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Clones, Genes, and Immortality

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John Harris, *Clones, Genes and Immortality: Ethics and the Genetic Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

In a series of lectures later published under the title *The Principle of Reason*, the philosopher Martin Heidegger draws attention to the name that had been given to his era, a title conceived from the foremost technology possible at that time: "the atomic age." We are now defining ourselves based not on cultural or humanitarian achievements, but on the possibilities given to us by our latest technologies. "Humanity defines an epoch of its historical and spiritual existence by the rapacity for, and availability of, a natural energy." He notes the danger that "the more decisively humans try to harness the 'mega-energies' that would, once and for all, satisfy all human energy needs, the more impoverished becomes the human faculty for building and dwelling." The quest for energy inevitably leads us to view our world only in terms of its energy *potential*. And it is not long until human beings are understood in a similar way.

We are now living in the genetic age. Rather than an age governed by power plants and factories, it is one governed by the cold and sterile atmosphere of the laboratory. Genes now, not atoms, are the lens through which we see the world. Life, rather than energy, is that for which we now quest inexhaustibly. But what kind of life? And at what cost? Reading John Harris' *Clones, Genes and Immortality* is not unlike walking into a biotechnology laboratory: precision and accuracy are at a premium, and not a single detail is out of place or unaccounted for, and yet a cool and calculating sterility underlies the entire operation.

The book was written in the early 90s, when the Human Genome Project seemed to promise a disease-free world through genetic engineering once the complex code of the human genome had been unraveled. Despite its relatively early publication date, however, *Clones, Genes and Immortality* is not an outdated or unuseful read. Harris predicted some of the hot-points of biotechnology and bioethics over the past 15 years with remarkable accuracy. At their (controversial) infancy when Harris was writing, issues such as abortion, IVF, and embryonic cell research are now almost completely normative. Indeed, Harris begins his book with what is now a relatively rote discussion of the ethics of those procedures and technologies and comes to the unsurprising conclusion that none of these are very problematic in the end, provided we use new the technologies responsibly and without infringing anyone else's rights.

What he means by *responsibly* and *rights* Harris feels he hardly needs to say, since he defers to the Anglo positive law tradition of the past fifty years. This tradition is not unfamiliar to anyone following recent bioethical debates. It generally relies, if implicitly, on a concept of person based on will and the ability to assert oneself: "a creature capable of [consciously] valuing its own existence" (p. 87). Such a

definition allows Harris to regard a human being in the womb as a "pre-person," and someone who can no longer consciously value his existence due to an accident, disability, or age as an "ex-person," able to be manipulated, destroyed, or experimented upon for the sake of the betterment of humanity.

Again, these are familiar, if somewhat banal and shallow arguments. What is fascinating, however, about Harris' book is where it goes after the issues of abortion, embryonic cell research, and IVF are addressed. Harris then turns his attention to the question of disabled human beings, and therapeutic cloning. His contention is that mothers who know that their children will be born with a disability, for example, Tay-Sachs disease or Down's Syndrome, or even a missing finger, are *morally obligated* to "terminate" their pregnancies in order to prevent "needless suffering" and "wrongful life." In the case that parents decide to bring a child with a disability to term, they may be penalized by the state and even brought to court by their own children, on the grounds that non-existence is preferable to a disabled existence.

All of this is in service to Harris's rather blatant eugenicist concerns of breeding "wonderwomen" and "supermen" (in fact a shorter version of this book was published under that title in 1992). Not quite hidden behind a cool logic that proclaims as its only wish a world without suffering is a desire to build the human race into some sort of *uber*-humanity - to allow biogeneticists to take human nature into their hands and mold as they see fit. The corpses of those children which have been deemed unworthy - whether they be in embryonic or fetal form - should become the property of the state and be handed over to scientists to experiment on, for the sake of discovering cures and promoting health. We should be able to make clones at will in order to harvest their embryonic cells for use in our own bodies. Neither is the other side of the spectrum of life safe from this exploitation: all "ex-persons" and dead bodies should also be property of the state so that it may delegate the "donation" of viable organs to the living.

And herein lies the question Harris's book: who, exactly, are the living? On the surface it seems as if Harris would claim the highest moral value is life, but no single life *per se* is truly valued - if it were, one could see the infinite and inexhaustible value in every life, even one which Harris calls "disabled." It is the *potential* good of those who are living or those who might live that Harris values most. It is the good of a future super-race that Harris hopes humanity may one day be. His ethical outlook is built upon viewing our genetic code as containing the potential for something better. A potential that we are morally obligated to exploit to the limits of our technical proficiency.

Harris does not balk at his own logic. An argument that condones abortion, IVF, and even contraception, must allow someone to assert - in good faith, if you will-"that the decision to go ahead and have a child requires as much and as careful justification as the decision to terminate a pregnancy, and that it can also be wrong not to terminate a pregnancy" (pp. 90-91). It is a logic of will: an assertion of the power of the strong and superior over the weak and inferior. Eugenic tendencies are not incidental to, indeed they lie at the very root of, those technologies and procedures contemporarily understood as normative. The genetic age is upon us, and one cannot accept only some of the consequences without swallowing its logic wholesale: either humanity is ultimately another resource that can be exploited at the hands of those with the power, resources, and will to do so or it is not. But if it is not, then what must be recognized is a human life's inherent and intrinsic value from first to last.

