

Ethics in the Genomic Era

According to the ancient Greeks, the medical skills of Asclepius were so great that he was even able to raise the dead. This so appalled Zeus, worried that Asclepius would upset the order of the world, that he put the "god of the medical arts" to death and turned him into the constellation Ophiuchus. What was Zeus so afraid of? Immortality is something biology ensures not to individuals, but rather to all of mankind. The laws of evolution envision that only individuals who are strong, capable of adapting and fighting for live should survive.

Yet ever since the times of Asclepius, the achievements of medicine have been offering weaker individuals a chance to outwit evolution and escape the laws of nature. Indeed, the very purpose of medicine is to protect individuals that are physically weak. But modern medicine and the natural sciences (especially biotechnology) have not stopped there: cloning and genetic engineering now make it possible to control this process of escaping the laws of nature and evolution, to steer the direction and pace of change.

The achievements of science and technology, of course, are a source of optimism. Yet the moral relativism such achievements entail is also a source of concern. In view of the potential benefits, cloning is quickly losing its status as a novelty, sensation, or something threatening. No one is now pondering what price we will have to pay for our current and planned achievements.

Ever since the discovery of the wheel and fire there has been no turning back, and laws of nature once discovered cannot be re-hidden. Science, or rather scientists, cannot be mentally confined or bound. The market for biotechnological achievements is similarly unlimited - with most people being potential clients. And so I have no doubt that if we do consent to cloning, we will not manage to prevent it from becoming commercialized, or prevent the emergence of a thriving "gray economy." Under such conditions, clinical and biotechnological ethics will lose out against the rules of the market - in fact I cannot imagine any sort of concept resisting the pressure of such money. This makes it all the more apt to ask whether human dignity stands any chance, in our current market-ruled reality, of competing against practical benefits. If utilitarianism were to be the dominant value in human endeavors, there would be an immediate collision between the values of "human dignity vs. utility" or even "human life vs. utility." In the utilitarian interpretation, the concepts of human dignity and good may signify something different to everyone, and this significance can moreover evolve

in response to changing, immediate needs. For example, parliamentary elections can affect politicians' attitudes towards moral issues. Advocates of abortion will assert that we can speak of a human being existing only after the moment of birth, for instance. But if someone does not consent to abortion but does accept therapeutic cloning, they will assert that we can speak of human existence after some arbitrarily stipulated point in a embryo's life. That brings back the old joke: "How much is two plus two?" The answer: "That depends on whether you are buying or selling."

A dictatorship of moral relativism is becoming an ever more realistic prospect, with profits becoming its sole driving force.

For the time being no one is yet so bold as to admit outright that utilitarian values are more important to them than moral values, and thus the brutal reality is being "whitewashed" with platitudes and manipulated definitions. This danger is all the greater in that there is a lack of any reflection or vision about the consequences of medicine being dominated by exclusively utilitarian arguments.

Nevertheless, life contains many difficult situations that demand clear-cut decisions. We have to decide what position we want to ascribe to the individual person among other people. Should this be a status of "neighborly" respect or that of an object, even an

instrument, allowing a weaker or defenseless person to be taken advantage of? How should human rights, dignity, and human nature be defined, to ensure that these definitions do not just serve the criteria of business, ambition, profit, or fame?

In view of the wide diversity of views on cloning, it is also important not to antagonize the sides in the debate and not to discredit the views of one's adversaries. Debate about cloning should not take on an anti-intellectual slant; rather it should embody the common intellectual goal of finding a compromise solution. We should draw our motto here from Seneca's *homo homini res sacra*, "man is sacred to man," stressing human dignity as one of the main criteria of morality. Any attitude or action with respect to another person which recognizes the priority of human dignity and aims to develop his or her human nature can be recognized as being morally good.



The moral relativism that stems from the achievements of contemporary natural sciences is a source of concern

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