

SUJET

Why, in your opinion, could human cloning “be the biggest dilemma of the 21st century”?

Do you think it may be one of humanity’s best or worst inventions?

Ian Wilmut, a Scottish scientist, who announced in 1995 he had cloned a sheep called Dolly, began a revolution in the field of genetic engineering¹. Recently the debate on this “heady subject”² as a recent article in *The Guardian* described it, has been reignited³ by the claim, which proved bogus⁴, of a Korean researcher to have created the first cloned human embryo.

The general public finds it difficult to⁵ understand this technology but it certainly fears it because of the awesome⁶ potential fallout⁷. Was the arrival of Dolly portentous⁸ or propitious⁹? Is cloning one of humanity’s best or worst inventions? And do such questions make it the biggest dilemma of the 21st century?

For the scientists researching into stem cell technology, cloning is the only means to get an unlimited supply of stem cells¹⁰ enabling them to produce tissues identical to a patient’s for the replacement of damaged organs. Such so-called “therapeutic” cloning would be of great help to people suffering from, for example, neurological diseases. As an expert from the Newcastle NHS¹¹ Fertility Centre has recently been quoted in the press as saying, “the goal is not to clone humans, but to understand the causes of disease”. Seen from this perspective, opposition to cloning amounts to opposing scientific progress of unquestionable benefit.

For its opponents, embryo research is the first step on the road to a cloned human being – it should therefore be banned since it trivializes¹² life and so is unethical¹³.

Cloning is definitely a highly controversial issue: weighing the potential benefits for humankind against the profound repercussions¹⁴ it may have on human society is challenging enough. But since it raises broader questions about what life and death mean for us, it will certainly be one of the great dilemmas of the 21st century, since such questions are central to the mystery of the human condition in any era.

(317 words)

The artificial creation of life is not a recent idea. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and closer to us, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* are literary classics which people think of as soon as human cloning is mentioned. But as science advances, some think creating a human being artificially could well stop being fictional and become reality. Will this much heralded¹⁵ and feared possibility become “the biggest dilemma of the 21st century”? At first sight this use of the superlative seems far-fetched¹⁶. Why should cloning raise more ethical problems than say, aid to developing countries or the development of nuclear energy?

That said, what are the various points of view on this issue, which is complex because it involves both reproduction and therapy? On the one hand, reproductive cloning appeals to¹⁷ some scientists because of the challenge the technique involves: replicating a person from a single cell is bound to sound exciting even if the process implies many tries and little success – as in the case of animal cloning where the failure rate is very high. For the layman¹⁸ the prospect of producing a human being whom they think would look like them is tantalizing¹⁹ because they would feel they have achieved immortality²⁰ by living on through their clones. For people unable to procreate naturally, like infertile and homosexual couples, reproductive cloning would open up new possibilities to do so. Replacing dead relatives also ranks high among²¹ the arguments developed by the proponents²² of reproductive cloning. These reasons can be easily dismissed: couples unable to procreate can resort to²³ other assisted reproduction techniques or to adoption; furthermore, aren’t people supposed to be unique and therefore irreplaceable? The uniqueness of the individual is definitely at stake²⁴ here, inevitably raising ethical issues.

On the other hand, therapeutic cloning is a different matter altogether since its aim is to help with medical treatment of disease, particularly degenerative diseases. It has already caused an outcry²⁵ from pro-life advocates because it involves tampering with²⁶ human embryos in order to produce stem cells²⁷, but this technique, which focuses on the interests of the patient, is compatible with the basic aim of medicine and does not meet with much opposition from the general public.

Therefore human cloning (i.e. reproductive and non-reproductive) could be said to be one of the best and one of the worst inventions of this century, one which will provide hope for patients afflicted with