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Gilbert Meilaender

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CLONING IN PROTESTANT PERSPECTIVE

GILBERT MEILAENDER*

Because I have been invited to reflect on the moral implications of human cloning specifically as a Protestant theologian, I have chosen my concerns accordingly. I do not suppose, therefore, that the issues I address are the only issues that deserve our attention. Thus, for example, I will not address the question of whether we could rightly conduct the first experiments in human cloning, given the likelihood that such experiments would not at first fully succeed. That is an important moral question, but I will not take it up. Nor do I suppose that I can represent "Protestants" generally. No such beast exists. Indeed, Protestants are specialists in the art of fragmentation. In my own tradition, which is Lutheran, we commonly understand ourselves as quite content to be Catholic except when, on certain questions, we are compelled to disagree. Other Protestants might think of themselves differently.

It is also important to emphasize that reflecting from this particular perspective should not be understood as an attempt for the "Protestant interest group" to weigh in on public policy deliberations. On the contrary, theological language, at least as I shall use it here, has sought to uncover what is universal and human. It begins epistemologically from a particular place, but it opens up ontologically a vision of the human. The faith which seeks understanding may sometimes find it. The unease about human cloning that I will express is widely shared. I aim to get at some of the theological underpinnings of that unease in language that may seem unfamiliar or even unwelcome, but it is language that is grounded in important Christian affirmations that seek to understand the child as our equal—one who is a gift and not a product.

Lacking an accepted teaching office within the church, Protestants had to find some way to provide authoritative moral guidance. They turned from the authority of the church as interpreter of Scripture to the biblical texts themselves. That characteristic Protestant move is not likely, of course, to provide any very immediate guidance on a subject such as human cloning. But

* Ph.D., Princeton University, 1976; Board of Directors Chair of Christian Ethics, Professor of Theology, Valparaiso University. This article is a revised version of remarks first presented by invitation on March 13, 1997, to the National Bioethics Advisory Commission. The author was specifically asked to speak out of the Protestant tradition to the Commission. Hence, the nature of the invitation accounts in part for the structure and character of this article.

Also, this article is a revised version of Gilbert Meilaender, *Begetting and Cloning*, FIRST THINGS, June-July 1997, at 41. Copyright© 1997 by Gilbert Meilaender. This revised version is included with the permission of the author and the publisher.

it does teach something about the connection of marriage and parenthood. The creation story in *Genesis* Chapter One depicts the creation of humankind as male and female, sexually differentiated and enjoined by God's grace to sustain human life through procreation.

Hence, there is given in creation a connection between (1) the differentiation of the sexes and (2) the begetting of a child. We can begin with that connection, making our way indirectly toward the subject of cloning. It is from the vantage point of this connection that our theological tradition has addressed two questions that are both profound and mysterious in their simplicity: What is the meaning of a child? And what is good for a child? Such questions are, of course, at the heart of many problems in our society today, and it is against the background of such questions that I want to reflect upon the significance of human cloning. What Protestants found in the Bible was a normative view: namely, that the sexual differentiation is ordered toward the creation of offspring, and that children should be conceived within the marital union. By God's grace, the child is a gift who springs from the giving and receiving of love. Marriage and parenthood are connected—held together in a basic form of humanity.

To this depiction of the connection between sexual differentiation and child-bearing as normative, it is, of course, possible to respond in different ways.¹ We may welcome the connection and find in it humane wisdom to guide our conduct, or we may resent it as a limit to our freedom and seek to transcend it. Members of our society, whether theoreticians or eminently practical people, are often drawn to a vision of human nature that sees the "essence" of being human—as an older language would have put it—to be simply our freedom to make and remake ourselves. Hence, limits to our freedom are resented. If we are able to separate child-bearing from the sexual relation of a man and woman, and if we have reason to make the separation, we chafe at any suggestion that we ought not do what we can do. But recent "advances" in human reproduction, and certainly the possibility of human cloning, might give us pause. Is the freedom to make and remake ourselves really what is most fundamental about being human? That it is one important aspect of our being is undeniable. But at least as important is the affective bond that ties the generations together, and that bond is grounded in our biology and in the procreative relationship of a man and woman. Some recent "advances" in reproductive technology have already begun to threaten the bond between the generations, and cloning would constitute a decisive rupture. With cloning, we would willfully give rise to relationships that we hardly know how to

1. The following discussion is drawn from an argument by the Anglican theologian, Oliver O'Donovan. See OLIVER O'DONOVAN, *BEGOTTEN OR MADE?* 16-18 (1984).

name—when, for example, a woman’s “daughter” is, in some sense, also her twin “sister.” We would willfully undertake something like a deliberate rejection of the otherness within relationship—and perhaps of relationship altogether—that sexual reproduction always requires us to acknowledge. We would willfully subvert the web of relationships across the generations, one of the constitutive elements of our humanity. A decision to clone, therefore, would demonstrate paradigmatically the way in which our freedom is not only creative but also destructive.

We did not need modern scientific breakthroughs to know that it is possible—and sometimes seemingly desirable—to sever the connection between marriage and begetting children. The possibility of human cloning is striking only because it breaks the connection so emphatically. It aims directly at the heart of the mystery that is a child. Part of the mystery here is that we will always be hard-pressed to explain *why* the connection of sexual differentiation and procreation should not be broken. Precisely to the degree that it *is* integral to our humanity, as integral as freedom, it will be hard to give more fundamental reasons why the connection (between marriage and begetting children) should be welcomed and honored when, in our freedom, we need not do so. But moral argument must begin somewhere. To see through everything is, as C.S. Lewis once put it, the same as not to see at all.²

If we cannot argue *to* this norm, however, we can argue *from* it. If we cannot entirely explain the mystery, we can explicate it. And the explication comes from two angles: maintaining the connection between procreation and the sexual relationship of a man and woman is good, both for that relationship and for children.

First, it is good for the relation of the man and woman. No doubt the motives of those who beget children coitally are often mixed, and they may be uncertain about the full significance of what they do. But if they are willing to shape their intentions in accord with the norm I have outlined, they may be freed from self-absorption. The act of love is not simply a personal project undertaken to satisfy one’s own needs, and procreation, as the fruit of coitus, reminds us of that. Even when the relation of a man and woman does not or cannot give rise to offspring, they can understand their embrace as more than their personal project in the world, as their participation in a form of life that carries its own inner meaning and has its *telos* established in the creation. The meaning of what we do then is not determined simply by our desire or will. As Oliver O’Donovan, a well-known contemporary Anglican theologian, has noted,

2. C.S. LEWIS, *THE ABOLITION OF MAN* 91 (Macmillan Paperbacks ed. 1947).

some understanding like this is needed if the sexual relation of a man and woman is to be more than “simply a profound form of play”³

Second, maintaining the connection between procreation and the sexual relationship of a man and woman is also good for the child. When the sexual act becomes only a personal project, so does the child. No longer then is the bearing and rearing of children thought of as a task we should take up or as a return we make for the gift of life; instead, it is a project we undertake if it promises to meet our needs and desires. Those people—both learned commentators and ordinary folk—who have described cloning as narcissistic or as a replication of one’s self see something important. Even if we grant that a clone, reared in different circumstances than its immediate ancestor, might turn out to be quite a different person in some respects, the point of that person’s existence would be grounded in our will and desire.

Hence, retaining the tie that unites procreation with the sexual relation of a man and woman is also good for children. Even when a man and woman deeply desire a child, the act of love itself cannot take the child as its primary object. They must give themselves to each other, setting aside their projects, and the child then becomes the natural fruition of their shared love—something quite different from a chosen project. The child is therefore always a gift—one like them who springs from their embrace, not a being whom they have made and whose destiny they should determine. This is light years away from the notion that we all have a right to have children—in whatever way we see fit, whenever it serves our purposes. Our children begin with a kind of genetic independence of us, their parents. They replicate neither their father nor their mother. That is a reminder of the independence that we must eventually grant to them and for which it is our duty to prepare them.⁴ To lose, even in principle, this sense of the child as a gift entrusted to us will not be good for children.

In C.S. Lewis’ *That Hideous Strength: A Modern Fairy Tale for Grown-ups*, the National Institute of Coordinated Experiments (NICE) is undertaking an ambitious attempt to control and shape nature. A member of NICE named Filostrato explains how this applies to human beings. “What,” he asks, “are the things that most offend the dignity of man?” And he answers, “Birth and breeding and death.”⁵ Organic life, having done its work in producing mind, can now be transcended by the free human spirit. Death can be conquered, and reproduction need no longer involve copulation. We are able

3. O’DONOVAN, *supra* note 1, at 17.

4. PAUL RAMSEY, *FABRICATED MAN: THE ETHICS OF GENETIC CONTROL* 72 (1970).

5. C.S. LEWIS, *THAT HIDEOUS STRENGTH: A MODERN FAIRY-TALE FOR GROWN-UPS* 174 (Macmillan Paperbacks ed. 5th prtg. 1967).

now to see just how prescient Lewis was—how offensive birth and breeding are to a society in which control of our nature and destiny has become for some the central cultural project. But such control is bad both for the sexual relation of a man and woman and for children. In particular, and especially, the child becomes a chosen and willed product, one whom we have shaped and whom we rightly control.

I will press this point still further by making one more theological move. When Christians tried to tell the story of Jesus as they found it in their Scriptures, they were driven to some rather complex formulations. They wanted to say that Jesus was truly one with that God whom he called Father, lest it should seem that what he had accomplished did not really overcome the gulf that separates us from God. Thus, while distinguishing the persons of Father and Son, they wanted to say that Jesus is truly God—of one being with the Father. And the language in which they did this is from the fourth century Nicene Creed, one of the two most important creeds that antedate the division of the church in the West at the Reformation. The Nicene Creed describes the Son of the Father as “begotten, not made.”⁶ Oliver O’Donovan has noted that this distinction between making and begetting, crucial for Christians’ understanding of God, carries considerable moral significance.⁷

What the language of the Nicene Creed wanted to say was that the Son is God just as the Father is God. It was intended to assert an equality of being. And for that, what was needed was a language other than the language of *making*. What we beget is like ourselves—what we make is not. What we make is the product of our free decision, and its destiny is ours to determine. Of course, on this Christian understanding, human beings are not begotten in the absolute sense that the Son is said to be begotten of the Father. They are *made*—but made by God through human begetting. Hence, although we are not God’s equal, we are of equal dignity with each other, and we are not at each other’s disposal. If it is, in fact, human begetting that expresses our equal dignity, we should not lightly set it aside in a manner as decisive as cloning.

I am well aware, of course, that other advances in what we are pleased to call reproductive technology have already strained the connection between the sexual relationship of a man and woman and the birth of a child. Clearly, procreation has to some extent become reproduction, making rather than doing. I am far from thinking that all this has been done well or wisely, and sometimes we may only come to understand the nature of the road we are on when we have already traveled fairly far along it. But whatever we say of that, surely human

6. See JAROSLAV PELIKAN, *THE EMERGENCE OF THE CATHOLIC TRADITION (100-600)*, at 200-210 (1971); 1 PHILIP SCHAFF, *THE CREEDS OF CHRISTENDOM* 24-29 (1881).

7. O’DONOVAN, *supra* note 1, at 1-13.

cloning would be a new and decisive turn on this road—far more emphatically a kind of production, far less a surrender to the mystery of the genetic lottery which *is* the mystery of the child who replicates neither father nor mother but incarnates their union, far more an understanding of the child as a product of human will.

I am also aware that we can all imagine circumstances in which we ourselves might—were the technology available—be tempted to turn to cloning. Parents who lose a young child in an accident and want to “replace” her. A seriously ill person in need of embryonic stem cells to repair damaged tissue. A person in need of organs for transplant. A person who is infertile and wants, in some sense, to reproduce. Once the child becomes a project or product, such temptations become almost irresistible. There is no end of good causes in the world, and they would sorely tempt us even if we did not live in a society for which the pursuit of health has become a god, justifying almost anything.

As William F. May has often noted, we are preoccupied with death and the destructive powers of our world. But without in any way glorifying suffering or pretending that it is not evil, Christians worship a God who wills to be with us in our dependence, teaching us “attentiveness before a good and nurturant God.”⁸ We learn therefore that what matters is how we live, not only how long—that we are responsible to do as much good as we can, but this means, as much as we can within the limits that morality sets for us.

I am also aware, finally, that we might for now approve human cloning but only in restricted circumstances—as, for example, the cloning of preimplantation embryos (up to fourteen days) for experimental use. That would, of course, mean the creation solely for purposes of research of human embryos—human subjects who are not really best described as *preimplantation* embryos. They are *unimplanted* embryos—a locution which makes clear the extent to which their being and destiny are the product of human will alone. If we are genuinely baffled about how best to describe the moral status of that human subject, the unimplanted embryo, we should not go forward in a way that peculiarly combines metaphysical bewilderment with practical certitude by approving even such limited cloning for experimental purposes.

Proponents of human cloning sometimes suggest that the kinds of concerns I have noted here cannot be determinative of public policy in a pluralistic society such as ours. Even if I have successfully pointed to certain dangers or suggested certain wrongs that we might do, all such claims will be branded as “speculative.” Perhaps human cloning will help to create a world in which we

8. WILLIAM F. MAY, THE PHYSICIAN'S COVENANT 32 (1983).

think of children principally as the product of will and choice, a world in which the affective bond that ties the generations together will be radically altered, a world in which human equality will be threatened. But if such wrongs do not indubitably lead to physical harm, they are only "speculative." That is, they put forward a kind of metaphysical vision of what is good in human life—profound perhaps and even, on some occasions, compelling, but never worthy of any special place in the formulation of public policy. What must then be said in response is that the alternative view, which seeks to make a place for human cloning in our common life, is every bit as "speculative." It too must be said to be grounded in a disputed vision of what is fundamentally human. For against the vision of the human good which sees children as the fruit of an ecstatic union of a man and woman, the defender of cloning puts forward a speculative metaphysic according to which rational will and choice are what characterize our humanity. There is no reason to give such a vision of humanity pride of place in our public deliberations.

Protestants have often been pictured—erroneously in many respects—as stout defenders of human freedom. But whatever the accuracy of that depiction, they have not had in mind a freedom without limit, without even the limit that is God. They have not located the dignity of human beings in a self-modifying freedom that knows no limit and that need never respect a limit which it can, in principle, transgress. The meaning of the child—offspring of a man and woman, but a replication of neither; their offspring, but not their product whose meaning and destiny they might determine—that, I think, constitutes such a limit to our freedom to make and remake ourselves. In the face of that mystery, we do well to remember that "progress" is always an optional goal in which nothing of the sacred inheres.⁹

9. Hans Jonas, *Philosophical Reflections on Experimenting with Human Subjects*, in *READINGS ON ETHICAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES IN BIOMEDICINE* 35 (Richard W.ertz ed. 1973).

