

Thoughts on Cloning Humans
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Cloning already happens by accident; not particularly often, but often enough that we all know examples. Identical twins are true clones of each other, with the same genes. So, the new discovery just announced from Edinburgh can't be all that radical in its moral and ethical implications. Heaven's foundations don't quiver every time a pair of identical twins is born.

Nevertheless, two bees seem to be buzzing around in public bonnets. First, the new technique makes baby duplicates of an existing adult. We might, as it were, clone Stephen Hawking or Mother Teresa, and this is not the same thing as twins of the same age. Second, the spectre is raised of multiple clones, regiments of identical individuals marching by the thousand, in lockstep to a Brave New Millennium. Looked at in certain ways, both these notions can be made to seem unpleasant. Phalanxes of identical little Hitlers, goosestepping to the same genetic drum, is a thought so horrifying as to overshadow any lingering curiosity we might have over the final solution to the "nature or nurture" problem.

But do you whisper to yourself a secret confession? Wouldn't you love to be cloned? I've never admitted it before, but I think I would. This has nothing to do with vanity, with thinking that the world would be a better place if there was another one of me going on after I'm dead. It is pure curiosity. I know how I turned out having been born in the 1940s, schooled in the 1950s, come of age in the 1960s, and so on. I find it a personally riveting thought that I could watch a small copy of myself, fifty years younger and wearing a baseball hat instead of a solar topee, nurtured through the early decades of the twenty first century. Mightn't it feel almost like turning back your personal clock fifty years? And mightn't it be wonderful to advise your junior copy on where you went wrong, and how to do it better?

Are some people motivated by a watered down version of this feeling when they want to have ordinary children, by the approved method? Their trouble is that the duplication is watered down too. By sex. Your child may half resemble you, but it has half your spouse's genes too. Wonderful as that is (depending on your view of your spouse), it is hardly the full clock-zeroing experience.

Anyway, that is self-indulgent fantasy. It is one thing to clone an ordinary, nice, harmless person like you or me; or somebody we'd all like to see more of, like David Attenborough. But isn't it more likely that, if cloning became practical politics, politics itself would rear its ugly head? Who is most likely to get himself cloned in practice, David Attenborough or Saddam Hussein: someone that we all admire, or a Rupert Murdoch who has nothing to commend him except power, influence and money?

Suppose society managed to outlaw general, free-for-all cloning of just anybody who could afford it. How might we then decide whom we'd like to clone? Nobody has come up with a good solution to the "playing God" problem (which arises, say, when there's a shortage of kidney machines, and doctors are accused of playing God when they have to choose whose is the most worthy life to save). Would cloning dilemmas lead us inexorably to yet another committee of the great and the good, chaired (who could doubt it?) by Baroness Warnock and including (of course) Rabbi Julia Neuberger?

Another problem: how would the baby itself feel about it? Would it be teased at school, tormented for its uniqueness? Undoubtedly the first cloned baby would feel unusual. It would have a birth mother who was no relation, an identical brother or sister who might be fifty years older, and genetic parents perhaps long dead and old enough to be its great grandparents. But the stigma of uniqueness is not a new problem, and it is not beyond our wit to solve it. It presumably arose for the first IVF babies, yet now they are no longer called "test tube babies" and we hardly know who is one and who is not.

I think we must beware of a reflex and unthinking antipathy to everything "unnatural". Certainly cloning is unnatural. We haven't bred without sex for perhaps a thousand million years. But unnatural isn't a necessary synonym for bad. It's unnatural to read books, or travel faster than we can run, or scuba-dive, or fly. It's unnatural to wear clothes, but we do. Indeed, the people most likely to be scandalised at the prospect of human cloning are the very people most outraged by lack of human clothing.

Cloning may be good and it may be bad. Probably it's a bit of both. The question must not be greeted with reflex hysteria but decided quietly, soberly and on its merits. We need less emotion and more thought.

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