



Health Matrix: The Journal of Law-Medicine

Volume 9 | Issue 2

1999

Speech: Stopping Science: Human Cloning -- Should it be Stopped?

Harold T. Shapiro

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/healthmatrix>

 Part of the [Health Law and Policy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Harold T. Shapiro, *Speech: Stopping Science: Human Cloning -- Should it be Stopped?*, 9 Health Matrix 303 (1999)

Available at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/healthmatrix/vol9/iss2/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Journals at Case Western Reserve University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Health Matrix: The Journal of Law-Medicine by an authorized administrator of Case Western Reserve University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

SPEECH

STOPPING SCIENCE: HUMAN CLONING – SHOULD IT BE STOPPED?

Harold T. Shapiro[†]

I MUST ADMIT THAT “stopping” phrases like “Stopping Science” seem to have a magnetic resonance to them. Indeed, they have a certain bracing quality that not only beckons us to purposeful action, but often contains either an obvious imperative of some sort, such as “stop the violence,” and/or an understandable wish, such as “stop AIDS” or “stop cancer.” Indeed, we are now stopping so many things that there is a new literary genre dealing with the End of Empire, the End of History, the End of God, the End of Affluence, the End of Nation State, and so on.

Somewhat less frequently, a different class of “stopping” phrases is developed that urges us to stop something, or slow something down that most people think, on balance, is a very good thing. Here we are presented with a much more subtle matter. Although the rallying cry is intended, once again, to promise us a better world if only we will act, this time the promised prize is available only if we have the wisdom to see the futility of our current beliefs and the dangerous dynamic of our present circumstances. This special category of “stopping” phrase, therefore, attempts to call our attention not only to a complex matter, but to some previously “hidden” impact and/or meaning of developments in a particular area. Thus, for example, however positive developments in science and/or technology may seem, someone is suggesting that a deeper look into their full impact would, at the very

[†] Professor Harold T. Shapiro has been the President of Princeton University since 1988. Prior to that, he spent eight years as the President of the University of Michigan. Among his many interests is an interest in science policy. He has been chairman of the National Bioethics Advisory Committee, a commission which issued a report on cloning human beings in June, 1998. He has a Ph.D. in economics from Princeton University.

least, generate some disquiet in our minds, particularly regarding the meaning of these new developments for our views regarding our own humanity and our “appropriate” role or place in our world.

In any case, these more subtle “rallying cries” not only call us to action, but call us to account for both our intellectual shortcomings and the lethargy that together prevent us poor souls from being agents of positive change. Such phrases, therefore, are simultaneously meant to mobilize us and to scold us for our previous blindness. It is in this category that phrases such as “Stopping Science” or “Stopping Progress” or “Stopping Religion” or “Stopping Technology” fall, and since they dare us to think anew about some central matters in our lives, our initial reactions are often “flight” (denial) or “fight” (denial again).

It is always challenging, and often bewildering, to look below the surface of things to uncover a “new truth” that suggests that one may need to replace previous beliefs with a new set of ideas. Fortunately, contemporary observers have lots of intellectual resources for attending to such situations, since a great deal of modern thought, from Darwin, Freud, Marx, and Einstein to the ideas that surround the more recent notion of the Social Construction of Reality, deals with the “uncovering” of truths that replace a set of former beliefs which have been revealed to have been badly mistaken or have been proven to be convenient myths. Thus, for example, our prevailing confidence in human competence, technology, and science may, in the fullness of time, turn out to be just another myth that needs to be modified or set aside!

I must confess, however, that of the many surprises I have encountered in an academic career spanning almost four decades, being asked to address a conference with the overall title of “Stopping Science” came as a bit of a surprise, although I expect that the organizers of the conference may be quite serious about the issue. In retrospect, it seems that I began my academic career at a less sophisticated (i.e. more naïve) moment in my life with the rather simple idea that I might, through teaching and scholarship, play a small role in advancing knowledge, thereby improving the human condition. Even then, I was aware that since ancient times some observers of the evolving human condition had associated technological and material progress with the dehumanization of mankind, but I thought of them (unjustly) as being on the fringes of society with little appreciation of the demonstrated capacity of science and technology not only to relieve human suffering, but to enhance the

expression of our own humanity. There were always those, I told myself, who had a self-interest in opposing change. Almost four decades later, despite my continued commitment to skepticism regarding all manner of current beliefs, I have a more nuanced view of these matters. My new perspective includes a great deal more respect of the need for all thoughtful citizens to consider not only the impact of science and technology on those cultural institutions, values, and other cultural commitments that sustain our individual and common life, but to contemplate both the proposition that the nature and speed of scientific and technological development are, in part, an optional matter, and that we are all faced with the challenge of finding a way to deal with the mystery that will always lie beyond science itself.

More specifically, however, why would anyone want to stop some branch of scientific investigation or interfere with the existing dynamic underlying the development of new technology? Even among those with great respect for the continuing contribution of science, there are, of course, ontological arguments having to do, for example, with deeply held views regarding the limits on appropriate human behavior and/or activity. In addition, there are purely secular concerns about the continued capacity of human institutions and nature itself to survive advancing science and technology and the associated desires to control and possess all. As Havelock Ellis commented in *The Dance of Life*,

The sun and the moon and the stars would have disappeared long ago . . . had they happened to be within the reach of predatory human hands.¹

Indeed, concerns regarding all these issues are found throughout the historical record of Western civilization and are widespread in the Western literary tradition.

For example, the notion that science and technology is Janus-faced – both friend and foe – is a very old one. The idea that advances in science and technology bring both vast good and catastrophic evil is a truly ancient one and is, for instance, deeply embedded in classical Greek culture, where science and technology are often characterized as having brought both promise and peril, hope and despair. Moreover, even in those early days, the focus of concern was on the implications of our new knowledge for the

¹ HAVELOCK ELLIS, *THE DANCE OF LIFE* 352 (Boston, Houghton Mifflin 1923).

meaning of being human and what new and perhaps dark human desires would be released by our new power. Since the earliest days, therefore, the issues have been: how do we understand the nature of what it means to be human within the context of our new knowledge about the natural world, and how will these developments influence the future of the human condition? This is a rather natural concern for those who think deeply about the nature of the human condition, as it is hard enough to know who we are, let alone what we shall become. Listen, however, to the voices of Ovid and Sophocles, who speak directly to the issue of mankind's evolving role and whether limits to our power are an essential aspect of our humanity.

What you want, my son, is dangerous, you ask for power beyond your strength and years: your lot is mortal. But what you ask is beyond the lot of mortals.²

Many things are formidable, and none more formidable than man And he wears away the highest of the gods, Earth, immortal and unwearying, as his ploughs go back and forth from year to year Skillful beyond hope is the contrivance of his art, he advances sometimes to evil and other times to good May he who does such things never sit by my hearth or share my thoughts.³

These verses, and the countless others that have become part of the Western literary tradition, reflect the fact that just below the surface of our consciousness there has always been not only a great deal of pent-up anxiety regarding the impact of science and new technology both on a wide variety of honored practices, important values, and other longstanding cultural commitments, and on the inherent limits on the ability of science and technology to address important aspects of the human condition (e.g., the Faust Legend). Moreover, these concerns have always focused on the fact that science and technology seem to have very little to say about how human beings should act, or how they are to construct a coherent and secure narrative of their place in the scheme of things.

² See generally OVID, *METAMORPHOSES*, BOOK II, 16-17 (A.D. Melville, trans., Oxford Univ. Press 1986).

³ See generally SOPHOCLES, *ANTIGONE*, 22-23 (Nicholas Rudall, trans. 1998).

Of course, alternative views about science and technology also have an ancient lineage. Aspects of the Judeo-Christian ethic, for example, particularly the notion of humankind's perpetual progress within the divine unfolding of history (e.g., the Exodus Story), have been responsible for, some would say, transforming a reverence for nature to a "mere" resource to support humankind's efforts to achieve their (and God's) program of upward progress. Consider the following verses from Genesis:

God said: Let us make humankind, in our image, according to our likeness! Let them have dominion over . . . all the Earth . . . Bear fruit and be many and fill the Earth and subdue it!⁴

The same verses, of course, not only have a variety of interpretations, but also provide support for the widely held Western notion of the moral superiority of human life over other forms of life.

Whatever else one may say about science, one must allow that it can be quite subversive, since its focus on revealing the previously unseen reality of things works against the stability of current beliefs and our trust in or even reverence for certain values that are required to sustain certain valuable human institutions. While it may seem fine to have the "real truth" out (it certainly seems better than sustained ignorance!), our social institutions often rely on trust – as opposed to skepticism and even, as noted above, a reverence for a particular set of beliefs.

In our own time, of course, we must both celebrate and contend with the fact that science and technology are advancing at an unprecedented rapid pace. To the extent, therefore, that science works to undermine our faith in existing arrangements for our individual and common life, it is a moment of considerable reflection on the meaning of these developments. In addition to the rapid overall pace of scientific and technological progress, the current scientific environment is characterized by truly extraordinary advances in the life sciences and information technologies, and both of these areas have already had a deep impact on our social, political, cultural, and economic environment. New information technologies, for instance, have not only changed the way we work together, but are impacting the scientific agenda in almost all areas. Developments in life sciences – especially genetics – are intimately related not only to the clinical practice of medicine and all

⁴ GENESIS 1:26-28 (American Standard).

aspects of agriculture, but to issues of how we understand birth and death, human identity, the limits (if any) of intellectual property, the social and economic role of free markets, health and safety issues, and the future of our environment.

The impact of these developments has been so startling and perplexing to some, that many observers believe that a considerable level of scientific and technological hostility, supported by a chasm between the dynamic of scientific and technological developments and our general social inertia, is becoming more widespread. Furthermore, at the current time, a growing distrust in both business enterprise, experts of all stripes, and government agencies to take responsible positions in these areas has added to the level of concern.

In such a context, it is always important to remember that anyone who has actually studied the material condition of human societies over time cannot help but be impressed by the contribution of science and technology, not only to a fuller understanding of the natural world and a fuller expression of our humanity, but to the reduction of individual human suffering. Nevertheless, as with the Ancients, we must continue to acknowledge that while there does not seem to be anything particularly convincing about calling new scientific developments or other threats to previous beliefs dehumanizing, these developments do bring in their wake a certain disquiet and perplexity to many.

My own view is that sustaining the intellectual authority of the scientific community requires their willingness to take appropriate action as new scientific understandings emerge. This is a social as well as a scientific process. Social decisions are not and cannot be left to scientists alone.

A striking mismatch continues to exist between the concerns of public policymakers and scientists. The concerns of scientists focus on issues of cost, risk, and benefit. The concerns of the public, however, focus on moral acceptability. Science, however, does not deal with issues like better or worse, or have much to say about freedom, virtue, childhood, identity, etc. – issues which have seemed to matter to us for a long time. We need to acknowledge that there is much about the conduct of life that is not addressed by science.

Does our survival as humans require a shift in our values and aspirations? Is it true that the only way we save our souls is to find some moral compass, or moral limits, to our desire to conquer and control all and to possess all? Perhaps only such limits can save us

from the moral ambiguity of our own cleverness. We need not only to distinguish between self-interest and community interest, sentimentality and careful thought, learning and imagination, but to understand the power and limitations of knowledge.

