

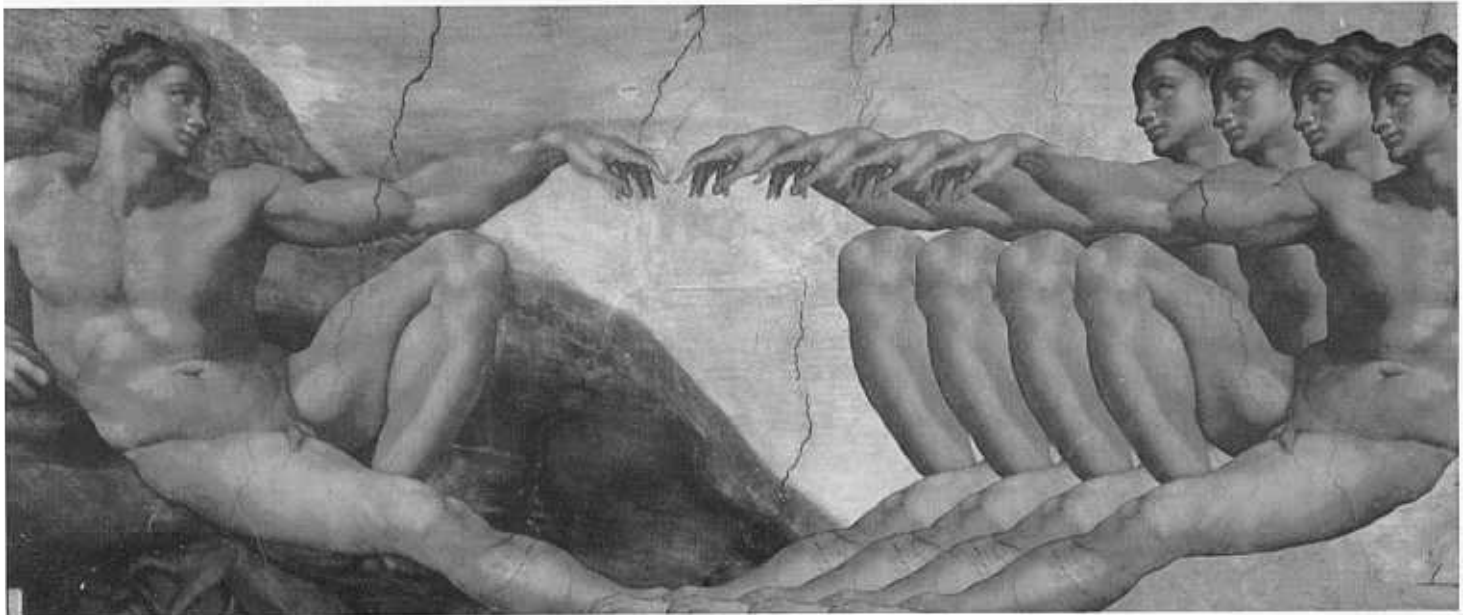
PAUL KURTZ: WHO IS A JEW?

THE INTERNATIONAL SECULAR HUMANIST MAGAZINE

# Free Inquiry

SUMMER 1997 • VOL.17, NO.3

## CLOWNING HUMANS



**Why it scares religions and intrigues humanists**

*Morality Requires God ... Or Does It?*

*Exposed: James Dobson's War on America*

*Can Science Prove That Prayer Works?*

**PLUS:** THE *REAL* LESSONS OF HALE-BOPP MADNESS  
MARTIN GARDNER ■ RICHARD DAWKINS ■ ALBERT ELLIS  
REINCARNATION ■ TALES OF ATHEISM ■ CHURCH & STATE  
HUMANISM & THE ARTS ■ AND MORE . . .



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# No Fear

## *How a humanist faces science's new creation*

**Richard T. Hull**

**M**y typical reaction to noteworthy scientific advances is amazement and joy: amazement at the complexity of scientific knowledge and its rate of expansion, joy at living in a time when there is so much promise offered by science for having a major impact on human destiny. As a humanist, I see the ability of my species to manage its own evolution to be one of its most wonderful emerging properties, an ability that distinguishes humans from every other species. So I am deeply suspicious of attempts to impose bans on specific efforts to extend to humans new technologies achieved in animal models.

The modern biological journey we are on, viewed unclouded by irrational fears and sweeping theological generalizations, is truly extraordinary. The recent cloning of a female sheep in Scotland stands as testimony to the power of the scientific method. Again and again, things we seem to know are overturned by the scientific testing of those knowl-

***As a humanist, I see the ability of my species to manage its own evolution to be one of its most wonderful emerging properties.***

edge claims. The cloning of Dolly from nucleus material taken from a cell of her progenitor's udder and inserted into an unfertilized egg (sans nucleus) was stunning. It refuted the widely held belief that the specialization of cells that goes on through the development and maintenance of an organism is an irreversible, linear process.

Such a belief underlies the distinction many held between a fertilized ovum and a body cell. People found it tempting to call the former an individual human being, the latter merely an individual human cell because of the supposed difference in potential. But now we know that most of our cells have the potential, if situated and manipulated appropriately,

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to generate an individual human being. We have yet to hear from the theologians on this point, but my guess is that the status of the fertilized ovum in such circles is going to have to be fundamentally rethought as a result of this advance. Once again, when science and faith have been put to the test, beliefs generated by faith have not survived. The production of Dolly is on a par with Galileo pointing his telescope at the moon and seeing mountains and craters.

Nor do I view kindly the efforts of the Clinton administration to block the extension of this technology to humans. I hope the intent was a temporary moratorium to permit the President's Commission on Bioethics time to assemble the testimony of a variety of experts and commentators to quiet the fears fanned by the media's sensationalism. But I fear that the result may be a chilling effect on our most advanced researchers in this field.

The similar knee-jerk reaction of the British government in ending the grant to Dr. Ian Wilmut under which Dolly was brought about was alarming. It is implausible to say that the aims of the grant have been completed when the experiment produced but a single sheep out of several hundred attempts. Such a success is but a first indicator of possibilities, not the perfection of a technology. Withdrawal of funding in the face of the initial reports of the media must give any scientist in this field serious doubts about continuing investigations, even on the remaining questions to be answered in animal models.

### UNDETERRED INQUIRY

Those remaining questions, of course, should be answered before proceeding to human applications. They include the question of whether the DNA of an adult animal's cells has "aged." We know that errors of transcription in the DNA of specialized body cells accumulate as those cells divide and are replaced during the animal's life. Such mutations come from environmental factors (radiation, exposure to chemicals) that produce genetic breakage and from errors caused

by imperfect replication. And there seems to be a theoretical limit in humans of about 50 cell divisions, after which division of a line of cells ceases and the cells simply age and die. The question these facts pose, then, is whether the DNA of Dolly's progenitor cell, taken from a six-year-old adult ewe's udder, carries with it such signs of aging. We simply don't know whether Dolly was born "six years old" or whether she faces the prospect of a life as lengthy as that of a sheep produced sexually. And we don't know whether Dolly will contract earlier the kinds of cancers and other age-related diseases that sheep produced sexually will.

Moreover, Dolly was the only ewe born of several hundred attempts at the same procedure. Why the procedure worked in roughly 0.3% of the cases and none of the others needs to be understood. The technology of cloning must be improved before it is commercially viable in animal husbandry, let alone appropriate to try in humans.

So while I think the technology should continue to be developed, it would not be appropriate to try it yet on a human. No serious scientist would attempt to do so without the above risks being substantially reduced and without the success rate substantially improved.

Should such matters be controlled by governmental panels? Governmental panels are poor substitutes for the good sense and open communications of scientists working towards the same goal. What possible expertise does a congressman or senator have that is relevant to the question of whether the technology is good enough to try on a human? Such "solons"—wise lawgivers—are not dedicated to the rational advance of scientific questions—at least, not as their prime mission. They are, for the most part, motivated to reflect the interests of the strongest contributors among the groups they represent. And the presidency is also subject to pressures of

media sensationalism, special interest groups, and polls.

## FALSE ALARMS

Contrast the humanistic view of cloning with some of the more irrational concerns raised about Dolly and the prospect of cloning humans.

**Handicapped infants will surely be the unavoidable result of early cloning attempts.** If the standard of producing no damaged, handicapped infant were the litmus test of a method of human reproduction, the species should have stopped sexual reproduction long ago since it is the chief source of such unfortunates!

**Cloning humans will contravene nature's wisdom in constantly mixing the human gene pool.** The claim here is that having children genetically identical with their parents and grandparents and great-grandparents will eventually weaken human diversity and deny future generations the benefits of what in the plant world is called "hybrid vigor." I have mentioned the two questions that are related to the genetic health and longevity of cloned individuals, and they must surely be answered before we proceed to introduce the technology into human reproduction. But just as the presence of carrots in the human diet doesn't mean we will necessarily all turn yellow from overindulgence in carotene-bearing foods, so the presence of cloning in medicine's arsenal doesn't mean that at some future date all humans will be clones of past generations. As an expensive medical therapy, cloning will have a small number of takers. And the worry associated with its development is no greater than the worries associated with the development of *in vitro* fertilization, or



artificial inseminations, and probably considerably less than those associated with surrogacy.

**Egomaniacal individuals will have themselves cloned to achieve a kind of immortality.** We already know enough about the interaction between heredity and environment to know that it's impossible to reproduce all the influences that go into the making of an individual. Big egos may seize upon cloning as a kind of narcissistic self-recreation just as individuals now seize upon sexual reproduction as a kind of narcissistic self-recreation. When people do have children for narcissistic reasons, they are usually disappointed that the children don't turn out as their parents did. Because of the essentially unreproducible nature of environmental influences, cloning won't be any more successful at producing copies of their progenitors than sexual reproduction is. Yet another disappointment for big egos!

**Cloning will be used to create embryos that can be frozen, then thawed and gestated as organ farms for their progenitors to harvest when facing major organ failure.** This interesting worry—interesting because it may have some basis—deserves serious reflection. Given the way the fact of cloning transforms the question of the special status of the fertilized ovum, we may be on the verge of rethinking the whole question of what abortion is. If even the most conservative positions must now reopen the question of when the individual human begins, we may come to see harvesting fetal organs to be more like taking specialized cells from a culture than like taking organs from a baby.

But the more interesting possibility is that the development of cloning technology will be accompanied by mastery of the genetic code by which genes are turned on or off to sequence specialization. It may be possible in the future to clone individual organs without having to employ the medium of the fetus. Such a process should be faster than a nine-month gestation, and the availability of artificial womb technology (or some equivalent suitable for organ cloning) would make possible enormously important advances in organ transplantation that would be free of the complications of immune system suppression necessary for transplanting genetically non-identical organs. So while there are potential moral problems and temptations along the way, we should not recoil from them. As is nearly always the case with scientific advances, the likely potential benefits vastly outweigh the possible risks.

Those with religious scruples concerning cloning and other future biomedical technologies need not employ them. Plenty of existing children need adoption; a more rational routine retrieval practice for transplantable organs would increase the supply; real wombs, whether owned or rented, will continue to provide an ample supply of human babies. Those of us who see the future of humankind in evolving greater and greater control over our destinies, who see human strivings and human achievements as the source of humanity's value, say this: cancel the executive orders, unchain our science, minimize its regulation, and let us rejoice in its fruits. **FI**