

A Life in the Shadow: One Reason Why We Should Not Clone Humans

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Introduction

One of the arguments that is often put forward in the discussion of human cloning is that it is in itself wrong to create a copy of a human being.

This argument is usually dismissed by pointing out that a) we do not find anything wrong in the existence of monozygotic twins even though they are genetically identical, and b) the clone would not be an exact copy of the original even in those cases where it is an exact genetic copy, since it would have experienced a different environment that would have modified its biological and psychological development.

In my view both these counterarguments are valid, but nevertheless I think that there is some core of truth in the assertion that it is wrong deliberately to try to create a copy of an already existing human being. It is this idea that I will briefly try to explicate here.

The Life in the Shadow Argument

When we see a pair of monozygotic twins who are perfectly identically dressed some of us experience a slight sense of unease, especially in the cases where the twins are young children. This unease is exacerbated when people establish competitions where the winners are the most identical pair of twins. The reason for this uneasiness is, I believe, that the identical clothes could signal a reluctance on the part of the parents to let each twin develop his or her individual and separate personality or a reluctance to let each twin lead his or her own life. In the extreme case each twin is constantly compared with the other and any difference is counteracted.

In the case of cloning based on somatic cells we have what is effectively a set of monozygotic twins with a potentially very large age difference. The original may have lived all his or her life and may even have died before the clone is brought into existence. Therefore, there will not be any direct day-by-day comparison and identical clothing, but then a situation that is even worse for the clone is likely to develop. I shall call this situation "a life in the shadow" and I shall develop an argument against human cloning that may be labeled the "life in the shadow argument."

Let us try to imagine what will happen when a clone is born and its social parents have to begin rearing it. Usually when a child is born we ask hypothetical questions like "How will it develop?" or "What kind of person will it become?" and we often answer them with reference to various psychological

traits we think we can identify in the biological mother or father or in their families, for instance "I hope that he won't get the kind of temper you had when you were a child!"

In the case of the clone we are, however, likely to give much more specific answers to such questions. Answers that will then go on to affect the way the child is reared. There is no doubt that the common public understanding of the relationship between genetics and psychology contains substantial strands of genetic essentialism, i.e., the idea that the genes determine psychology and personality.¹ This public idea is reinforced every time the media report the finding of new genes for depression, schizophrenia, etc. Therefore, it is likely that the parents of the clone will already have formed in their minds a quite definite picture of how the clone will develop, a picture that is based on the actual development of the original. This picture will control the way they rear the child. They will try to prevent some developments, and try to promote others. Just imagine how a clone of Adolf Hitler or Pol Pot would be reared, or how a clone of Albert Einstein, Ludwig van Beethoven, or Michael Jordan would be brought up. The clone would in a very literal way live his or her life in the shadow of the life of the original. At every point in the clone's life there would be someone who had already lived that life, with whom the clone could be compared and against whom the clone's accomplishments could be measured.

That there would in fact be a strong tendency to make the inference from genotype to phenotype and to let the conclusion of such an inference affect rearing can perhaps be seen more clearly if we imagine the following hypothetical situation:

In the future new genetic research reveals that there are only a limited number of possible human genotypes, and that genotypes are therefore recycled every 300 years (i.e., somebody who died 300 years ago had exactly the same genotype as me). It is further discovered that there is some complicated, but not practically impossible, method whereby it is possible to discover the identity of the persons who 300, 600, 900, etc. years ago instantiated the genotype that a specific fetus now has.

I am absolutely certain that people would split into two sharply disagreeing camps if this became a possibility. One group, perhaps the majority, would try to identify the previous instantiations of their child's genotype. Another group would emphatically not seek this information because they would not want to know and would not want their children to grow up in the shadow of a number of previously led lives with the same genotype. The option to remain in ignorance is, however, not open to social parents of contemporary clones.

If the majority would seek the information in this scenario, firms offering the method of identification would have a very brisk business, and it could perhaps even become usual to expect of prospective parents that they make use of this new possibility. Why would this happen? The only reasonable explanation, apart from initial curiosity, is that people would believe that by identifying the previous instantiation of the genotype they would thereby gain valuable knowledge about their child. But knowledge is in general only valuable if it can be converted into new options for action, and the most likely form of action would be that information about the previous instantiations would be used in deciding how to rear the present child. This again points to the importance of the public perception of

genetic essentialism, since the environment must have changed considerably in the 300-year span between each instantiation of the genotype.

What Is Wrong about a Life in the Shadow?

What is wrong with living your life as a clone in the shadow of the life of the original? It diminishes the clone's possibility of living a life that is in a full sense of that word his or her life. The clone is forced to be involved in an attempt to perform a complicated partial re-enactment of the life of somebody else (the original). In our usual arguments for the importance of respect for autonomy or for the value of self-determination we often affirm that it is the final moral basis for these principles that they enable persons to live their lives the way they themselves want to live these lives. If we deny part of this opportunity to clones and force them to live their lives in the shadow of someone else we are violating some of our most fundamental moral principles and intuitions. Therefore, as long as genetic essentialism is a common cultural belief there are good reasons not to allow human cloning.

Final Qualifications

It is important to note that the 'life in the shadow argument' does not rely on the false premise that we can make an inference from genotype to (psychological or personality) phenotype, but only on the true premise that there is a strong public tendency to make such an inference. This means that the conclusions of the argument only follow as long as this empirical premise remains true. If ever the public relinquishes all belief in genetic essentialism the 'life in the shadow argument' would fail, but such a development seems highly unlikely.

In conclusion I should perhaps also mention that I am fully aware of two possible counterarguments to the argument presented above. The first points out that even if a life in the shadow of the original is perhaps problematic and not very good, it is the only life the clone can have, and that it is therefore in the clone's interest to have this life as long as it is not worse than having no life at all. The 'life in the shadow argument' therefore does not show that cloning should be prohibited. I am unconvinced by this counterargument, just as I am by all arguments involving comparisons between existence and nonexistence, but it is outside the scope of the present short paper to show decisively that the counterargument is wrong.

The second counterargument states that the conclusions of the 'life in the shadow argument' can be avoided if all clones are anonymously put up for adoption, so that no knowledge about the original is available to the social parents of the clone. I am happy to accept this counterargument, but I think that a system where I was not allowed to rear the clone of myself would practically annihilate any interest in human cloning. The attraction in cloning for many is exactly in the belief that I can recreate myself. The cases where human cloning solves real medical or reproductive problems are on the fringe of the area of cloning.

Note

1. Nelkin D, Lindee MS. *The DNA Mystique: The Gene as a Cultural Icon*. New York: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1995.