

RESOURCES**BOOKS**

Conversations in cloning

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The Genetic Revolution and Human Rights: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures 1998

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We live in a society where, despite the rich, inspiring, useful, and diverse array of current thinking in moral philosophy, we continue to lack a moral consensus on some of the most profound ethical claims that some believe ought to be more fully reflected in our public and private lives. In a society such as ours, therefore, we will be perpetually uncertain regarding which of the many competing ethical concerns ought to shape particular public policies. As a result, we cannot escape the anxiety that characterizes a situation in which the justifiability of many ethical claims remains uncertain, or at least unconvincing, to important segments of the community. Moreover, the rapid pace of development of new knowledge and, therefore, potential new opportunities, is certain to generate new issues and new anxieties in the ethical arena.

The 1998 Oxford Amnesty Lectures addressed some of these new anxieties, and a number of essays and commentaries based on these lectures have been brought together in this rather uneven, but stimulating, volume. The essays cover two broad topics, namely, to clone or not to clone human beings, and the appropriate use of genetic information and genetic engineering.

In addition, the volume concludes with a moving essay by Solomon R. Benatar that pleads for a shift of focus in bioethics from an excessive concern with individual rights to the responsibilities individuals have for each other. Benatar's essay also deals with the growing gulf between the "haves" and "have-nots," not only in income but in their ability to share in the benefits of biomedical advances. Roger Crisp's commentary, which follows the Benatar essay, endorses the view that the notion of rights should not be the sole foundation of moral and political theory. Similar sentiments are also reflected in Bartha M. Knoppers' essay, where she



reminds us to look at the larger policy issues of solidarity, equity, and mutuality.

The issues surrounding the appropriateness of cloning human beings (using the "Dolly" technique) deal necessarily with an extravagantly imagined future. Hilary Putnam, however, steps forward to suggest in his essay that such a technique of human procreation allows every narcissistic motive free rein (not a good thing), is inconsistent with those family structures that underlie our democratic aspirations, and undermines the intrinsic value of the unpredictability and diversity of our progeny. Essays and commentaries by Alan Colman (cloning human beings would be a 21st century circus act), Ian Wilmut, Ruth Deech, and R.L. Gardner also reflect rather negative views regarding Dolly-type cloning for creating human beings.

On the other hand, an interesting essay by John Harris concludes both that the best way to avoid totalitarianism is to permit free parental choice in matters of partners, gametes, embryos, and genetic engineering, and that we should resist forming our moral sentiments on the basis of our gut reactions to new phenomena. He finds no remotely plausible arguments that Dolly-type cloning of human beings threatens anything.

Finally, there is a series of essays on the appropriate response of individuals and governments to the prospective or actual inequality in an individual's genetic endowment. Justine Burley suggests that society at large should share the cost of bad genetic luck, since some of this bad luck is environ-

mental, for which we are all jointly responsible. On the other hand, in one of the most stimulating essays in this volume, Hillel Steiner takes the view that a child's genetic endowment is not deemed anyone's fault, and therefore there are few reasons we can offer to trigger redistribution on this account. Steiner does, of course, allow both that children do gain some benefits from their initial genetic endowment and from various postconception inputs, and that the genetic revolution has put events we have long considered natural into the domain of choice. The issue of these new choices also animates the contributions to this volume of Alan Ryan and Jonathan Glover. Glover worries about the prospect that genetic engineering will blur the boundaries between changing the characteristics of a person and replacing one person with another. Ryan, on the other hand, reminds us that whatever dark fears we have about eugenics, it had its origins in a broadly progressive and often left-wing movement to reduce misery and alleviate harm.

Irrespective of one's views on the ultimate impact of advances in biomedical science on the evolving human condition, there seems to be a clear need for all thoughtful citizens to consider the ongoing impact of these developments on those institutions, values, and other cultural commitments that sustain our individual and common life, since it is in these areas that science and technology gain moral relevance.

One of the great responsibilities facing us in the next century, therefore, is to consider the social and human repercussions of our rapidly accumulating new knowledge and the appropriate stance of public policies with respect to these matters. For scientists, ethical reflection must become an integral part of the scientific agenda. This obligation is especially acute, given our enhanced capacity to transform all manner of plant and animal life, including ourselves.

We should all look with some dismay on the general lack of serious conversations between scientists and other thoughtful citizens. Such exchanges can build new worlds of meaning and lasting connections of all kinds. They can lead all participants to a deeper understanding of themselves, the human narrative of which they are a part, and an enhanced capacity to help meet the challenges before us all. These essays, fortunately, are part of such conversations. //