

# The genius of cloning

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By Michael Cook

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Stem cell scientists ought to follow their ethical arguments to a logical conclusion.

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No one can be an expert at everything. Would you trust Tiger Woods' cooking? Or Kofi Annan's hair styling? Or Stephen King's selection of kids' bedtime books? How about stem cell scientists: can we trust their ethics? I think not -- at least not their ethical theorising. Sure, they don't beat their wives, rob banks or drop lolly wrappers in parks. In that sense they are, touch wood, upright and respectable citizens. But when it comes to ethical theorising, of marshalling consistent arguments to explain why their work is right or

wrong, they are incompetent. In fact, harsh as it may sound, they are ignoramuses.

Take, 32-year-old Kevin Eggan, Harvard's stem cell Golden Boy. Scientifically, Dr Eggan is a real smart guy. In June he was named one of [Popular Science](#) magazine's "Brilliant Ten". Last month he won a [MacArthur genius grant](#), an annual award for exceptionally talented and creative people, which comes with US\$500,000, no strings attached -- about as much money as a Nobel Prize. A spokesman for Harvard describes his work as "intellectually daring, technically astonishing". His boss calls Eggan "one of those rare individuals who clearly and immediately sees the big picture, can seemingly instantly scope out a way forward, and then delivers on his ideas."

I'm sceptical. Dr Eggan may win his Nobel Prize some day, but his ethics only qualifies him for one of the [hilarious igNobel Prizes awarded yesterday](#) at his university. Here is a report of a debate on the ethics of stem cell research from the [Harvard Gazette](#):

Still, he said, we must answer the question of whether destroying human embryos is morally defensible. "I believe the moral obligation we have to treat diseases and relieve suffering outweighs our obligation to the embryo," Eggan said.

Later, during the Q&A period, he elaborated on this idea: "I would tend toward the view that the blastocyst does not manifest many of the properties that we associate with humanity."

Eggan disagreed with the argument that cloning human embryos for research purposes will lead down a slippery slope to reproductive cloning and "designer babies," because at no time in the process of working with embryonic stem cells are embryos implanted in a woman's uterus.

Stem cell scientists seldom write books on ethics and only from throwaway remarks in press accounts like this can one discern their ethical convictions. These are Eggan's: the embryo is not a person because it does not look like a person. Since it is merely a clump of cells, it has no rights. Therefore it is ethical to use these cells to advance the common good.

Eggan appears to assume that consciousness -- which an embryo obviously does not have -- makes us human. It is the same view that bioethicist Peter Singer uses to justify euthanasia, infanticide and the superiority of adult pigs over infant humans. If Eggan truly were one of those intellectually daring spirits who clearly and immediately see the big picture, surely he would embrace the consequences which cascade from his view of personhood. Political suicide, of course, but intellectually daring spirits are supposed to boldly go where no man has gone before.

So it is difficult to escape the conclusion that Professor Eggan, his genius grant for science notwithstanding, is an ethical ignoramus. Since we are all ignoramuses in something, there ought to be no shame in this. But his case is different. The public is looking to Eggan and his colleagues for enlightenment about the ethics and future development of therapeutic cloning. It is not to their credit that they oblige. An ignorant public pleads for truth and it gets Hallmark doggerel about cures for dread diseases and protecting the rights of researchers.

This is easily seen in Eggan's belief in the absolute wrongness of reproductive cloning. Why is this so wrong and therapeutic cloning so right? The one and only reason ever advanced by stem cell scientists is that it is unsafe. In the words of [Lord May](#), of the Royal Society, the UK national academy of science, "human cloning is a threat to the health of both the cloned child and the mother... Given that, attempts at human cloning seem reckless and grossly irresponsible and arguably exploitative of vulnerable people who desperately want children."

Ah yes, but what if it were safe? What then? Would it be right or wrong? Amazingly, scientists aren't sure. The [InterAcademy Panel](#), a global network of national science academies, has put down a two-way bet. It contends merely that a ban on reproductive cloning "should be reviewed periodically in the light of scientific and social developments."

Fortunately for the dithering scientists, there are bioethicists to do the heavy lifting and demonstrate that reproductive cloning is a terrific idea. Writing in the October issue of a respected international journal published at Oxford, the [Journal of Medical Ethics](#), D. Elsner, of the University of Melbourne, demolishes Eggan's ethical scruple. He argues that the right to reproductive freedom is paramount: "People wishing to reproduce by cloning should be able to do so, provided that there is no reasonable alternative."

But what about possible harm to a child? First, Elsner responds that existence is better than non-existence. Second, children created through IVF already face a substantially higher risk of bad health and birth defects. "Few people would seriously suggest that IVF, with all the benefits it has brought to infertile people, should be banned on the basis of these findings," says Elsner.

Warming to his theme, Elsner elaborates on how useful reproductive cloning could be. Although at first blush it sounds grotesquely egocentric to Xerox a child, the longing for a genetic connection is already one of the main reasons for IVF. Otherwise couples would adopt their children instead of making them in a Petri dish. Second, clones could be used for spare parts. Since many IVF clinics already create children for this purpose, it is difficult to argue that children should not be cloned for the same purpose.

His article is disturbing, but at least the candid Mr Elsner is bold enough force the arguments of stem cell scientists to their logical conclusion. It is no doubt the reason

why bioethicists seldom appear in television debates about the rights and wrongs of therapeutic cloning. They might actually describe the garden path down which Dr Eggan and his colleagues are leading us.

*Michael Cook is Editor of MercatorNet.*

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