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Cloning & Politics

Going into these readings, I did not have much background knowledge on cloning. The video about the dogs that we watched in class was my most in-depth exposure. Before these readings, I believed that cloning was morally wrong and should not be permitted. I still believe this is the case, especially for cloning-to-produce-children, however the readings have helped me go beyond my unexplainable discomfort with the concept and equipped me with thorough analysis to back up my beliefs and hesitation. I am still unsure my exact feelings about cloning-for-biomedical research, but I am much more open to this kind of cloning, if it is strictly regulated.

The report produced by the President’s Council on Bioethics provided helpful context and analysis, connecting these issues to policy. Created in 2001 by President Bush, the Council pondered the potential benefits and repercussions of human cloning. The Council was comprised of members from a variety of backgrounds, not just professional bioethicists. I think this was a wise and important decision – bioethics do not just impact the experts, and all people grapple with moral issues. Thus, this issue should be vigorously discussed by people from a plethora of backgrounds and communities. The Council focused on two types of cloning – for the purpose of producing children and for biomedical research.

The Council unanimously agreed that cloning-to-produce-children should be outright banned and is unethical. Their concerns fell into five categories – problems of identity and individuality, concerns regarding manufacture, the prospect of a new eugenics, troubled family relations, and effects on society. The Council brought up an excellent point about mental health effects on cloned individuals. Mental health has become less taboo overtime, so I am glad this was a consequence they were weighing twenty years ago. This type of cloning would not only impact the mental health of the cloned child, but also the family of that child. I cannot imagine living with the knowledge that my genetics were not truly my own and I was merely a replication or recreation. Part of what makes life so special (and scary) is the impermanence of it. Cloning messes with this notion, stripping away our claim that there will only be one of us in the history of the world.

There was greater disagreement among the Council over cloning-for-biomedical research. Seven members wanted it to proceed under strict regulation, while ten members thought there should be a four-year moratorium. When it came to cloning-to-produce children, I had a lot of difficulty getting behind some of the reasons people might want to engage with these technologies. It seemed like such an extreme step for an infertile couple or mourning parent to take. However, the reasoning for cloning-for-biomedical research was not as clear-cut as appropriate or inappropriate for me. The primary reasons the Council finds for supporting this research are an obligation to alleviate human suffering and the belief that embryos should not be treated as equivalent to humans. On the other side, people believe it is morally wrong to destroy embryos, even if there is no malintent.

Personally, I do not believe that an embryo should be afforded the same respect and care as a “full” human. However, there is a difference between believing an embryo is not a real person and thinking embryos should be destroyed – this is a difference I still grapple with today. Should we exhaust every resource and explore every means necessary to alleviate human suffering? I believe we should try, but I do not know where the line is – once we cross it, going back is near impossible. For this reason, I would be more inclined to be in favor of the four-year moratorium. However, just as with the abortion argument, I do not foresee any remote semblance of a consensus within four years, since the issue of embryos is still present.

Breitowitz looks at human cloning through a Jewish lens. This was really exciting to me, as I have been engaged in Jewish life since I was young, but never have been steeped in these types of discussions. Breitowitz examines a tension between being made in G-d’s image and submitting to the world’s mysteries. He explains that Judaism does not believe that G-d is the only source of relief for pain and illness. Additionally, our knowledge and skills are treated as a gift from G-d and the Jewish people are commanded to “be fruitful and multiply.” If this commandment was written in an academic journal, would there be a footnote that says, “by any means” or perhaps one that says, “not by cloning?” While that may seem like a silly question, being gifted with knowledge and skill and commanded to multiply are very broad ideas – I am not sure if cloning would truly fit into them.

Breitowitz brings up another fascinating question – who has cloning rights? This is a question that has sat with me for some time now. The Council’s report gives an example of parents cloning a dying or dead child because they cannot bear with this immense loss. Do the parents have the right to clone their child? Does the child get a say before death? What if the child is a minor? An adult? A friend? How about a mere acquaintance? Who does this genetic material “belong” to? These are such difficult and complex questions and I do not have all of the answers. I believe the genetic material belongs to the original individual, but I doubt most individuals would consent to being cloned, or in sad cases like these, might be too young to even understand the idea of cloning to give consent.

Macklin’s piece discusses the emergence and elevation of the conservative bioethics movement, which diverges from the previously more mainstream liberal bioethics. She characterizes conservative bioethicists by their use of poetic and metaphoric language, appeals to emotion, sentiment, and intuition, mean-spirited rhetoric, and proliferation of projects. In this discussion, Macklin is clearly in opposition to the conservative bioethics movement. However, she only blatantly claims her identity as a liberal bioethicist at the end of the piece. I think this does a disservice to the readers, because I began the article thinking it would be an unbiased overview of the movement. I do not necessarily disagree with Macklin’s views, but I do wish she had been upfront about her position instead of leaving her claim to the very end and having the reader try to deduce it throughout.

This reading also sparked an interesting question I have been mulling over. Macklin advocates against excluding conservative writers from being included as bioethicists because it would play into the game of “true bioethics” (Macklin 42). I ask, what does it mean to be a “true” bioethicist? As I mentioned previously, bioethics impacts everyone, not just the academics who study it. Aren’t the people in our class all bioethicists? The people we pass on the streets? Who can be disqualified as a bioethicist? I believe we all are bioethicists, and that is a part of the beauty of these types of discussions.

Braun’s article discussed the link between public policy and ethics through the lens of Germany. I found it to be a pleasant surprise that techno-skeptics and optimists were not necessarily divided by political party or religion – this was incredibly refreshing in contrast to the identity-based, polarized American politics. I was also intrigued by the abortion law in Germany, which emphasizes support as opposed to punishment.

I am pursuing a career in public policy. While I plan to focus in social policy, I do think these readings gave me a helpful background in how ethics, religion, science, and more can all influence policy decisions.