

We license plumbers and pilots – why not parents?

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We have successfully cloned a sheep. It is not unreasonable, then, to believe that we may soon be able to create human life. And I'm sure we'll develop carefully considered policies and procedures to regulate the activity, perhaps if only because we have Mary Shelley's Frankenstein lurking in our minds.

For example, I doubt we'll allow someone to create his own private work force or his own little army. And I suspect we'll prohibit cloning oneself for mere ego gratification.

I imagine we'll enforce some sort of quality control, such that cloned human beings shall not exist in pain or be severely substandard with respect to basic biological or electrochemical functioning.

And I suspect one will have to apply for a license and satisfy rigorous screening standards. I assume this will include not only meeting certain requirements with regard to the lab and its equipment, but also submitting, and obtaining approval of, a detailed plan regarding the future of the cloned human being; surely we won't allow a scientist to create it and then just leave it in the lab's basement one night when he leaves.

The thing is, we can already create human life. Kids do it every day.

And although we've talked ourselves silly and tied ourselves in knots about ending life – active, passive, voluntary, coerced, premeditated, accidental, negligent – we have been horrendously silent, irresponsibly laissez-faire about beginning life. We would not accept such wanton creation of life if it happened in the lab. Why do we condone it when it happens in bedrooms and backseats?

It should be illegal to create life, to have kids, in order to have another pair of hands at work in the field or to have more of us than them. It should be illegal to create a John Doe Jr. to carry on the family name and/or business.

And it should be illegal to knowingly create a life that will be spent in pain and/or that will be severely substandard.

As for the screening process, would-be teachers are generally required to study full-time for at least eight months before the state will allow them the responsibility of educating children for six hours a day once the kids become 6 years of age. Many would say we have set the bar too low.

And yet we haven't even set the bar as high – in fact we haven't set a bar at all – for parents. Someone can be responsible not only for a child's education but for virtually everything about the child, for 24 hours a day until that child is 6 years of age – that is, for the duration of its critical, formative years – and he or she doesn't even have to so much as read a pamphlet about child development.

As Roger McIntire notes, "We already license pilots, salesmen, scuba divers, plumbers, electricians, teachers, veterinarians, cab drivers, soil testers and television repairmen. ... Are our TV sets and toilets more important to us than our children?"

Then again, wait a minute – we have set a bar for parents: adoptive/foster parents. Those would-be parents have to prove their competence. Why do we cling to the irrational belief that

biological parents are automatically competent – in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary? We have, without justification, a double standard.

One common response to this notion of licensing parents is dismissal with a giggle, as if I'm suggesting the presence of police in the bedroom. But there is no necessary connection between sex (whether or not it occurs in the bedroom) and reproduction (unless, of course, you reject all forms of contraception), so that response indicates an error of overgeneralization. On the other hand, sex can make you a parent only in the biological sense; since I'm proposing that we license both parentage (the biological part of being a parent – the provision of sperm, ovum, and/or uterus) and parenting (the social part of being a parent – the provision of care, very comprehensively defined), the response also indicates an error of undergeneralization.

Another response to licensing parents is a sort of goofy incomprehension, often followed with something like "Well, it's not as if people plan it, you know – usually, it just happens." Excuse me? It is not possible to create life "by accident" – men don't accidentally ejaculate into vaginas and women don't accidentally catch some ejaculate with their vaginas. (As for failed contraception, there's morning-after contraception and abortion.) "I created someone by accident" should be just as horrific, and just as morally reprehensible, as "I killed someone by accident." (At the very least, such "parents" should be charged with reckless or negligent reproduction.)

Yet another response is dismissal with indignation, because surely such a proposal violates our rights! But do we have the right to replicate ourselves, to create a person? And do we have a right to raise that, or any other, person? There are many good arguments claiming that we don't: for starters, merely having a capability doesn't entail the right to exercise that capability. (Ruth Chadwick has written a good article examining various motives for having kids – she finds them all inadequate as grounds for the right to have them.) There are also many good arguments for claiming that such "rights" are better conceived as responsibilities or even privileges.

One must also be careful about distinguishing between moral rights and legal rights. (Laura Purdy has written an excellent article investigating whether it's immoral to have children when there's a good chance they'll have a serious disease or handicap and David Resnik has written about whether genetic enhancement is immoral or unjust – neither advocates parenting licenses, but their conclusions are nevertheless relevant; for example, if it is immoral to have children with genetic defects, that might serve as a premise supporting parent licensing.)

But even if we do have the right to be a parent or to parent, no right is absolute. My rights end where your freedoms begin. The real question is under what conditions do we have those rights and, then, under what conditions are those rights violated. Why, for example, should the right to be a parent depend on the means of becoming a parent? People seeking access to new reproductive technologies are screened for genetic anomalies, infectious diseases and other "high-risk factors"; they must read and understand information about the risks, responsibilities and implications of what they are undertaking; and they must undergo counselling that addresses their values and goals.

Why should children born as a result of assisted insemination or in vitro fertilization be privileged to a higher standard of care in their creation than children born as a result of coitus? These questions about rights are not easy questions to answer, and this particular dismissal of the proposal to license parents reveals gross naiveté.

Yet another dismissal appeals to the difficulty or impossibility of implementing the idea: Who would set the requirements, what would those requirements be, how would they be assessed ... ? Often lurking beneath these concerns is one more: "and I suppose I wouldn't be good enough!" Partly, this is a paper tiger response: The more ridiculous the claim, the easier it is to mock, so people imagine all sorts of complicated and unrealistic policies and procedures that no advocate of

parent licenses would ever suggest. (Read Hugh LaFollette, Covell and Howe, and Jack Westman for real proposals.)

And partly, paradoxically, this response reveals a failure of the imagination: Licensing parents could be as simple as when you turn 18, you get the book and study it or take the course, then you take the written test, and the eye test, and if you pass, you get a beginner's license, then you do some hands-on child care for maybe six months under the guidance of a licensed parent, and if you pass that part, you get your license, and if you don't, maybe you try again in a while. Sound familiar? So what's the problem?

Well, those bedrooms and backseats – we could never really control the parentage part. No, not at the moment. But what if we developed a contraceptive vaccination? (But nooo, our little boy scientists, once they'd finished snickering over the name "Dolly," developed Viagra instead.) We could administer the vaccine as a matter of routine, perhaps once puberty is reached. And then, as part of the license, the antidote could be made available.

One last objection concerns the potential for abuse. Do we really want to give the state this particular power? I have to say, seeing a theocracy coming ever closer, that this is the argument that gives me most pause.

I want to point out that just because something will be abused doesn't mean it shouldn't be tried, and I want to point out that our many other licensing policies still exist despite the occasional abuse. But I've read Margaret Atwood's "Handmaid's Tale." It's chilling. But I've also read the reports of people too drugged out to even know they're pregnant. And it's not a question of which scenario is more likely. One is already happening and has been for quite some time.

Most of us have seen broken kids, kids who didn't get what they needed at a critical stage in their development, so they go through life thinking the world owes them something. And indeed we do. But sadly, tragically, we can't give it to them because that critical window of time has passed: We can't go back and flush from the fetus the chemicals that interfered with its development; we can't go back and provide the baby with the nutrients required for growth; we can't go back and give the child the safety and attention that would have led to a secure personality. Every year, millions of the people we've created so carelessly are being starved, beaten or otherwise traumatized. Thousands die. And that doesn't count the ones still walking around.

To be succinct, the destruction of life is subject to moral and legal examination – so too should be the creation of life, whenever and however it occurs.