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·BIOETHICAL CRITIQUE OF A FORETOLD BIRTH

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ABSTRACT

Very few pieces of news created such convulsion in the international media like the birth of the sheep Dolly, announced by the New York Times, in advance of an article put out by Scotch researcher Ian Wilmuth and his team in the British magazine Nature on 27 February, 1997. The public at large was the one really surprised, since it was something foreseeable, a "foretold birth", at least for those who read about or work in the scientific world. This article will analyze the novelty of that event.

Key words: cloning, responsibility, bioethics, diversity

A coincidence that ought to be analyzed at the start is that animal cloning was carried out by means of a sheep, symbol of human redemption in Christian imagining. Many a time Christ referred to the "sheep" in the Gospels. The announcement of a new era, therefore, was made through Dolly, which had been operationally produced since July of 1996 in the University of Edinburg Laboratories, in Scotland. This generated contradictory reactions that went from sheer glorification of science to utter repulsion. Suddenly, cloning became a polarized point ranging from deification to devilment.

1. The Myth of Immortality

Adam was seduced by Eve – her being cloned by the Creator as of the cells of a rib from the former – to eat from the tree of wisdom, the one dealing with good and evil. Suddenly Adam rediscovered himself in all

the frailty and precariousness of his being. And God expelled him from Paradise, before Adam was able to take a morsel from the second tree, the tree of life, the one that would endow him with immortality.

Since then, Adam and his descendants have pursued the myth of immortality. Trying to integrate themselves in the precariousness of human existence. Temptations come from time immemorial through René Descartes, who in 1630 was already after the dream of a form of infallible medicine, to the beginnings of the 21st Century, by means of extraordinary projects, such as Man's wish to reach Mars or any other regions in the planetary system, seeking for novelties and improvements.

French researcher Lucian Sfez, in his book The Perfect Health, Critique of a New Utopia, recorded the end of post-modernist rhetoric. That piece of good news was dimmed by the sprouting of a more fearful yet consistent form of ideology at the end of the century. Using three advanced scientific projects in the contemporary world, Human Genome, Biosphere II and Artificial Life, Sfez took up the question regarding the "virtual body". It was not the mere abstract anatomical reconstruction, which exists and yet it doesn't; it is richer, more informal, more perfect than our poor body hiding its miseries, not being a pure entity; it is a higher body-concept, cleaner, more complex than the body-flesh one, and he asks himself: What to think of that object? What is the **major** signal of utopia and of ideology at the same time?

Regarding **utopia**, since metaphors are present throughout his thinking in a rational imperious manner: "To create kidneys and hearts, which was God's attribute, is not enough, because techno-scientists need an internal body," a calculated one, "that tends to substitute morally our poor and imperfect reality for some almighty reasoning. And this reasoning cannot tend towards perfection but through the scientists' hands. He mentions **ideology**, since it would be unimaginable that all this reconstruction took place without the existence of a determinant, ceaseless force with a conceptual basis of powerful backing up: techno-science. Its critical, unilateral and razing radicalism are a positive warning about deep-set challenges facing the third millenium, offering or effecting the rehabilitation (or the need) of the role of ideologies or utopias for which most people feel little regard nowadays.

For Spez (Sfez), there is the real danger that technology may dominate the world, society, nature, without the scientists mediating in social conflicts. Taking the techno-scientific way as a means of support, it

destroys North American thinker Francis Fukuyama and his "end of history" theory. The possible genetic changes – animal, vegetable or human ones – will alter the course of history. And history, which is formed by a long series of stories, is substituted by small fragmented ones. **Genetic engineering is writing a new story for us.**

It has to do, therefore, with overcoming the drying up of myths and the irreversible aging of the world and its inhabitants, and with returning to the essentials, to the very substance of our lives. Against history's failure and life's frailty, only ideology can recreate the image of the eternal return and of the eternal permanence, as a way of protesting against the vulnerability of our human condition.

2. The morality of cloning

Philosopher Hans Jonas was one of the first thinkers to detect the expiration of the critical terms traditionally used by ethics to techno-scientific progress: "We go on with the discussion about technology from the point of view of an anthropological truth...." Today technology cannot be ethically subservient nor hysterically dominant.

In this discussion, two paths for analysis can be pointed at: A techno-scientific and a bioethical one. Since I am not a specialist in genetics, I prefer to reflect on this in an epistemological manner. It seems to me than in such a complex field, the question to be discussed is "the morality of cloning". Is it moral to clone human beings? If we attain exclusively to this paradigm, our immediate answer will be "No". If, on the other hand, this were a rational argumentation, we would be forced to interpret two identities for the same being: A genetic one (biological) and a personal one (anthropological).

A clone can perfectly be identical from the biological point of view, but it will always be different from the personal point of view. When cloning biological characteristics, the biology of an individual not its personality is what is being cloned. In spite of the very few proofs of similarity of personality recorded in identical twins, the same generic-genetic identity is accompanied by a different specific identity. ("I am me and my circumstances," said Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset). To mistake personal identity with biological identity is logical abuse, it is pure biological reductionism that mixes up identity with specificity.

This discussion does not pretend to defend the morality that involves the cloning of human beings; on the contrary, it criticizes the intolerance of the answers and arguments, in addition to the philosophical poverty of the discussions that are in general taking place in Brazil – or in the world – on this specific topic. In this sense I have maintained, for a long time, that topics such as the limits of science in manipulation require, in addition to a deep sense of tolerance, great prudence and sense of responsibility. In an article printed in the French magazine Liberation, French philosopher Jean Baudrillard considered "cloning a perfect crime, (...) The conflict between the original and its copy is not about to end, nor the contention between the real and the virtual."

3. A better understanding of human cloning

Research institutes have been working for several years on the cloning of vegetal species, without generating meaningful commotion within society. Dolly's birth, as well as the intention of Severino Antorini, the Italian physician, of going into human cloning around November, 2001 – a deadline that has already expired – caused reactions that go from the fascination of some people to the perplexity or the fear of the vast majority. North American scientist Richard Seed had already made the same threat of Antonini's four years earlier, but he was not able to turn into something concrete his pretended undertaking. The topic of cloning, therefore, has become an obligatory one at a scientific and mass media level in the last years. In addition to a noticeable desire of some scientists to take advantage of this for personal promotion, there is also a mass media avid of lurid stories to promote higher sales. All this generates normal worries all over the world as well as some distorted facts that need to be better understood.

One first questions to be dealt with is the one stating the difference between what is called " reproductive cloning" and "therapeutic cloning". Reproductive cloning refers to the direct duplication of representative members of the same species, be these vegetables, animals or humans. The latter one, at the same time, means the possibility posed by science of constructing, for example, a new liver immunologically compatible for a patient who needs a transplant as of a "stem cell" differentiated from the patient himself or coming from the placenta, from the umbilical cord or from the very same embryos. In the same manner, we can talk about the hope to reach control of illnesses such as Parkinson's or Alzheimer's, or diabetes, which lay to a great extent in the possibilities for the future development of the so called "therapeutic cloning".

For a better comprehension and understanding of all this, it is essential to first establish a separation between what vegetal cloning (which, because it has been correctly conducted, has lead to fewer questionings), animal cloning and human cloning really mean at a moral level. Animal cloning, keeping the required ethical parameters, allows for research to continue without any direct danger for the species or for biodiversity itself. Dolly was the successful outcome of 277 prior aberrant attempts, in spite of a great number of doubts that arouse and persisted related to diverse technical matters; as an example, Dolly's age is still being discussed as it seems that it was added to the donor sheep's original mammary cells. The mastering of this technique or its variations adapted for the human species in a therapeutic sense, as it has already been mentioned, could bring forth extraordinary benefits for diverse health problems, thus contributing to the improvement in the quality of our life.

The so-called "human reproductive cloning", at the same time, cannot find any ethical or moral support for its development. In addition to the fact that I personally cannot find any scientist or company capable of mastering with total safety all the variables dealing with its complete execution, there is also the question regarding **human diversity**, one of the most valuable natural patrimonies. The vulgar duplicity of some eccentric millionaires who wish to perpetuate themselves; or of the super athletes that cloud the shine of olympic competitions; or –presently- the human female or male specimens endowed with unusual beauty for aesthetic or sexual purposes, cannot or must not be accepted.

4. The future responsibility

At present times our human sapiens is transforming into homo faber. Facing the power and velocity of the technological and scientific progress which overcome us every day, it is essential to substitute the ethics of contemporaneity or of immediacy for a new ethics of prospectiveness or of future responsibility.

In search for the correct form of ethics for the technological age, Hans Jonas made, among several, the following proposals: 1) Any action must be transformed into a universal law; 2) Any similar species must be treated as an end in itself, not as a means; 3) The effects of the action must be compatible with the permanence of genuine human life; 4) No condition of undefined perpetuation of humankind on earth must be put

at risk. To summarize: " At the very same instant that it is our own nature what is being put to trial, prudence becomes, by itself, our first ethical duty."

In other words, what we must avoid at any cost is determined by what we must preserve at any cost. An essential aspect dealing with the morality of human cloning refers to the vulnerability that will be originated, sparked by the fact that all individuals will become biologically similar, since one of the major qualities enriching humankind is precisely our genetic variety, our diversity. A philosophy of nature must articulate what "is" scientifically valid as it "should be" regarding moral judgement. Among bioethics' greatest practical problems, there is the difficulty of working within the relation certainty-doubt.

Albeit some radical critics consider a vast number of science's advancements "dangerous", it is impossible to imagine the present societal (or biological) structure as something eternal or immutable. Science's commitment is to prepare the future, foreseeing what it may generate by means of discoveries that will be beneficial for humankind. The mutability of society and of the world is a certainty; the doubt resides in the concrete limit set for the advancements of science to be verified.

Once again, it seems to be obvious, the path lies in equilibrium, in looking for morally acceptable and practically useful solutions. So, it is indispensable that novelties be analyzed one by one, in each social context, in a responsible manner and with common sense, with due respect to certain societal values and the moral pluralism that, whether we like it or not, are a trademark in our times.

In this sense, some of the values that humankind and science have been setting forward lately ought to be transformed. It would be preferable that **ethical responsibility** be indelibly tattooed in an equation determining scientific freedom; and that the unbridled technocracy and merchandising, that subsume societies to their insensitive laws, be exclusively transformed into a healthy technology for humankind's benefit. In other words, to try to incentivize the development of science within the human boundaries while, at the same time, to refrain it when it advances to or trespasses the inhuman or iatrogenic borders.

It means, also, not only to do everything that **can be done**, but also to do those things that **ought to be done**. Today several countries have the technology to build the atomic bomb but not because of this, after

the painful experience with it in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, do they envision the possibility of its being used, plus the fact that the discovery of atomic energy and its peaceful usage may bring forth uncountable benefits. Summarizing, I defend the argument about the freedom for research in the scientific field, but exerting control over its practical applications, its technology.

It is important to understand that cloning is a technique. Being a technique, it has indications and contra indications. Likewise, it is necessary to end the myth and the fear the word generates.

Along this line of argumentation, therefore, the fact that scientists work with certainty on some vegetal, animal or on the human being himself (therapeutic cloning) by means of cloning or other techniques in search of future benefits for humankind is not morally condemnable. What matters, in the long run, is not the use of cloning techniques in themselves, but their control. And such control must come from a field different from the scientific and technologic one: an ethical control

Likewise it is essential to direct our pursuits, once more, with prudence and tolerance, within the tight limits of what is necessary and possible. The sophisticated techno-scientific intervention is both a natural and a cultural means, involving voluntary and passionate acts, and it is more human in as much as it is more ethical and thus, at this very point a "dialogue" can be carried out. All this permeated by the Law, constructed upon pluralistic and democratic foundations.

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