

Engineering Immortality through Human Cloning

A Christian Theological Perspective

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Abstract. This paper discusses the topic of engineering immortality, which is used as an ethical argument in support of human cloning. While many of the legal and religious responses to the ethical issue of human cloning focus on the use of embryos as a means to an end (for reproductive or therapeutic purposes) and on the concern for human dignity, an argument for achieving human immortality through human cloning has rarely been considered. This paper presents, from a Christian theological perspective, a response to the argument for engineering immortality by human cloning. *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 9.3 (Autumn 2009): 447–451.

Soon after the first successful cloning of a mammal, Dolly the sheep, was announced in 1997, the possibility of human cloning became *the* issue in public debates on bioethics. In the same year, a new religious movement called Raëlism came to public attention with the founding of a human cloning company, Clonaid, by the movement's leader, Raël (Claude Vorilhon).¹ Aliens from outer space, called

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¹Clonaid claims to have successfully created thirteen cloned human babies (<http://www.clonaid.com/news.php?3.2>). The claims, however, remain unverified. See, for example, Natasha McDowell, "Dutch Clone Claimed—But No Proof," *New Scientist*, January 6, 2003, <http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn3230-dutch-clone-claimed--but-no-proof.html>.

“Elohim,” had purportedly revealed to Raël that the Elohim had created all human life by cloning their own genetic material (hence, “in the image of the Elohim”) and that scientific knowledge of cloning was the means by which human beings could become immortal, reaching the status of the gods.² According to Raëlism, then, the hope of becoming immortal will be realized through human cloning. Although an individual human being will not survive forever, the genotype of a particular person will continue without end through successive clones.

Although the Raëlian movement can be dismissed for its many unverified claims, particularly about its successful attempts to clone human beings, its idea of immortality through human cloning is noteworthy. This idea is taken up by others, including Stanley Shostak in his book *Becoming Immortal: Combining Cloning and Stem Cell Therapy*, although Shostak takes a slightly different stance.³ According to Shostak, evolution and development shaped mortality, but human beings, a product of biological evolution, are capable of turning against the evolutionary process by developing the biotechnology to help them become immortal.⁴ Shostak is optimistic about the applications of biotechnology and finds that its use is justified and will always be justified because of its benefits, particularly its promise for achieving immortality.⁵ In contrast to the Raëlian movement, however, which aims to achieve immortality through the cloning and survival of individual genotypes, Shostak would combine cloning and the use of human embryonic stem cells to make it possible for a particular person to stop the development of aging and become a “forever-young immortal.” His idea is based on two premises: that (1) anyone who is able to perpetually regenerate, reinvigorate, and replace aged or diseased parts of their body could live in the same body from birth to eternity with their persona intact, and (2) a clone of one’s own cells could serve as a source of embryonic stem cells to support cellular renewal.⁶

The Hope in Human Cloning

The inevitability of death has always been feared by human beings, and religious traditions usually tackle the problem of death within particular worldviews. If the sting of death is the fear of the people, then immortality is their hope. Medicine itself has been the means to fight the diseases that ultimately led to death, but now biotechnology has pushed medicine from merely extending human life for a short time to extending it forever by fighting death itself. Human cloning, either in the Raëlian sense of cloning a person to produce an identical twin who would continue

²International Raëlian Movement, “Summary of the Messages,” video, 2005, http://www.rael.org/e107_plugins/raeltv_menu/view.php.

³Stanley Shostak, *Becoming Immortal: Combining Cloning and Stem-Cell Therapy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002). The idea of engineering immortality for human beings is also appearing in works of fiction; the novel *Forever and Ever*, by Dan A. Baker, for example, addresses immortality through human cloning.

⁴Shostak, *Becoming Immortal*, 46.

⁵Ibid., 37.

⁶Ibid., 15.

the life of the previous person or in the Shostakian “forever-young” sense of cloning a person to create an embryo who would provide stem cells for the adult’s own survival in the same body, is seen as a possible answer to the hope of the people—it is an engineered immortality.

The Ethics of the Ecozoic Age

The problem with the idea of engineering immortality through human cloning is the attitude of subduing nature and challenging the natural processes of evolution and development through biotechnology. The desire to transcend and control nature for the sole purpose of human prosperity is precisely the attitude that led to the present ecological crisis. René Descartes’ dualistic idea that human beings possess a transcendent mind that lives in an external, mechanistic world and Francis Bacon’s view that nature needs to be subjected by the human mind through technology for the sake of human prosperity are examples of the human desire to transcend and control nature, which, despite its good intentions, ultimately led to the degradation of the environment.⁷

Writing on the ecological crisis specifically, Rev. Thomas Berry, C.P., a Passionist priest, notes that the desire to transcend nature is the result of unhappiness with the human condition, and it is what led to a current ecological crisis, since human beings were alienating themselves from the natural processes of the earth. The problem is that human beings have developed, both in the past and in the present, transcendent views (1) about God, which have reduced emphasis on the immanence and active personal role of God in creation and negate the intrinsic value of the natural world in communicating the divine presence; (2) about the role of humanity, which have brought about an idea of detachment from the phenomenal world and turned it to an external object of instrumental value; (3) about redemption *from* the world, instead of the Christian teaching of the salvation of the whole world (cf. Rom. 8:21); and (4) about the human mind, which have led to an imperialistic ecology that caused the human relationship with the natural world to deteriorate. Berry’s views on these transcendent attitudes and their effects on the ecological crisis can be extended to include the use of human cloning for engineering immortality as well:

We also have transcendent technology, which enables us to evade the basic biological laws of the natural world. And we have not only a transcendent technology, but also a transcendent destiny or transcendent goal, a millennial vision in which, within history, we get beyond the human condition. . . . We want to control the outside, we want to change things. We want to control the very structure and functioning of the natural world. . . . We think we can force the natural world to function according to our desires. Eventually, we must discover how to live in accord with the natural world. So, in these transcendencies, we

⁷Donald Worster, *Nature’s Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 29.

⁸Thomas Mary Berry, “The Conditions for the Ecozoic Age,” in Thomas Mary Berry et al., *Befriending the Earth: A Theology of Reconciliation between Humans and the Earth*, (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991), 115, 116.

have the context in which Western alienation takes place between the human and the natural world.⁸

Hence, it could be argued that the attitude of transcending the natural world through biotechnology could harm humanity as a species, in the same manner that transcendent technology has threatened biodiversity and ecosystems.

Berry's aim is to move into an "ecozoic" age, a period during which our anthropocentric attitude is replaced with a geocentric attitude, where we live in communion with the natural world as a subject, preserve the natural world, and ensure a future for humanity, because the human is derived from the natural world.⁹ Since the argument for engineering immortality through human cloning is anthropocentric and does not value the fact that human beings evolved from the natural world, it is not in accord with the ethical characteristics of an ecozoic age.

Berry's approach to unity with the natural world and the implications of the transcendent attitude can further be clarified by a practical observation: Genetic diversity is an asset in the environment, and human cloning threatens natural diversification among human beings, thus threatening the life of human beings. Peter J. Paris remarks,

The production of human clones goes against nature, in that the latter requires that the genetic structure of all human offspring be a composite of genes from two donors. In that way, nature assures diversity and helps overcome some of the inherent weaknesses in either donor. Thus, it follows that widespread cloning would lead to a gradual diminution in genetic quality.¹⁰

According to Paris, human cloning—rather than providing us with an opportunity to become immortal, as the optimistic Raëlians and Shostak would have it—poses the threat of weakening human nature and leading to death.

In other words, the natural processes of evolution and development are not the dark forces of mortality that need to be transcended but the means of ensuring species survival. Thus, instead of engineering immortality, it is necessary for us to come to an understanding of immortality that is in accord with the natural world.

A Christian Perspective in an Evolutionary Worldview

The story of the universe from a Christian perspective can offer a different understanding of immortality, and as a consequence it shows that engineering immortality cannot be used as an ethical argument in support of human cloning.

The Christian understands the creation of the universe by the Trinitarian God as expressing God's love of the universe, and the process of evolution as the universe's approach to God—that is, a process that is intended by God and takes place in God.¹¹

⁹Ibid., 97.

¹⁰Peter J. Paris, "A View from the Underside," in Ronald Cole-Turner, *Human Cloning: Religious Responses* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 47.

¹¹Denis Edwards, *The God of Evolution: A Trinitarian Theology* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999), 34.

Using ideas of Berry and Teilhard de Chardin, Denis Edwards identifies human beings as the product of the evolutionary universe coming to reflective self-consciousness, and, using Karl Rahner's theology, he identifies evolutionary history as the rise toward self-transcendence and openness to God's self-communication and grace given to the whole of creation through mediation.¹²

The Christian belief in the incarnation of God in the Logos, Jesus Christ, who created the world, is understood to be God's offer of grace to the cosmos (i.e., Christ is fully divine) and the asymptotic goal of the evolutionary history of the cosmos toward self-transcendence (i.e., Christ is fully human).¹³ The belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ shows that Christ is the firstfruits of the resurrection of the dead, and through the resurrection of human beings the whole cosmos participates in the resurrection.¹⁴ Thus, the resurrection is the immortality of the human person, as well as the immortality of the cosmos. Both human beings and the cosmos participate in the resurrection and are transfigured in Christ. Human beings, the material universe, and God are intimately connected according to this Christian theology.

Evolution and development, then, are a part of God's plan for the *theosis* of the cosmos. Human cloning takes the opposite tack in attempting to subdue the natural processes of evolution and development intended by God, whereby both humanity and the cosmos may participate in the divine nature. Taking the resurrection of the body seriously also means that immortality cannot be understood as a process that requires the aid of human biotechnology (in this case, human cloning) to transcend the human condition; instead, immortality is brought about by the power of God in the natural world and is the goal of the evolutionary process which God created. Immortality cannot be engineered, as it cannot be separate from the natural world, thus discounting any argument for human cloning on the basis of engineering immortality from a Christian theological perspective.

No Need for Engineering Immortality

I have argued that the use of human cloning is opposed to the natural order of creation and the ethics of an ecozoic age described by Thomas Berry. I have also argued that Christian theology provides a geocentric approach within an evolutionary worldview, such that immortality is recognized to be the goal of the evolutionary process in the natural world and the work of God through self-conscious humanity, as expressed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus, it is not the case that human beings, separate from the rest of the cosmos, should try to transcend the natural world, oppose evolution and development, and use biotechnology to become immortal. From a Christian perspective, the argument for engineering immortality does not provide sufficient grounds to clone human beings.

¹²Denis Edwards, *Jesus and the Cosmos* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1991), 28, 68.

¹³*Ibid.*, 69, 70.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 94. This theme has a biblical basis in Romans 8:18–23.