cloning as a route to immortality.

Commodification and Exploitation

Commercial interests have under girded both eugenics and slavery. They are major factors in the lobby behind ESCR and cloning as well. As cultural critic Cornel West has said in another context: "the market ethos that permeates almost every sphere of society ... makes it very difficult to hold on to non-market values. ... It makes it difficult for us to take, not only commitment and caring and sacrificing, but ultimately human life seriously... Profits become much more important than human life."

According to Patent Watch, a patent on human reproductive cloning and any "products" created by that process, theoretically including embryos, fetuses and children, was issued by the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office in April 2001, and three additional patents on human cloning are pending. Such patents signal the penultimate form of discrimination – ownership of and profit from one group of humans by another. These render dubious any claims that researchers understand embryos as a form of human life worthy of respect. The rhetoric is the language of therapy, but the reality is that of hope for a financial windfall.

Finally, apart from the embryos themselves, it will be the bodies of women that bear the greatest burden in the use of these techniques because ova are needed for the research. The practice of cloning would further the trend of thinking of our bodies in market terms—since the gametes required would be bought and sold, the embryos thus created would be "owned," and the products issuing from them could be sold. We must also ask: who are the women who will undergo what is necessary to sell their gametes, to make embryos solely for research? Euphemistically referred to as egg "donors" these women will be paid. The process, however, is quite burdensome and carries medical risks. Who will be the women target-marketed by researchers who need ova? In what communities will we find the advertisements "Egg Donors. Excellent Compensation"? If history is any indicator, one can reasonably bet that it will be the bodies of poor women of color—in the U.S. and abroad—who will bear the burden of repeated cycles of hormone shots, surgical egg retrieval, and the unknown risks that attend high doses of fertility hormones.

And who will bear the burden if the research bears fruit, and there is suddenly a "need" for a production-level number of embryos to supply tissues for patients? Feminists who support ESCR and "abortion rights" have come out against cloning for research purposes, in part because it will require thousands, if not millions, of human eggs. At a minimum, to create one clone requires one oocyte. But, given the enormous failure rate and the high percentage of deformities among clones, dozens if not hundreds of oocytes will be required to produce one successful cell line. To meet the therapeutic "promise" of cloning could require hundreds of millions of eggs. As African American women under slavery were exploited for their reproductive potential to fuel the economic machinery of the U.S., we again find the potential for grave reproductive exploitation of women of color and poverty, for the benefit of wealthy Americans.

The Sheep of His Flock

In the end, the prospect of human cloning urges us to remember that we are neither our own creators nor our own destiny. Nor are we to be the makers, owners, or destiny of others. Hubris may lead some to make "sheep" of others through cloning, to create a subcategory of humans—exploited, enslaved, and destroyed for the convenience and profit of a few. But Christians will remember that the differences that are part of the wonder of creation do not erase our essential equality before God. We are all the sheep of His flock. How we treat the least, most vulnerable, most voiceless among us is a measure not of their humanity but of our own. For what we do to them, we do unto Him.

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Resources

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