

EVE'S SONS. THE DEBATE ON HUMAN CLONING IN THE ITALIAN PRESS AFTER RAELIANS' ANNOUNCEMENT

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Abstract

The possibility of cloning a human being still arouses great attention in the public sphere, especially when the media cover stories about this. Subsequently to Dolly's birth and after the cloning of other mammals, the public debate results to be particularly sensitive to the theme of reproduction through the technique of cloning.

Therefore is not surprising that the announcement of the birth of Eve, the first baby-girl cloned by self-styled scientists in collaboration with the Raelians' sect, made between the 28th December of 2002 and the 13th January of 2003, caused a sensation. The paper focuses not on the causes of such sensation, but on the attempt to use controversies about Eve's birth to let emerge the connections which tightly bind, in our cultural system, the reproduction processes with the processes of construction of identity. Through the analysis of the 112 articles published on the main Italian newspapers in the period between the 28th December of 2002 and the 13th January of 2003, the main actors involved will be highlighted, together with the themes object of discussion, in order to give a clear overview of the framework where the theme of cloning joins together with the theme of assisted fertilisation, with the theme of human reproduction and, at large, with the theme of identity.

Keywords: Cloning, Identity, Reproduction, Media

1. Introduction

The aim of the paper is to analyse the episode of the baby allegedly cloned in the Clonaid laboratories and born on the day after Christmas 2002.

I use it to highlight the close connections in our culture between reproduction processes and human identity.

The paper is organized in two parts: first I would like to analyze the distinctions organizing the debate and framing different ideas of identity; the second part is focused on the relationship among identity, reproduction and science.

For this purpose, I analysed a corpus of 112 articles published in three leading Italian newspapers (Il Corriere della Sera – CDS; La Repubblica – REP; La Stampa – ST) in the period between 28 December 2002 and 13 January 2003, given that the majority of the articles are concentrated in the first three days of the Eva affair and that the attention of the media abated relatively rapidly.

2. Distinctions

We can reduce the complexity of the issues and the positions taken up by the actors concerned with the debate describing it as organized around a series of distinctions, some already known, others of more recent origin.

The main emerging distinctions are:

- a) reproductive cloning versus therapeutic cloning
- b) biographical identity versus genetic identity
- c) embryo as person versus embryo as not yet person
- d) science versus non-science
- e) animal cloning versus human cloning.

Other distinctions tend to be less clear-cut and are sometimes explicitly contested. This is the case, for example, of the distinction between science and science fiction, in that cloning would be fulfilment of a hypothesis already put forward by science fiction; or the distinction between natural and artificial, a blurring of boundaries which in this case also undermines the distinction between human and non-human.

The same applies to another foundational distinction for science, the one that distinguishes it from religion: "our religion is science" - said the Italian Raelian bishop Franceschini (ST 29.12, 6).

Analysing more closely how the five distinctions above are constructed, we can also see the conceptions of identity produced within the framework of their progressive articulation.

First to be noted is that, not by chance, scientists have been the main proponents of the distinctions in question. In various ways, and in various capacities, scientists have insisted that therapeutic cloning should not be confused with reproductive cloning.

Their argumentative strategy develops through a constant appeal to other distinctions. Therapeutic cloning, they claim, is a 'good' practice in that it is directed towards a beneficial end (the treatment of incurable diseases), whilst reproductive cloning is an aberrant practice because it is pursued for commercial ends by 'pseudo-scientists', as the Raelians are termed. In this way scientists reiterate the distinction between science and non-science: the former is conducted by scientists and is good; the latter is conducted by unreliable people like the Raelians and is therefore irremediably bad.

The ethical legitimacy of therapeutic cloning is also sustained by assuming clear distinctions between biographical identity and genetic identity, and between embryo and person.

With regard to the former, scientists have repeatedly stressed that a clone has the same genetic identity as the organism from whose DNA it has been produced, but not the same biographical identity. The latter distinction implicitly contains the idea that it is only possible to speak of a person when the genetic heritage has fully realized its potential – emphasising some aspects and muting others – according to its on-going interactions with the environment: that is, with the set of circumstances and experiences that give full-fledged form to the individual identity.

The scientists' position is also sustained by 'lay' experts in bioethics ('lay' in the entirely Italian sense of 'non-Catholic').

Ranged against the scientists and their distinctions are various representatives of Catholicism, whether high-ranking clerics or experts who embrace Catholic doctrine.

These reject outright the distinction between therapeutic and reproductive cloning on the ground that there is no difference between embryo and person and therefore, implicitly, between the project of person (i.e. genetic identity) and person (i.e. biographical identity).

Equally explicit is their rejection of the distinction between animal and human cloning, this being based on the 'slippery slope' argument: animal cloning would open a road which, technically, would make human cloning possible; and once this was possible, it would sooner or later be accomplished.

This line of argument has also been used by some 'lay' commentators.

To be noted finally is that Catholic commentators tend to endorse the distinction between science and non-science, but they shift the dividing line between them: 'true' scientists would never act in a manner contrary to universal ethical principles, like the sacredness of the embryo, and therefore could never be in favour of the distinction between therapeutic and reproductive cloning.

There are also those who overcome the distinction in one bound by following a different route. This is the case of Severino Antinori, the controversial gynaecologist who some time before the Eve affair – in the early months of 2001 – announced that he was working with Pavos Zavos on human cloning for reproductive purposes. Antinori, in fact, defends the legitimacy of human cloning by configuring it as a therapeutic method to cure sterility.

Against this background, what conceptions of identity are ranged against each other in the debate on cloning, and how do they relate to the conception of reproduction?

3. Identity, reproduction and science

The conceptions of identity that emerge from the articles published following the announcement of Eve's birth rotate around two definitional poles: that of **difference**, on the one hand, and that of **permanence/continuity**, on the other.

Difference is viewed as the guarantee of uniqueness, particularly in regard to everything that can be recognized as similar but not equal. The identity of the human species is accordingly defined as that which we share with those who are similar to us, despite the differences that distinguish us at the individual level.

At the same time, the other essential requisite of identity is continuity: that which remains the same over time despite or aside from possible changes. Individual identity, in fact, is based on the competence to recognize ourselves as the same over time despite the changes that occur in us.

It is interesting to note that the concept of 'genetic heritage' – at least in its version shared by the public at large – is closely compatible with the requisites of difference and continuity that underpin the notion of identity. The DNA of each of us is similar to that of all human beings, but it is sufficiently different for us to be able to identify ourselves as unique: the genome persists over time, to the point that it is transmitted from generation to generation, and - although it undergoes changes (mutations) - its substantial continuity is never affected.

This is nothing new, it might be said. And it is no coincidence that all the actors in the debate have implicitly defined identity as a mix of difference and permanence.

However, a first novel feature emerges if we consider where this permanence is located – if, that is, we seek to identify the seat of the identity.

In fact, not only does DNA seem to have taken the place of the soul, but the mind and the brain seem to have replaced what in the past was represented by the heart.

Once again, the Raelians forcefully express out loud what otherwise tends to remain implicit in our discourse: on the one hand: “an American couple lost a ten-month-old baby boy ... his genes were crying out, like a ghost might, to be reproduced” (Boisselier, REP. 29.12, 6), on the other: “the cloned organisms (...) would obviously only be empty bodies, but by means of an information loading process [implicitly = information are contained in our brain], people could transfer their personalities into them (Rael, REP. 29.12, 6)

But yet there is an element of continuity between the past and present of the identity, or better the core of permanence that guarantees it: the body. Perhaps the body is no longer “the temple of the soul” but it certainly appears to be the seat of the identity.

It is through the mediation of the body that the DNA = identity equation becomes plausible.

Once again the ineffable Boisselier overtly expresses this notion, which seems to be widely shared: “I don’t believe in the soul, but in the body yes” (Boisselier, CDS 29.12, 13).

Thus also evident is the nexus established between cloning, reproduction and identity. Reproduction, in fact, is principally (re)production of a body, and if this body, as an expression of DNA, is the same as someone else’s, then the persons who inhabit the two bodies will be identical: that is, they will have the same identity.

Moreover, cloning was depicted in numerous articles as a threat against ‘society’ and/or against ‘humanity’, without no justification being adduced in support of the opinion expressed.

Also scientists fuelled this process of *a priori* condemnation, even if their opposition was sometimes justified on the basis of risks to babies’ health, given the current imperfect state of the nuclear transfer technique, and the possible harmful consequences for ‘freedom of research’ – in this case research based on therapeutic cloning.

This repeated reference to cloning as an unspecified threat to man, as both an individual and a species, seems to be rooted in the conviction that the ‘natural’ method of reproduction is a cornerstone of human identity. And this relates to the idea that the genetic remixing – randomness – connected with the ‘natural’ reproductive act’ guarantees the mix of difference and continuity that underpins our conception of identity.

Albeit indirectly, also the position taken up by the Church seemed to support this interpretation of the cloning-reproduction-identity nexus.

A similar opinion was expressed by Hans Jonas, who insisted on the “transcendent right of each individual to a genotype which is his or hers alone, not shared with others, unrepeatable” (REP 31.12, 1), and by Jurgen Habermas, who argued that cloning devalued the self because “someone who discovers that he has been programmed knows that he is no longer the ‘undivided’ author of his life story” (REP 31.12, 14).

For that matter, also doctors and scientists seemed to take up the same position:

However, the requisite of difference was declined in ways that varied from one actor in the debate to another.

Thus, again by way of example, the Catholic Church seemed to define identity as a difference which, although “complete from the beginning”, is progressively expressed through the individual life-history, while for the scientists it is a difference which, because it is not initially endowed with all its defining features, must be progressively constructed, again through the individual life-history.

According to the former view, the randomness intrinsic in ‘natural’ reproduction fulfils the requirement of uniqueness, while on the contrary the duplication of the genome produced by cloning threatens this essential requirement for identity.

For those of the second opinion – i.e. mainly the scientists – the absence of cellular specialization in the embryo in the early days of its development makes it an incomplete program requiring interactions with the environment to acquire definitive form – that is, the uniqueness that attributes identity.

These two conceptions of identity – which were ranged against each other in the debate sparked by the Raelians – complemented the distinctions mentioned at the outset and confronted each other in the debate.

In fact, from an identity defined as a difference “complete from the beginning” derives a conception of embryo-as-person, a broad equivalence between genetic identity and biographical identity, and a close overlap between body and identity.

Conversely, an identity defined as an initially incomplete difference favours the distinction between embryo and persons, as well as the distinction between genetic identity and biographical identity. Moreover, this conception gives greater credibility to a sort of Cartesian dualism which places the seat of our identity as located not in our body but in our brain/mind.

Around a common nucleus centred on difference and permanence, therefore, the debate engendered by the Raelians' announcement comprised rather different conceptions of identity which rested on acceptance or rejection of certain distinctions.