Luddite Bioethics Panel

By ACSH Staff — February 1, 2002

Last month, like most months, saw advances and setbacks in biotechnology.

The cloned sheep Dolly appeared to be developing arthritis, but Japanese researchers found cloned mouse embryos in better shape than previously feared. The best news may have been the cloning of so-called "knockout pigs," pigs modified to eliminate a gene that in normal pigs prevents their organs being transplanted into humans. The worst news was the long-anticipated convening of the President's Council on Bioethics.

Much has been said about the ethics of cloning and about the opposition to cloning by the council's head, bioethicist Leon Kass, but it bears repeating: Despite Kass's record as a philosopher, surgeon, and medical ethicist, what makes him special the thing that really led to him running this panel instead of you is that he is arguably the most anti-cloning and anti-biotech figure in public life. It is as absurd for Leon Kass to oversee a debate on the ethics of biotechnology as it would be for Jerry Falwell to oversee a debate on the role of homosexuals in modern society.

Kass reportedly opened the council's first day with a discussion of a Nathaniel Hawthorne story in which a scientist kills his wife in an effort to eradicate a small imperfection in her face. Is this an apt metaphor for science in an age of routine plastic surgery, spine-straightening, conjoined twin-separating, heart-transplanting, and skin-grafting? Is there really any era in which Kass would have felt comfortable with progress and experimentation? Would he have eagerly promulgated Hawthorne's warning against progress even if he'd been alive back when Hawthorne wrote it, in an era before insulin, MRI scans, and open-heart surgery? I suspect he would.

Kass openly admits it is not mishaps he is frightened by but the prospect of biotechnology's success and the countless ways in which that success might force us to redefine our lives and rethink our concept of humanity. Few people define life and humanity in the cramped and limiting way that Kass does, though. Most of us can handle change.

Kass managed to find people who are almost as worried about biotech as he, and some of them, such as conservative political scientist James Q. Wilson and conservative theologian Gilbert Meilaender, don't even make any pretense of being specialists on medical matters. At least conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer is a psychiatrist, though I'm not convinced that makes him any more qualified to decide the fate of cloning research than I am.

The greatest disappointment on the panel, though, may be political scientist Francis Fukuyama. Despite being a genuine right-wing Hegelian and thus a representative of a philosophical faction not much heard from in over a century Fukuyama seems to have some futurist tendencies. He understands that history is a process of change, and even though he famously declared "the end of history" at the end of the Cold War, he soon went on to predict the imminent dawn of
"transhuman history," when humans would seize control of biological evolution, using technology to completely redesign themselves (Fukuyama did not predict a deadly conflict between the West and Islamic extremists, but that is a separate issue). Fukuyama sometimes sounds almost like an Extropian one of those people who take megavitamins to live longer and make arrangements to have their heads cryogenically frozen in his excitement about this impending new epoch, and he has found the time to say nice things about futurist, cyberpunk, ethically-traditionalist, and more or less libertarian sci-fi author Neal Stephenson in a book review for The Weekly Standard. So Fukuyama's not afraid to talk about a transhuman future.

Except he's against it.

I saw Fukuyama speak at a joint conference of the libertarian Reason Foundation and the British, Marxist, pro-science Institute of Ideas in October 2001. It was obvious that for Fukuyama, biotech is not something that raises subtle ethical questions to be debated at length by the President's advisory council. To him, biotech subverts ethics altogether. He argued that ethics rests upon the foundation of our common, largely unchanging human nature. Once human nature can be changed once it begins to exhibit a little too much variety all our shared rights and obligations, he fears, will go out the window.

I asked Fukuyama whether we should keep human nature from changing in order to keep our ethics simple or whether, as I would suggest, we should refine our ethics to cope with new sorts of people who arise. His answer was one of the most terrifying things anyone has ever said to me. He grimly predicted that the future, if biotech goes unchecked, will indeed see changes in ethics, but not of a sort that I would like, not new utilitarian rules (he somehow correctly pegged me as a John Stuart Mill fan, which was frightening in itself). Rather, the future, predicted Fukuyama, will be like something envisioned by Nietzsche, with seven-foot, big-brained master men ruling over subhuman monkey-man servants. And if someone asks, why should the seven-foot, big-brained master men not rule over the dull-witted monkey-men, says Fukyama, no clear answer will be forthcoming. Thus spake Fukuyama!

Well, all that was quite chilling, and perhaps Kass's panel should read Mary Shelley's Frankenstein while they're at it, but somehow I think we'll find ways of enforcing good behavior even in the unlikely event that the future is a planet of the apes and the Nietzscheans, just as we already find ways to cope with a society that has both geniuses and mentally retarded people in it. Helping to find new ways of dealing with a varied and ever-changing world would be a truly useful activity for a bioethics panel, but that's clearly not the sort of thing this council is going to do.