

“The Ethics of Human Cloning” by Leon R. Kass & James Q. Wilson, Scientia Press, Rs. 125. (2002).

Cloning of humans has always been a controversial issue. The sinister images of runaway Nazi doctors, secretly producing Hitler’s clones in the jungles of Brazil come to mind. Brazil Boys may have been just a movie, but the specter of science producing your identical twin has always troubled not only scientists and philosophers but also religious people. Is human cloning ethical? Should it be left to individual choice (like in vitro fertilization) or should it be banned? This and a host of other ethical issues are explored by Leon Kass and James Wilson in this thought provoking book.

These questions might have remained in the realm of philosophy and ethics had it not been for Dolly. On February 23, 1997 news came from a Scottish laboratory that a lamb had been cloned from the nonreproductive tissue of an adult female sheep. This meant that the lamb was genetically identical to her progenitor (in this case the sole progenitor). Predictably, this news led to a lot of media hype and even hysteria among people and therefore among politicians. The issue was not really Dolly, but the possibility of human cloning. Imagine having a clone produced from some cells of your skin! All of a sudden, the prospect seemed real, at least for the lay public, though to be fair, scientists have always cautioned that it is still a long way to successful human cloning.

Leon Kass is Professor in the Committee on Social Thought and the College of the University of Chicago and has authored several books on biology and its social implications. James Wilson is a philosopher at the University of California, Los Angeles. The book consists of two essays each by these authors; a main essay and a rebuttal of the other’s position.

Kass’ essay, “The Wisdom of Repugnance” is a passionately argued piece on the need for us to stay away from messing with nature. His central point is that all of us are repelled by the prospect of cloning humans not because it is something unusual, but because we can intuitively feel that it is a violation of some of our cherished ideas. He sees that in this age where everything is permissible (so long as it is done freely), repugnance is our only hope to protect the central core of humanity. Repugnance is not an argument but rather an “emotional expression of deep wisdom, beyond reason’s power to fully articulate it”. Indeed, he feels that it might be our only hope against the onslaught of excesses of human willfulness. “Shallow are the souls that have forgotten how to shudder.” His thesis is that nature has given us a package where love, pleasure of sex and the desire for children all come together in the act of procreation. The “severing of procreation from sex, love and intimacy is inherently dehumanizing, no matter how good the product”.

Wilson, while agreeing that there are indeed philosophical and practical objections to cloning, feels that the enterprise poses no special risks to society as we know it. The philosophical objection that cloning is contrary to nature he interprets as meaning that the cloned child can be put to harmful uses. In this sense, it is a practical problem of regulation. Indeed, he feels that if the regulatory mechanism is in place cloning could be like existing methods of producing children. If society does all in its power to ensure that the child is only “born” to a married woman and is the joint responsibility of the married couple, then there wouldn’t be any problems. As he says, “Parents, whether they acquire

a child by normal birth, artificial insemination, or adoption, will, in the overwhelming majority of cases, become deeply attached to the infant and care for it without regard to its origin." Of course, he is aware that parental ties are not enough to prevent infanticide but there are other reasons for this, not how the child is produced.

In the rebuttals, both the authors try and find common grounds in their arguments while at the same time restating their individual positions. The issue is by no means settled. The positions outlined in the book are just two of the many being offered nowadays. Scientists, politicians, ethicists, philosophers and even media commentators have given us their views on this controversial issue. Undoubtedly, as science progresses and human cloning comes closer to becoming scientifically feasible, this debate will hot up. Already, the issue of the use of embryonic stem cells in research has become important with the pharmaceutical and scientific interests on one side and the religious interests on the other. This book is a good place to become familiar with some of the ethical questions which we shall face as we move along the path to playing God.