

Flying saucers, Hitler's clone and Baby Eve

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I'm betting it's a hoax. The mother of all hoaxes, one might say. First, a word about the Raelians. Founded in 1973 by Claude Vorilhon (Rael), cult members worship little green men from outer space. Raelians expect these aliens to visit planet Earth soon, in flying saucers, to deliver salvation to their clonal offspring (us). In the meantime, Raelians are touting themselves as the engineers of the world's first clonal baby.

It's truly remarkable that the scientific claims of this Quebec-based group of "alien-worshipping loonies" have been taken seriously by much of the world's mass media. The Raelian spin-off company, Clonaid, headed by Brigitte Bosselier, has no known expertise in human reproduction.

Keep in mind that it took scientists at the Roslyn Institute 277 attempts to produce one Dolly the sheep. Indeed, 99 per cent of the sheep, goats, cows and mice cloned to date have spontaneously aborted or been stillborn. Of the one per cent resulting in live births, almost all have had serious genetic defects. Dolly herself suffers from symptoms of premature ageing, such as severe arthritis.

In short, the chances of a healthy human clone -- "Baby Eve" -- having been born on Boxing Day, as claimed by "bishop" Bosselier, seem very low.

Low, but not zero. After all, expertise can be purchased, and there's no shortage of how-to-make-a-clone technical information freely available in scientific journals. Since it can be done with sheep and mice, it can probably also be done with humans. Genuine reproductive scientists, such as Drs. Panos Zavos and Severino Antinori, are publicly claiming that they will supervise the delivery of cloned human babies later this very month. Since Antinori's track record already includes giving the world its first baby born to a post-menopausal woman, his claims have at least some plausibility.

Should we be panicked by these developments?

When the cloning of "Dolly" was first announced in February of 1997, one prominent McGill ethicist described the event as "a biological Hiroshima" because it could lead to the cloning of human beings. Commentators prophesied that we would soon see clones of Saddam Hussein. Some conjured up the ultimate nightmare scenario: a clone of Hitler. (More hopeful pundits dreamed of cloning Michael Jordan and Mother Teresa.)

Critics also fretted that clonal people would lack a soul and have no unique identity. Clones would be bred to provide us with a supply of body parts, others warned.

Inevitably, these alarming predictions have shaped Canadian public opinion. It's no surprise, therefore, that opinion polls show strong public support for a total ban on the cloning of humans. (By contrast, Canadians strongly support the cloning of embryonic stem cells for purposes of medical therapy.)

Fortunately, all of these dire predictions are based on misunderstandings of just what a clone is. A clone is a genetically identical twin. Three pairs of identical twins are born in Canada every day. If cloning technology were safe and effective, and if it were available in Canada, then some infertile couples would use it, and there would be a small increase in the number of identical twins. Not in itself a terribly worrying prospect.

Of course, cloned twins would not be the same age. The Raelians' Baby Eve, if she exists, and if she is the clone of her mother, would be 31 years younger than her identical twin. Eve's genetic parents, her biological mother and father, would be the same as her twin's genetic parents. A bit confusing at first, but morally objectionable?

As for that clone of Hitler, well, he would be Adolph's identical twin, but if he were born now he would be raised by different parents and in a very different society. There is absolutely no reason to think that Hitler's clone would pose a danger to anyone. Even identical twins who are born together and raised by the same parents in the same household often differ from each other in significant ways. The clone of Hitler might be interested in flower-arranging and chess rather than genocide and world conquest, and the clone of Michael Jordan might prefer baking to basketball.

Our genes determine our height and appearance, so identical twins are usually difficult to tell apart. But our personality, interests and talents are another matter. They depend partly on our genes, to be sure, but partly also on our environment. Only those who accept a crude genetic determinism would believe that genetically identical twins must become identical people. Look around and you'll see that this just isn't true. Twin studies provide additional confirmation that when it comes to characteristics such as intelligence and personality, the correlation between twins is less than 60 per cent.

Many people who feel human cloning to be morally repugnant appear to have an image of cloning technology that makes it like a Xerox machine. You take a person -- Hitler, let's say -- run him through the cloning machine and, presto, a carbon-copy of Hitler is produced, physically and psychologically identical to the original. Instead, what you would really get is a newborn baby who would share Hitler's genes, but nothing else.

As for the argument that human clones would be killed for their organs, this, too, rests upon a misunderstanding. When a child is born, however it was conceived, it is a person like any other. Quite simply, to kill it for its organs, or for any other reason, would be murder.

When baby Louise Brown was born on July, 25, 1978, she was the world's first "test-tube baby." Her birth was a media sensation, and was also the occasion for dire predictions of moral calamity. This "manufacture of babies" would be the end of natural childbirth, the end of sex, the end of bonding between parents and children.

Well, baby Louise is 24 now, a normal healthy young woman. During the intervening years a few hundred thousand infertile couples have become parents using the

same IVF technology. The likelihood of birth impairments is no higher for IVF babies than for those born by conventional means. Few people today would advocate that it be banned.

Those who have no principled moral objections to clonal babies must, nevertheless, admit that reproductive cloning (unlike IVF) poses high risks of harm to the baby, not to mention serious health risks to the mother. Clones tend to grow abnormally large, often threatening to tear the womb. Until the technology greatly improves, no ethically conscientious physician would agree to employ it. Nor would any loving woman knowingly expose her potential baby to the likelihood of serious harm.

But if animal research ever progresses to the point where cloning becomes as safe as conventional birth and IVF, human cloning could then be permitted as simply one more reproductive technology available to infertile couples for whom other technologies may not be working.

Although there may be nothing inherently immoral about cloning, it will remain morally objectionable so long as it poses unacceptable risks to baby and mother. Thus, cloning technology requires careful government regulation. It should be permitted only when scientific research shows it to be as safe as conventional and IVF births.

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