

### Molecular slavery

Can the soul be cloned?

Every science has its own special dialectic, one that an uninitiated person can scarcely fathom. This makes it difficult for me to say why a matter that is controversial enough to flutter the leaves of the media-forest should have surfaced just now as a topic of discussion. The topic is an exciting one: it concerns the allegedly imminent breeding of a Superhuman. Along with possessing a host of other undesirable qualities, it is not clear whether this noble personage will also be immortal. We now live in a world of rabbits, a world which is quite incapable of giving rise to great deeds. That world is now to be replaced by a world of superlative geniuses. The very thought makes me want to stop up my ears.

I am not sure what could have prompted even philosophers to be drawn into the discussion. Has the Supersheep fanned their flames of inspiration, or did the least recommendable parts of “Zarathustra” pull it off? To be sure, some people have the talent for making a lot of noise even *in absentia*. My wife used to have a vivid term for them: “noise-making bellboys”. There are many of these where I live, particularly because stridency is the first step towards becoming a celebrity. For instance, to be spoken of as a person of promise, one must first make a lot of promises. This applies with especial force to areas of biological research such as genetics and cell biology; and all the more so to the new trade of cloning.

Whoever chooses the cloning of human beings as a topic can be assured of a lot of attention. For all the talk concerning human cloning, though, nothing significant has happened so far. The reason has hardly anything to do with ethics; in any case, in the world of natural science ethics is now synonymous with finance. (As one of my old aphorisms had it: “Money is the life-breath of the devil”.) One might find it convenient to say that research into the cloning of human beings has been slowed down for ethical reasons, but the fact remains that public funding for the purpose is not yet at hand. Later on, should everything have gone smoothly in the interim, the biotechnology industry is bound to monopolize the entire field. One day a patented human being will follow the famous Harvard mouse. This possibility confronts us with an interesting dichotomy: on the one hand, a glorious fulfilment of platonic dreams and on the other, an enslavement through molecules.

At the risk of re-stating the obvious, may I point out that brilliance, however one defines it, is hardly likely to be part of one’s genetic endowment? A clone of Albert Einstein would more likely be a bad violinist than the discoverer of something as significant as the theory of relativity. Even if the latter, I doubt whether the outcome would be of much interest to anybody except psychiatrists and researchers interested in *idiots savants*. Who, therefore, is going to be the Original Daddy – to name him Father would be going too far – and provide us the material for the Superman clone? Might a suitable statistical agency situated in Hollywood help out? As I have said, the genetic engineers will not be ready for a long time to come. Still, philosophers are being asked to weave their web of words so as not to miss the great moment when it comes. To this end there is talk of a (modern) Codex of anthropological engineering.

Nobody knows what this Codex should represent because, in truth, nobody is sure of what he or she wants. In the past, in the Golden Age, a sense of dissatisfaction with what existed, the feeling that things could not go on as they had been going on, the feeling that something had to happen, was the forerunner of many great deeds. Here too, something may happen. All the same, the thought of letting a syndicate of philosophers and gene manipulators decide on the future of human beings seems absurd to me.

Anyone who takes this notion seriously is ignorant of the driving forces behind research in contemporary molecular biology. I assume that the philosophers of today are capable of thinking, even take great joy in thinking. But I doubt that this applies to most heads of scientific laboratories, though in some cases nostalgic memories may have survived. The reason for my saying so is that natural science has become a

branch of the free-market economy and produces so-called knowledge in an industrial manner. Given that, it is hardly on the cards that a committee of inquiring philosophers and molecular biology-bosses could come up with something desirable.

I fear that if the molecular magicians who splash about in the dark waters of conception and reproduction were to be questioned about their goal, they would assert that it is the welfare of mankind. I do not know whether philosophers too would answer just as insincerely. But a similar query was posed and honestly answered long ago, in the beginning of the era of molecular biology. The famous Ciba Symposium “Man and his Future” (1963) demonstrated to researchers just how busily they were occupied with filling up a large number of Pandora’s boxes. Here are ideas leading to two proposals that the bold dreamers of the future wished to see implemented (all names have been omitted):

“Do people have the right to have children at all? It would not be very difficult . . . for a government to put something into our food so that nobody could have children. Then possibly—and this is hypothetical—they could provide another chemical that would reverse the effect of the first, and only people licensed to bear children would be given this second chemical. This isn’t so wild that we need not discuss it. Is it the general feeling that people do have the right to have children? This is taken for granted because it is part of Christian ethics, but in terms of humanist ethics I do not see why people should have the right to have children. I think that if we can get across to people the idea that their children are not entirely their own business and that it is not a private matter, it would be an enormous step forward”.

“Clearly a gibbon is better preadapted than a man for life in a low gravitational field, such as that of a spaceship, an asteroid, or perhaps even the moon. A platyrhine with a prehensile tail is even more so. Gene grafting may make it possible to incorporate such features into the human stocks. The human legs and much of the pelvis are not wanted. Men who had lost their legs by accident or mutation would be specially qualified as astronauts. If a drug is discovered with an action like that of thalidomide, but on the leg rudiments only, not the arms, it may be useful to prepare the crew of the first spaceship. . . .”

And these were the cleverest and the best! They would give other answers today but their dreams would certainly not be more human. I am of the opinion that philosophy and modern science do not merge well, although in the ancient times the pre-Socratics could unite both. Of our natural sciences one can only say that they live on temporary finalities; indeed, it is doubtful if there is anything definite in them. (I do not consider Mathematics to be a natural science.) About philosophy I dare not say anything. At all events, my oxymoron will need to be defined in a manner which differs from that in the natural sciences.

I do not believe that the philosophically sanctioned breeding of paragons will contribute to calming the human soul. Can the soul itself be cloned? Molecular biologists would say no: “There is no such thing as the soul; we cannot grasp it; we cannot describe it; it does not have a defined chemical composition.” Thus the puzzle of consciousness remains. All the miracles of reductionism shatter on it. And by the way – although this doesn’t belong here – human destiny will never be cloned either.

### Reference

Ciba Foundation Volume 1963 *Man and his Future* (ed.) Gordon Wolstenholme (London: J and A Churchill Ltd.)

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